

# CROSS HAIR



# CONSULTING



## Chihuahua Coues Deer Adventure

by Bob Robb : Published in Safari



**Most Americans traveling south of the border to hunt Coues deer do so in the state of Sonora. However, on the eastern slope of the Sierra Madre, in Chihuahua, you'll find an untapped area loaded with quality bucks.**

The day held much promise. The weather was ideal, a bit above freezing just before daylight but certain to climb into the low 60's by early afternoon, with just a slight breeze. It was day five of an early December six-day Coues deer hunting adventure in the northern Mexican state of Chihuahua, and if things continued as they had, anything was possible.

My hunting companions Tom Haase, Jim Millis, and Wade Derby had already connected on outstanding bucks scoring in the mid-90 to low-100 range on the SCI scale, which is superb hunting in and of itself but tells little of the story.

Daily we had seen lots of deer and a high number of mature bucks. Each of us had also seen one giant buck, the kind that someone who has seriously hunted these elusive little desert white-tails for more than two decades like myself know are truly special deer. Unfortunately, in each instance the gods of the hunt had permitted them to keep their cuernos (antlers) for another season.

On this day my guide Jose led me an hour up a rocky, cactus-covered slope. His plan was to reach the top and carefully glass the deep canyon just on the other side. It was a place he had taken some good bucks in past years. And so, when we reached the apex we found cover on a bare slope behind a large juniper and began glassing the other side.

It was covered with oaks and tall brush, and still in the shade. However, as soon as the first rays of the sun began warming the ground we started picking up deer.



For about an hour we glassed intently but saw nothing exciting. Then Jose spotted a bedded buck a quarter mile off. He was hard for me to locate but when I finally did I thought to myself, "It's him!" When the sun rose a bit more and I was able to pick him up with the Bushnell Elite 15-45X spotter, I knew it was the buck I have been looking for all my life.

Those of you who have struggled along and followed my past writings know that I am something of a Coues deer hunting nut. From the day my friend and legendary Arizona guide DuWane Adams helped me take my first buck back in the mid-1980's I have been on a quest to take a buck that legitimately would score over 110 typical points. Though I have hunted the deer hard in both Arizona and Sonora taking a dozen bucks along the way, I had yet to reach this goal.

This was the one. The buck had very long main beams, five distinct points on one side, four distinct points on the other, and great mass. His G-1's were long and thick. I guesstimated him at 120 SCI points; I wanted him as badly as I have ever wanted any animal.

Jose and I tried to move closer but the terrain made it impossible. And so we set up on the steep slope under the shade of the juniper, my trusty rifle solidly rested in front on a set on BOG Gear shooting sticks, my back elbow supported by my backpack. The Bushnell Scout 1000 said the distance was 395 yards. With the .300 Win. Mag. sighted in to hit 3-inches high at 100 yards, when the buck stood up all I needed to do was place the crosshair on his backline, squeeze the trigger, and my dream would have finally come true.

He stood. I shot. He still stood, then walked into the brush. He came out, walking slowly. I shot. He walked. I shot. He walked over the crest of the ridge and out of my life.

I was too heartbroken to even be angry. How could I miss such a slam dunk shot? We of course went and looked for blood but found nothing. Jose confirmed that my bullets had all flown high.

As the day wore on we continued to hunt hard, looking high and low. My spirits were flagging but not badly enough to keep me from hunting hard. We all miss, and heck, I was in some of the most productive Coues deer country I have ever hunted. Anything was possible. That evening we set up on a neighboring ridge overlooking classic oak/grassland Coues deer habitat filled with cholla cactus, one of their favored foods. And we spotted several bucks, one an old 5x4 with a slight non-typical bent to his rack. I decided to take him and eased to within 200 yards. I shot. He stood. I shot. He stood. Both shots were very high, so I held just under his belly line and killed him.

He is a superb buck that scores right at 100 gross inches, and I was thrilled to have him. Yet I was still extremely puzzled with my rifle. What the heck was going on? I mean, I have never claimed to be a sniper, but generally speaking when I have a solid rest and am shooting at stationary animals, I hit them in the chest.

