

Coues white-tailed deer occur in rugged mountain ranges, which makes hunting them all the more challenging.



# ELLIOT'S

## TINY TROPHY WHITETAIL

By Jim Heffelfinger

**T**he white-tailed deer is the indisputable king of big game animals in North America. It is hands-down the most researched, written-about, and famous member of the deer family. The Texas whitetail, *Odocoileus virginianus texanus*, occurs throughout the state of Texas and also on the cover of just about every deer-related glossy magazine in the country. The Texas version is smaller than northern whitetails, but larger than other southwestern races. Regional variations such as this are referred to by many different names and this creates a lot of confusion about what these differences really are.

### LIKE A WHITETAIL, BUT SMALLER

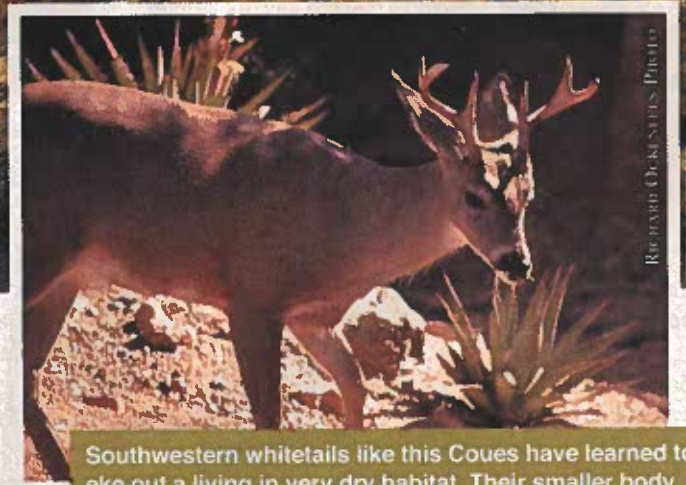
Big game animals sometimes vary in appearance from location to location. White-tailed deer live across a large range of conditions from snowy boreal forest to Sonoran desert, so it is not surprising they show a lot of variation throughout their range. Some early naturalists went a little crazy in their quest to name everything on the planet. C. Hart Merriam (Merriam's turkey, Merriam's elk, etc.) examined grizzly bear skulls and declared there were 86 species of grizzlies in North America, with 27 species in Alaska alone.



AUTHOR PHOTO



Southwestern whitetails have a remarkable ability to not only live but thrive in relatively harsh, yet beautiful conditions.



REYNOLD COOK/STAFF PHOTO

Southwestern whitetails like this Coues have learned to eke out a living in very dry habitat. Their smaller body size helps them cope in that environment.

Many of these early "species" were later reduced to subspecies status or rejected completely. These early efforts at categorizing animals created a lot of confusion and bad science. In most cases further analysis of many more individuals showed that the supposed differences between subspecies didn't hold up.

The Southwest is home to some of the most interesting versions of North America's big game animals. We host rugged mountain ranges of desert bighorn, flat dry plains of desert pronghorn, and valleys bouncing with desert mule deer. It should come as no surprise then that we have one of the most unique versions of whitetail. There is only one "species" of white-tailed deer on the planet, but we still have different categories or groupings of regional populations we like to name.

Through the years, many of these various kinds of whitetails have been described as official subspecies, complete with multi-colored maps showing well-defined distributions. Currently there are at least 38 subspecies of white-tailed deer that have been described in North and South America. Most of these descriptions were based on only a few individual specimens and have not been proven to be valid.

Besides the Texas version, there are two other widely recognized forms of white-tailed deer that inhabit the dusty Mexican borderlands and each has a unique allure all their own. In West Texas and southward into the Mexican state of Coahuila there is a type of whitetail that is even smaller, called the Carmen Mountains whitetail. Smaller still, is a miniature version called the Coues whitetail in Arizona, southwestern New Mexico, and northern Mexico that is recently generating a lot of interest na-

tionwide among hunters looking for a different challenge. When I attended the 2013 Pope and Young Club national convention in Dallas, I was astounded that everyone I ran into wanted to talk about Coues whitetails when they found out I was from Arizona. The Coues has become a star in the national spotlight of whitetail aficionados.

