

Hunting on the other side of the Rio Grande

Trophy deer hunters are well aware of the golden triangle. This South Texas region, bordered on its west by the Rio Grande River, is renowned for producing trophy caliber bucks on a natural basis. This is not to say that larger deer do not develop in other portions of the state because they do, but it's the average antler size of bucks in the harvest that counts, and based on this fact, the golden triangle has no equal, unless one investigates the size of bucks taken on the other side of the Rio Grande in Mexico. Hunters cognizant of the outstanding bucks in Mexico have perused much of this region in the past and have enjoyed premiere deer hunting opportunities only a stone's throw from the Texas border 'la frontera'.

Like the prolific trophy buck zone of Texas, Mexico's super buck region is somewhat triangular in shape, paralleling the Rio Grande from Amistad Lake north of Ciudad Acuna almost 200 miles southeast to Falcon Lake and 40 to in places 80 miles wide. The terrain is characterized as hilly, rolling country with an abundance of creeks 'arroyos'. Soil types vary from clay to fine red sandy loam to rocky. The plant diversity is rich, with all the highly desirable deer forage species supporting deer in the Texas triangle occurring there. The abundance of arroyos sustain an abundance of water during the wet season, representing a life support system for not only deer but a diverse array of wildlife, including feral hog, javelina, coyote, mountain lion 'puma', an occasional black bear, bobwhites, blue quail, and a plethora of colorful song birds. For centuries, land owners have dammed up arroyos to form lakes, which remain a valuable source of water to cattle and wildlife in one of the harshest, driest environments in existence.

Within the vast sea of brush the whitetail deer thrives. Its major enemies are the coyote, lion, and in some instances, abusive domestic stock practices. All three of these deterrents, however, have in a way enhanced antler size at various times. What must be understood is the fact that deer were not hunted in the distant past for anything other than gustatory purposes. In other words, deer represented a nutritional asset to the impoverished people living in the region. The only law governing hunting in Mexico was not passed until 1952 simply stating that wildlife in Mexico belonged to all the people, and landowners could not charge any fee to hunters on their lands. As a result, wildlife represented no monetary value to landowners until 2000 when the law was rectified. Prior to the legal ratification of the law of '52, deer were simply taken for granted and left unprotected. But that is changing.

The concept of trophy deer hunting and management in Texas was in its infancy during the 70s and 80s, and since hunting opportunities were abundant and more importantly affordable, there was little interest in venturing into Mexico. But there have always been a few adventurous souls eager to search for new deer country, and portions of Mexico were hunted by Americans.

Those who crossed the Rio Grande hunted what I refer to as the last deer hunting frontier where sportsmen had to exercise much skill, spend a lot of time, and have an abundance of luck to take a trophy caliber free-ranging buck.

My first deer hunting experience across the big creek was in the 1989-90 hunting season when I had the privilege of hunting with Greg Aguilar. Greg was one of the first professional outfitters in the brasada of Mexico and his ability to put hunters on big deer was renowned. More importantly, he had great connections with large landowners.

The trip began in Laredo where I met up with Greg, whom notified me we had one stop to make before crossing the bridge separating the two Laredos. Interestingly enough, we stopped off at a small meat market where Greg purchased four freshly plucked chickens. Minutes later, we were negotiating our way through the busy people-filled streets of Nuevo Laredo, but in a few minutes we exited the city as brush as far as one can see lined both sides of the narrow highway we traveled. Some ten miles south of town I realized why Greg had picked up the chickens as we stopped at a military checkpoint. Nonchalantly, Greg handed the chickens to the camouflage-clad officials, and we were once again on our way. That's simply how it is in Mexico, and those familiar with their ways seldom endure problems while visiting the magnificent country.

Several hours later we arrived at our destination, Rancho Cecelia, located on the border of Nuevo Leon and Tamaulipas.

A heavy rain occurred sometime during my first night, but as the early morning fog began to dissipate, I discovered that I was sitting on top a metal pole some 20 feet off the ground. Reaching the zenith before daylight was not a problem as I had no perception as to my position, but once I could see, it was a little disturbing to say the least.

Young bucks and a few doe were all I saw that damp morning. Later in the afternoon, Greg and I traversed a rock laden escarpment in hopes of spotting a buck from our elevated position. As we negotiated our way around boulders, some twice the size of our truck, we came upon an old plane crash site which Greg informed me was occupied by drug smugglers.

Anticipating what we would see next, which in Mexico is often the unexpected, we spotted a nice buck. Judging him to break the 160-inch mark was all I needed to know before initiating a long, rather arduous stalk, approaching to within only 50 yards of the animal before I could make out its legs, then its neck, in the thick brush within which the animal remained cement still. Following a single, well-placed shot, I discovered that I not only had shot a 23-inch-wide racked buck, but it also had a long drop tine that both Greg and I failed to see. At 165 inches, it took first place in the famed Freer Muy Grande deer contest (Mexico division).

Dining on fajitas grilled on an open pit right inside the adobe house we stayed in that evening was one festive occasion as was my trip back to the States. There have been many trips back to the brasada, but none have ever been the same nor has the price. Mexico has always been behind when it came to managing their deer herds, but today that is rapidly changing.

At one time high end deer in Mexico were actually a byproduct of lack of management. The abundance of coyote and lion, along with excessive domestic stock, suppressed deer populations. The characteristically dry, harsh climate reduced populations even further, but when adequate rainfall occurred, those few survivors realized optimal forage conditions and developed outstanding racks. It was a boom or bust environment. But deer management is rapidly catching on in old Mexico, and no longer are ranchers taking the valuable whitetail for granted.

Until the year 2000, whitetails in Mexico represented no monetary value to Mexican landowners, that is until the local ranchers association in Nuevo Laredo, Guerrero, and Tamaulipas initiated the concept of legalizing the use of wildlife for the

benefit of the landowners, by forming a group of “diversified ranchers” under the name National Association of Diversified Wildlife Breeders and Ranchers (ANGADI), officially recognized in May of 1987. This organization became nationally recognized under the cattle association’s law, in which the definition of cattle activity is the breeding of animals for the benefit of man; more significantly, it designated no difference between domestic or wildlife, which actually replaced the old law in April of 2000. The opportunity to generate revenue from their wildlife resources was the impetus to manage their wildlife resources, particularly deer.

As a wildlife consultant in Mexico throughout this time, I have seen firsthand the changes that have taken place. And as a speaker for the annual ANGADI convention on numerous occasions, I have witnessed an elevated interest in deer and deer management.

Today ranchers are beginning to supplement their deer herds during stress periods, and in some cases domestic stock numbers are being reduced in order to assuage the acute demand they place on the native habitat. On many ranches, large antlered bucks are being captured and placed into temporary confinement along with a number of doe to capitalize on exceptional antler traits similar to the Texas DMP program, and the deer breeding industry, although in the early stages of development, is escalating.

Obviously, there remains a concern of safety as drug cartels remain a constant source of consternation, but the status of the whitetail in Mexico is a healthy one. Hunting in Mexico is truly a remarkable and memorable experience, one that will only get better in the future as the Mexico triangle becomes recognized as being just as good as or even better than the triangle on the U.S. side of the river.

