

# DEER

## Of The

# Southwest

Lee Allen

Even the deer could learn something  
from Jim Heffelfinger's new book.

## Looking for deer

with Jim Heffelfinger is somewhat akin to dunking  
bait with Roland Martin, taking a bike ride with  
Lance Armstrong, or playing a game of miniature  
golf with Tiger Woods.

Intimidating is the word that comes to mind because  
of the Arizona wildlife biologist's vast knowledge of  
what he terms "the ultimate ungulate" — a subject of  
lifelong interest that has led to publication of *Deer*



Author Jim Heffelfinger

*of the Southwest: A Complete  
Guide to the Natural History,  
Biology, and Management of*

*Southwestern Mule Deer and White-Tailed Deer.* The  
282-page, photo-illustrated compendium is so com-  
plete that even the deer could learn something by  
reading it.

"This is desert mule deer and Coues whitetail from  
A to Z," says the author. "These two unique forms of  
North American species represent a whole different  
biology and set of ecological needs. My intent was to  
write for that fine line between knowledgeable  
hunters and professional wildlife biologists where  
both could get relevant information. My specialty is  
taking research information and boiling it down into

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readable feature article form, and reviews so far have been universally positive.”

“Jim is fast becoming the authority on mule deer in the United States,” says National Rifle Association Board Member Todd Rather, chair of the NRA hunting and wildlife conservation committee. “There are

few people more enthusiastic about mule deer, and his genetic studies have taken things to a new level. Jim likes to hunt deer as much as he likes to study them, making the information he shares very relevant to hunters.” Rather is not alone in praising the thoroughness of this printed body of knowledge. *Deer of*

## Deer Of The Southwest

the Southwest has been officially endorsed by Safari Club International and the Boone & Crockett Club.

When the president of the National Rifle Association of America moved to Tucson, the tome had yet to be written, and Sandra Froman had to blaze her own trail instead of relying on Heffelfinger's accrued knowledge. "When I first tried hunting and hiked all around Arizona trying to find deer, I rarely saw an animal, let alone got a chance to shoot at one," she said. "I stopped calling it 'hunting' and started calling it 'armed camping.' The more educated we are about wildlife and where and how it lives, the more pleasant our field experiences become."

Deer from stem to stern have been Heffelfinger's life since his impressionable days in grade school. Looking down from a tree-



*The health and future of the Southwest deer herd relies heavily upon conservation.*

stand in rural Wisconsin and watching intently as a doe passed by beneath him — unaware of his presence — his thought was, "Wow, deer are cool." He's been studying deer, appreciating them, hunting them, and helping to ensure their continued existence ever since.

"That experience was the turning point and the start of my total and encompassing love of everything connected with the outdoors, especially four-footed animals, particularly deer," he says. "Once you acknowledge your appreciation for the animal and its well-being, you get concerned about habitat and develop an interest in the health of the ecosystem and the need to preserve open spaces."

Sitting on a rise outside Tucson, Ariz., surrounded by creosote bush, ocotillo and saguaro cacti, amid dove and quail taking frequent flight, Heffelfinger discussed the health and future of deer in the Southwest.

"Deer are the 'bread and butter' species of wildlife agencies, and financial support and interest in wildlife conservation in general has rested largely on the backs of the deer family. They have liter-

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ally paid the way for all other game and non-game wildlife in terms of support for conservation and development of the most successful system of wildlife conservation in the world. Simply put: Deer Rule!”

Get Heffelfinger warmed to his subject, and he's like that battery rabbit that keeps going and going and going:

“For many people, deer are the embodiment of nature itself. The

mid-1980s was a period of abundance that followed several consecutive years of above-average precipitation.

“Likewise, a deer decline in the 1990s followed a series of dry years. And while there are many factors that contribute to ungulate population increase and decrease, in the short run, fluctuations are driven by the amount and timing of precipitation.

“Wet winters bring nutrition to

does and they deliver more and healthier fawns. When it rains in the Southwest, everything is favorable for deer. When it doesn't rain, everything stacks up against them. Moisture is the main fuel that drives deer population and we're going to need some back-to-back years of winter rainfall October to March to get our deer populations back.”