### ELLIOT'S WHITETAIL

The Coues white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus couesi*) is named after Elliot Coues, an army surgeon and naturalist that served a tour of duty in the American Southwest in the late 1800s. Dr. Coues had a keen interest in wildlife, as many medical men did at that time. He was one of the first naturalists to document plants and animals in the Southwest, but he never shot one of the whitetails that now bear his name. As was the common practice of the time, naturalists named animals after each other so as not to seem egotistical in naming things after themselves. Elliot was a great scientist, despite writing a book at the time lending credibility to the idea people could levitate. So, as it turns out, he was wrong about human levitation, but his huge contributions to





**Coues whitetails occur throughout the Sierra Madres of Mexico and the scattered mountain ranges of the American Southwest.**



**Geographic distribution of white-tailed deer in the Southwest.**

### A DESERT DEER

Coues whitetails are distributed throughout central and southeastern Arizona and also found in scattered populations throughout other areas such as southwestern New Mexico and in the Mexican states of Sonora, Chihuahua, Durango, and Zacatecas. Throughout their range, these little whitetails live in relatively rough, wooded terrain with steep canyons. Typical Coues whitetail habitat is mixed oak woodland, but they can be found anywhere from ponderosa pine/mixed conifer at 10,000 feet elevation down to the upper limits of semi-desert grassland. Although elevations with the highest deer densities vary among different mountain ranges, most Coues whitetails are found between 4,000 and 7,000 feet because of the density of valuable shrubs at that level. These deer do not migrate, but their distribution in the mountains is determined by the availability of quality browse and water in dry seasons. At lower elevations, there is considerable overlap in habitat use with desert mule deer.

Besides acorns, shrub leaves and weeds, they eat a lot of cactus fruit and flowers. The nutritional bottleneck for these whitetails is different than northern deer. Deer in the northern states try to put on a lot of fat in the fall and coast through the winter in hopes of making it to spring green-up with the body reserves they stored up. In contrast, the nutritional bottleneck for Coues is late May and June in between the winter rainfall and the summer monsoons that begin in early July. Coues white-tailed deer have to take advantage of the flush of greens in winter to stock up on body fat going into the summer period.

Small deer predictably have small home ranges—the area they occupy throughout the year. Researchers put radio collars on 35 Coues whitetails. Fourteen of them were bucks. These deer were then located repeatedly for three years; some were located several hundred times.

The overall area they used during that time and a more intensive “core area” were identified by analyzing these locations.

science in the Southwest allow us to excuse him on that one.

For many southwestern deer lovers, there is no confusion about how to pronounce the name of this little whitetail. It is called a “Cooz” deer more often than not. While writing my book “Deer of the Southwest,” I had a conversation with Elliot’s great, great, grandnephew to see how the family pronounced their name. From before Elliot to the present time, the family has always called themselves the “Cows” family (not “Cooz”). It has been mispronounced too long to correct it now, but we should at least admit we are saying it wrong.

Jack O’Conner once wrote that the wise old desert bighorn became so smart from years of experience, but the Coues white-tail got his smarts through his mother’s milk! He proclaimed the Coues white-tailed deer to be the most beautiful of the North American big game. I was not as impressed when I moved to Arizona from South Texas and saw the tiny trophies the local biologists were getting excited about. Although, I have to admit, a 110 Boone and Crockett score on their downsized bodies still looks proportionately impressive. It took years before I began to fully appreciate the beauty of these little versions of America’s deer.





Females had home ranges averaging two square miles with a core area of more intensive use less than a square mile. As is typical, bucks had larger home ranges averaging four square miles with a core area less than 2 square miles.

The small size of the Coues deer is an adaptation to a less-fertile and less-productive habitat. They have found it to be much more efficient to live in that environment if you are smaller. This is a well-known ecological rule whereby island animals and those in desert areas evolved smaller to survive.

