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The Canyon of the Giants

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Growing up part of my life in the Sonoran Desert was a dream for a young hunter. The terrain was vast, and taught me many lessons of the hunt that I have carried with me over the years.

The stark beauty of the land and its creatures still draw me there. As the plane landed in Hermosillo last December, I experienced that feeling of homecoming, coupled with the excited anticipation of pursuing Desert Mule Deer in one of the last best places on earth.

This particular journey actually started the year before. I was hunting Columbian Blacktail Deer with my good friends Doug and Janet Gattis outside of Medford, Oregon. Doug and Janet own and operate Southern Oregon Game Busters and have a long-standing reputation for producing world-class blacktails for their clients.

The conversation of hunting Mexico came up many times during the week, and I invited Doug and Janet to come with me on a December Coues Deer hunt I was planning. The seed was planted and took root quickly. In no time the hunt date came and we were headed south of the border. We had a terrific hunt, and took several trophy Coues Deer. Doug and Janet enjoyed the hunt so much, they went back a few weeks later for mule deer and harvested two great bucks.

I received an excited phone call upon their return telling me they were going to open a new hunting area in Sonora and had already begun setting up leases. They were hooked! Doug and Janet asked me if I would be interested in being the first hunter booked for their new operation. After learning that some of these ranches had not been hunted for up to five years, my answer was a resounding, "Yes."

Janet was there to greet us at the airport. Clearing through customs and immigration with our firearms was hassle-free because Janet had all of our paperwork in order. After the usual four hours of bad roads we arrived at a modest, but acceptable ranch house that would be our home for the next five days.

Doug was there with the guides, and after introductions we settled in for the night. In the morning we headed off in the "High Racks" to get a feel for the ranch and the terrain. The December morning was brisk, but promised to be eventful. I was partnered with Steve, from Oregon. Ten minutes from the ranch house we spotted the first buck. He was a wide buck 29-30 inches. We studied him at 200 yards through the binoculars and decided to pass him. We agreed he was an old buck, past his prime, sporting a 3x2 rack. He was tempting, but this was Sonora.

We moved less than half a mile from this buck and spotted another promising deer. He was clearly over 30 inches, a 4x3, but lacked the mass. We passed on him, wondering if this was a mistake. I thought to myself, where else would we even be compelled to let a buck like that walk?



Deer activity tapered off quickly with the rising sun and its warmth. By 9 A.M., most of the desert life had already bedded.

We used this time to get more familiar with the land, water sources and bedding areas.

The rut was a couple of weeks away, so most of the bucks were solitary wanderers, or they were in small bachelor groups feeding and resting. In the afternoon we hunted a high plateau of the ranch on foot. This tactic paid off because Steve stalked in close to a nice representative Coues Deer buck and took him. Steve was understandably excited, as we took photos of his first Coues in the fading light.

The next morning Steve and I headed off from the ranch house on foot to try and catch bucks coming from a water source at dawn. After climbing the first small ridge, we found our

selves overlooking several arroyos. Immediate-



ly we saw three good bucks moving below us. This was Steve's last day, and he was ready to take one. Steve's .30/06 found its mark and the buck went down cleanly. Steve was rewarded with a nice 4x4 buck, and fond memories of Sonora.

With Steve's departure I partnered up with Jim from Minnesota. Jim was after a trophy, having successfully hunted Sonora the year before. At this point in the hunt we knew the lay of the land, and had some of the habits of these bucks figured out. We knew to be successful we had to be in position before dawn. Waiting for shooting light, we began glassing. The Mexican guide, Victor, began excitedly pointing and saying, "Shoot!" A 33-inch 4x4 had us spotted and was about to disappear into a stand of Palo Verde. At the shot, the deer bolted into cover and disappeared. We never got another chance him.

The sun had warmed things up considerably and we headed back to the trucks around 10:30 A.M. I just had climbed into the "High Rack" when I spotted movement across the canyon. It was clearly a large buck. Doug spotted him too, and calmly suggested that one of us should take him. The buck was at long range. I had a steady rest and decided to take the shot. The .25/06 barked and the buck's reaction indicated a hit. The buck began moving downhill in my direction so I ran into the canyon to prevent his escape.

Moving along cautiously I spotted not one, but two large bucks bedded approximately 50 yards away on the opposite side of a cholla cactus patch. The deer



spotted me and the larger of the two ran straight away. I could see clearly that it was the buck I was after, as he was favoring his left side. I had no clear shot so I ran through the cholla patch, racing after the buck. I found the buck trying to cross back to the other side of the canyon. I was able to catch up to the buck and finish what I had started.

This buck was by far, the largest bodied mule deer I had ever seen in Sonora. His mainframe 5x4 rack was massive, and carried some well-placed kickers and trash points off the main beam. The buck was old and showed the scars of his many years. His inside spread was only 27 inches, but he gross scored 203 BC. Clearly, this was my best mule deer after many years of searching.

The excitement wasn't over. The next morning Jim and I returned to the area we quickly named, "The Canyon of the Giants." Like clock work, Victor spotted a monster buck feeding at dawn. Jim headed out for the stalk while Doug and I looked on. The events as they took place next would be unbelievable had we not witnessed them. Jim took a shot at the big buck.

We estimated to him be in the 36-inch range. We saw Jim and Victor moving quickly down the ridge-line, and could see the buck moving ahead of them, uninjured. Doug and I caught a final glimpse of this monster as he escaped. Thinking the excitement was over; we heard shots coming from the canyon. Four bucks, all in the 30 inch or better class were barreling up the opposite canyon away from the hunters. Victor signaled to us to move further ahead and indicated nothing was down. Dumfounded, Doug and I moved ahead to block the canyon edge. In just a few minutes we had seen five bucks

over that magical 30-inch mark. The number of big bucks this canyon held was almost surreal.

Jim and Victor came into view again, as Doug and I spotted three more bucks leaving cover further up the canyon. Two of these deer were in the 29-



30 inch class and third buck was a bit smaller. As the deer were about to make good their departure, Jim made an excellent shot and dropped



the smaller of the three bucks. We were elated for Jim, and still reeling with excitement over seeing all of these big bucks in less than twenty minutes.

Jim's buck ended up scoring in the mid-180 class, a beautiful and well-earned trophy. We finished the hunt with 100% success and the desire to return to Sonora again. Doug and Janet selected their leases and guides well. During the later rut hunts Allen, from Texas, anchored a 36 inch buck that grossed over 200 inches.

Sonora clearly does hold some of the best pockets of big mule deer left anywhere. As long as the ranches remain well



managed the mule deer resource will continue to thrive. In the meantime I'll be creeping around a certain obscure desert canyon this winter that we so aptly named; "The Canyon of the Giants."