As noted in the book's epilogue: “The future of deer conservation in the Southwest lies squarely in how well habitat is managed to provide for nutritional and cover requirements of the deer. No one said conservation was easy. Nothing this important and worthwhile ever is. Our challenge is to wisely manage populations for future generations who will share our admiration for deer.”

Some questions come up over and over again when Heffelfinger and hunters get talking, common issues include deer life span, antler size, timing the rut, fertility, and pack-out weights.

**Question:** How long do deer live?

**Answer:** Deer in captivity, afforded protection and good nutrition, will commonly live 15 to 20 years. Although there are exceptions, it's much less common to find cases of wild deer living past 15 years. A laboratory in Montana aged more than 10,000 deer and reported no mulies older than 20 years and no whitetails older than 19. Even in un hunted herds, wild deer seldom live much past 10 years.

**Question:** How do buck antlers grow?

**Answer:** Three factors — age, nutrition, and genetics — affect the size of a buck's antlers. Size increases with age until a buck

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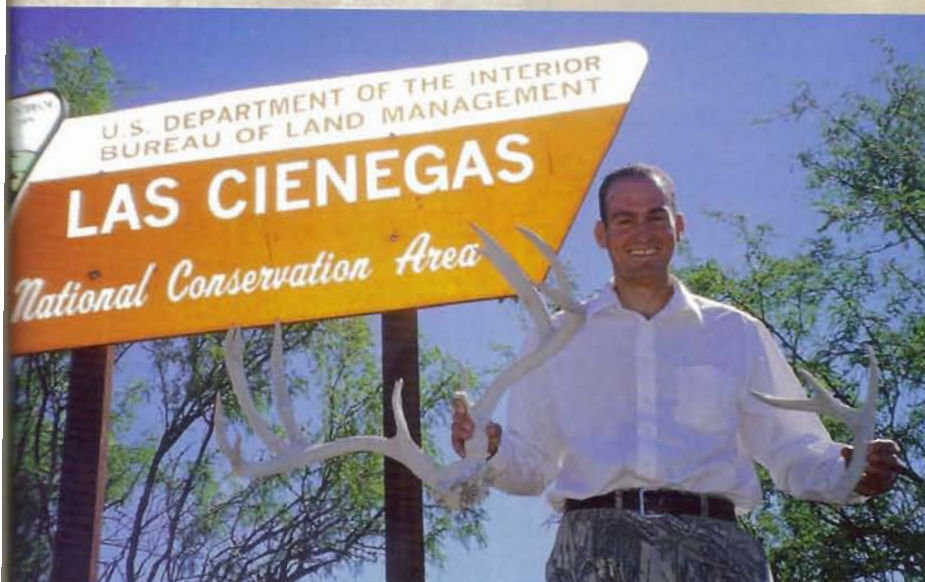
antler shapes and sizes that are very different — just as some humans never reach 6 feet in height regardless of age or diet.

**Question:** What causes non-typical antler points?

**Answer:** If all bucks looked the same, ho hum. It's the odd antlers with stickers, kickers and drop tines that capture our interest the most. Many factors cause or affect the expression of antler abnormalities — age, nutrition and genetics mentioned earlier as well as physical injury or other trauma to the velvet antlers or skeletal structure. Anything that disrupts the hormonal environment can produce abnormalities such as "antlered does" and "cactus bucks."

**Question:** What determines timing of the rut?

**Answer:** Bucks begin producing sperm in the summer and are ca-



Tucson hunter Joe Louis shows off some antlers found in southeastern Arizona.

reaches prime, usually peaking at 5 to 7 years of age, then starts to decline when antlers lose tine length, have fewer points, and increase in thickness. Nutrition is important to antler growth as nutrients go first into body development and maintenance, then

antler growth. This is one reason yearling bucks don't produce large antlers, because nutritional intake is used almost entirely for body development. Each buck has a different genetic potential for antler growth and captive animals of the same age, fed the same diet, show

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pable of breeding for between 5 and 9 months. Does are only briefly accommodating, entertaining intimacy only at the peak of estrus (which lasts 24-36 hours), so right-place, right-time is key. Breeding season timing is influenced not only by genetics, but by the amount of daylight in each 24-hour period. Shorter days in autumn trigger pineal gland changes and a release of hormones. Once a deer herd is prepared physiologi-

cally for breeding, a cold front with falling barometric pressure can increase activity levels. Unseasonably warm weather seems to prolong the rut and suppress rutting activity.