Well, to make a long story short, when I returned home and began cleaning my rifle, I discovered an amazing thing. The barrel had come unscrewed from the action! It was a full revolution loose, and you could turn it with nothing more than light finger pressure. Have you ever heard of such a thing?







No wonder my bullets had flown wildly askew! I took it to my friend, Tucson custom rifle maker Patrick Holehan, who fixed the problem while telling me he had never seen this happen in all his years.

These are the things that make me think that when it comes to killing a true monster Coues deer, I get to camp walking under a ladder only to find a black cat crossing my path.

Wade Derby of Crosshair Consulting (925/679-9232; [www.crosshairconsulting.com](http://www.crosshairconsulting.com)) had turned me on to Ernesto Beall and Ojo Caliente Outfitters, whom he has recently begun booking hunts for. I had heard about this outfit off and on for many years from friends who had decided to try their Coues deer luck in what proved to be an area that has, through the years, received minimal hunting pressure from Americans – the eastern slope of the Sierra Madre mountains.

The Beall's own their own ranches and do not lease hunting rights to anyone. Because they are all about quality, they have not killed more than 15 bucks off of either of their two large hunting ranches in any one year since 2002. They employ local guides who have lived and hunted in the area all their lives, making them extremely good at spotting and evaluating deer. Ernesto and his family speak fluent

English and help all their clients with the necessary permits and paperwork. They will meet clients at the El Paso, TX airport and personally escort them across the border, eliminating the "hassle factor." Camps are incredibly comfortable heated ranch bunkhouses with beds, a separate toilet/hot shower room, superb food, and trucks that don't break down

All hunt are fair chase and conducted with a 1x1 hunter/guide ratio. The use 4x4 vehicles (two hunters/vehicle) or horses to access the hunting area, with all hunting conducted the old-fashioned way – traversing the mountains and canyons on foot. It is what one of my friends called the "anti-high rack" alternative to much of the deer hunting so common in other areas of Mexico. In the past several seasons the success rate is holding right at 98 percent with most bucks taken scoring 90 or better SCI; every year a few fortunate hunters take bucks scoring much higher. In Chihuahua the Coues deer season runs December 1-January 28, with the rut generally occurring in the month of January.

Temperatures during the hunting season can range from 20-70-something degrees Fahrenheit, with a slight chance of snow. When we were there in mid-December the sunrise often greeted temperatures near 20, but eh day warmed up nicely. The elevation of the camp northwest of Casas Grandes, where we hunted, is 6000 feet above sea level, and the Ojo Caliente Ranch headquarters is 4500 feet above sea







level. All hunts are six days long, excluding travel. Though the ranch is only about 250 miles southwest of El Paso, Texas, once across the border the roads are two-lane and it takes most of the day to get to the ranches. The easy way to make the trip is to fly or drive to El Paso the day prior to your pickup and overnight at one of the airport hotels (we stayed at the Microtel and were quite pleased.) Ernesto and his staff will then provide transportation between the El Paso Microtel and the hunting ranches. It's a slick system that works well.

And so, as I write this in early 2008, I find myself staring out the window and daydreaming of what could have been, yet what still can be. Wade and I have already made arrangements to hunt with Ernesto Beall again this coming season.

This time, I will be well prepared. My rifle will be dialed in and I know that while shots can be close, I need to be prepared to make a long shot if that's the only chance I get. I know what gear to bring and what to expect.

Best of all, I know that this area of the Sierra Madres holds the kind of Coues deer bucks that will make your eyes bug out. I can still see the buck that Wade and I jumped out from under a juniper bush the first afternoon of our hunt only because we were tired and did not execute the stalk as we should have. That buck was ungodly big in both body and antler, and we had him dead to rights had we been smarter and more cautious. Even in a remote area such as this, a mature Coues buck is one of the most wary and alert big game animals on the continent. They do not suffer fools.

Before that hunt, I'll be back on the Beall's ranch hunting the Gould's turkey. We saw lots of turkeys while deer hunting, and Ernesto's spring turkey hunts run virtually 100 percent. It will give me the opportunity to enjoy spring in the Sierra Madres hunting one of my favorite of the North American wild turkey subspecies. It will also give me the chance to begin scouting for deer season. Those two big bucks I saw on this past hunt survived hunting season, and I now know where they like to hang out.

One of them badly needs to come home with me.