### SWITCHED ON

Brian Call of the Gritty Podcast likes to refer to Coues whitetails as “switched on.” That is the perfect description for these little neurotic deer with senses that border on the supernatural. The Urban Dictionary defines one who is switched on as being “alert and intelligent.” It’s a gross understatement in the case of Elliot’s tightly wound and high-strung deer.

This personality trait comes from surviving through the eons by avoiding the teeth and claws of mountain lions, coyotes, bobcats, wolves, jaguars, grizzlies, and black bears in the Southwest. It is not uncommon to quietly crest over the lip of a small canyon to peek down in and see the heart-sinking sight of Coues deer sneaking out the back of the canyon. Throughout evolution, animals avoided extinction in one of three ways. They got big, got armor, or got out of the way. Coues whitetails have certainly perfected the latter tactic.

### THE TINY TROPHY

This is the only type of whitetail recognized with its own separate category in the Boone and Crockett and Pope and Young Club record books because it is physically

so much smaller and mostly isolated from other whitetails. It takes only 110 points to make the all-time Boone and Crockett record book for the typical category. The 2017 edition of the Pope and Young Club records book shows just how tiny these trophies are: only the No. 1 world records in typical and non-typical categories have more than 130 P&Y points.

The current Boone and Crockett world record Coues whitetail scores 144½ points and has not been surpassed in more than 60 years despite a lot of effort by people with high-dollar optics and long-range rifles. Their antlers form a pleasant little oval rack with an iconic eight total points. Eight pointers are considered three pointers in the western system of counting antler points. To convert eastern count to western count you have to subtract the brown tines and divide by two. This is more math than I want to do on a deer hunt, but this Western whitetail is subjected to the Western count. Non-typical antlers are much less common in Coues whitetails for reasons that are not entirely known. The tannins in the bark of oaks that are so common in Coues country give their antlers a rich brown staining. It is uncommon for a southwestern miniature whitetail to have white or reddish antlers as sometimes seen in northern whitetails.

There is a persistent rumor of an extra-small version of the Coues whitetail that lives in the same areas. These mythical deer are referred to by various names such as dwarf, rock, Sinaloan, Mexican, or Sonoran fantail. Young deer, with very small 3x3 racks, are often the cause of such rumors because observers mistake them for unusually small, mature bucks. Another contributing factor is the wide variation in the color of the backside of the tail of Coues whitetails. The dorsal (back) surface

of the tail may appear gray/brown (same as the animal’s back), reddish, blond, very dark brown, or black. These are not different types of deer, but instead, are color variations found in some individuals.

You would think such a small deer would not be held in high regard as a trophy, yet quite the opposite is true. For years the Coues was overlooked as just a tiny whitetail, but once people started pursuing them they found out how amazingly witty and cunning they are. Disappearing into thin air is one of their skills they practice often and flawlessly.

### IT’S IN THE GENES

Genetic analysis has helped clarify relationships between different races or subspecies in a lot of cases. In most genetic studies of differences and variation by area, the genetic patterns do not match previously defined subspecies. Because of its interest in keeping trophy record books free of errors and a general interest in conservation research, the Boone and Crockett Club; Pope and Young Club; Campfire Conservation Club; Dallas Safari Club; and many others, funded a series of deer studies to look at just how genetically unique Coues whitetails are.

The research was a success, and both Pope and Young and Boone and Crockett clubs use the resultant test to maintain the integrity and accuracy of the permanent trophy record categories. This test can also confirm or reject whether a deer is from the Carmen Mountain subspecies. This test can be conducted on meat, skin, bone, or antlers at the hunter’s expense and now we no longer have to look at variable things like size of the body and shape of the antlers.

### GOOD THINGS IN SMALL PACKAGES

We are blessed in the Southwest to have the tiniest, but most interesting whitetail in the world. The Coues, with all its uniqueness, is hard to beat if you are looking for a challenging adventure full of frustration and reminders of your inadequacy. Part of the allure of these smaller gems of the Southwest is that they live in some of the most awe-inspiring country in America. Pursuing these graceful versions of the white-tailed deer not only puts meat in the freezer—maybe—but creates memories of incredible adventure in the wide-open, rugged spaces along the Mexican borderlands. 🐾