**Question:** Why are there so many "dry" does?

**Answer:** Actually, there aren't. Deer populations don't have large numbers of sterile does. Under good habitat conditions, fertility is

high and low; fawn:doe ratios are not caused by infertile deer. Researchers in Utah report an average of 1.78 fetuses per doe (sample population of 139 mule deer 8 years old or older). From conception to weaning, fawns can die from many factors, so does commonly carry more than 1.5 fawns during pregnancy. The reproductive surplus is nature's way of providing a means to increase the population when habitat conditions are favorable.

**Question:** How much meat does a 150-pound deer provide?

**Answer:** Terms such as field-dressed, hog-dressed, eviscerated, gutted and live weight make it difficult to understand just what people mean when they talk about deer weights. Live, on-the-hoof weight describes a living animal. Dressed weight involves removal of internal organs. In general, removing internal organs reduces overall live weight by a quarter to a third as organs traditionally account for approximately 30 percent of the live weight. About half the deer's dressed weight can be converted to boneless venison for the freezer.

**Question:** And the ultimate question — How do you find deer in wide-open habitat?

**Answer:** Bottom line, hunting is 100 percent luck, but there are some things you can do to greatly improve your chances of finding them.

■ **Be Prepared.** Spend a significant amount of time scouting before the season opens. You can locate bucks or deer concentrations and begin to understand distribution and movement patterns.

■ **Sit Down.** Good hunters wear out the seat of their pants before they wear out the soles of their



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Jim Heffelfinger glasses the foothills south of Tucson for mule deer.

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■ **Bright Side.** You always want the sun at your back. This prevents you from looking into the sun and illuminates the canyons and hillsides you're searching.

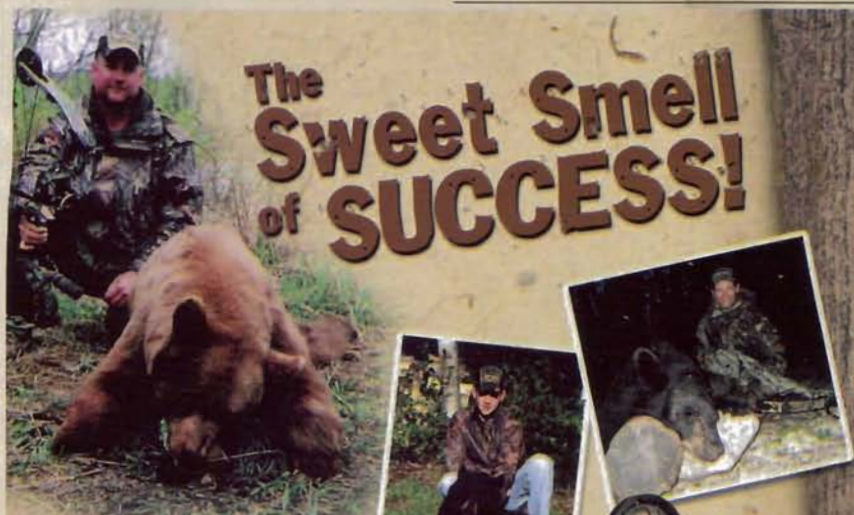
■ **High/Low.** When glassing, climb as high as possible to get the best view. It's tempting to stop short, but every additional foot in elevation opens up more country below for inspection.

■ **Concentrate.** Natural-colored big game animals don't stand out like neon signs. If you're not concentrating, you'll miss a deer in the middle of your field of view.

■ **Right Way.** Glassing doesn't entail looking around willy-nilly hoping to spot something. Search your visible area systematically. A tripod is a must.

■ **Come Early/Stay Late.** Be active during the same time the deer are. Take advantage of the Golden Hours, that first hour after sun-up and the last hour of sun in the evening. ■

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