MAGICAL MEXICO

Returning to the arid ranchland beyond the Rio Grande brought back a lot of fond memories — and gave me the season's last crack at bagging a monster whitetail on camera!

by Dr. James C. Kroll

Latin America in general, and Mexico in particular, has played a major role in my four decades of research on whitetails and other wildlife. And I am happy to report whitetails are a modern wildlife success story south of the border, just as they are to its north.

Although various subspecies are native to Mexico and points farther south, in the late 1960s there were few whitetails to be found in northeastern Mexico, which adjoins the western part of the legendary South Texas Brush Country. The fact that whitetails are now coming on strong on the far side of the Rio Grande is a testament to the wildlife conservation movement there.

In northeastern Mexico, one of the significant changes since I began working down there is that many landowners and hunters now manage whitetails just as seriously as their counterparts do in the U.S. and Canada. By implementing practical management practices such as those detailed in the "Building Your Own Deer Factory" series here in ***North American Whitetail***, these wildlife enthusiasts have had a tremendously positive impact on the region's wildlife.

As is the case with their counterparts in many other places, ranchers in Mexico have fallen under pretty bad times of late, as the profitability of cattle, sheep and goats has declined steadily. Eyeing South Texas ranchers' success



The final hunt of our 2003-04 filming season found the author on Mexico's Rancho Cuevas. The late-season rifle hunt produced this super buck, which was at least 6 1/2 years old. Photo courtesy of Rio Bravo Safaris.

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in producing high-quality bucks, the government has encouraged landowners to diversify their operations by managing for healthier deer and other wildlife.

Leading this charge has been a group commonly referred to as ANGADI, the acronym for *La Asociación Nacional de Ganaderos Diversificados* ("the national association of diversified cattle ranchers"). This is Mexico's equivalent to the cattlemen's associations in the U.S. and Canada.

In 2000, ANGADI invited me to talk about the principles of trophy deer management at its annual meeting in Nuevo Laredo, just across the Rio Grande from Laredo, Texas. This invitation came after two years of visits and phone conversations with my good friend Gabriel Serna, who figures significantly in the management of ANGADI. Through his efforts, we also arranged an exchange trip for ranchers and scientists to Nacogdoches, Texas, where our Institute for White-tailed Deer Management & Research is based. My plan was then to travel to Mexico to tour some of ANGADI's ranches and other operations.

The delegation from Mexico arrived last year, and we had a great time talking deer. The visit included a review of deer-culling strategies, nutrition and other such topics, both at the Institute facility near Nacogdoches and at Mustang Creek Ranch near Salado, Texas. (Ranch owner Bill Grace had hosted North American Whitetail University in February 2002.)

When Gabriel called to arrange my trip to Mexico, the excitement in his voice meant something was afoot. "How would you like to come on a hunt?" he asked.

Of course, it took about three nanoseconds for me to respond in the affirmative. One of the member ranchers, James (Jim) Woodward wanted me to come to the family ranch, which is called *Rancho Cuevas*, or "Caves Ranch." The property is named for its several caves, upon which many local legends apparently are based.

The ranch has been in the family of Jim's wife, Maria Luisa Reséndez, for generations. The ranch can be traced back to Spanish land grants, and it contains some of the finest old-growth brushland you will find anywhere. In addition to monster whitetails, Cuevas is home to bobwhite and blue quail, turkeys, javelinas, mountain lions and enough rattlesnakes to make Indiana Jones sweat. In short, it is my kind of place!

Jim and Maria have a unique relationship with Rio Bravo Safaris. In Mexico, it is not uncommon for folks to lease the hunting rights to a ranch, with permission from the landowner to sell some of the "management" buck hunts to help pay the bills for managing the habitat and herd. (I only wish Texas ranchers would adopt the same practice, as it helps raise a considerable amount of money to improve the land.)

Rio Bravo, which also has been around for years, is headed by partners Larry Hlavaty and Farryl Holub. My research partner, Ben Koerth, and I have had many visits with them over the years at hunting shows, and I have come to respect both men for their hard work and dedication to quality hunting.

Habitat management on *Rancho Cuevas* involves serious manipulation of the native brush. The management team has developed what are called "knockdown" areas at regular spacing. In this case, a "knockdown" is an irregular area of brush that is crushed using a bulldozer, so that the responding regrowth of woody browse is all within reach of the deer. In addition, the areas develop significant weed and grass growth favored by deer.

Lack of rainfall in this region does not permit planting food plots, so the ranch also provides pelleted protein through free-choice feeders. Water also is distributed throughout the ranch, allowing deer and other wildlife to utilize all areas.

Herd management here includes serious culling of mature bucks with eight or fewer typical points and low Boone and Crockett scores. These guys are committed to avoiding the harvest of immature bucks, so a transgressor might not be invited back.

Anyone familiar with the *Cola Blanca* ("white tail") big-buck contest in Laredo has heard of *Rancho Cuevas*. Year in and year out, the ranch places at least three bucks in the top five of various categories. On this property, 170-class typicals and 200-class non-typicals are legitimate possibilities, not wild fantasies! My January hunt would be icing on the cake after my October muzzleloader hunt in northwest Oklahoma and a December rifle hunt in southwest Texas, two other great trips we had filmed for ***North American Whitetail Television***.

After the holidays, I met up with Gabriel and his film crew in Laredo, in preparation for our border crossing. Leaving my truck on the U.S. side, we packed gear into Jim's truck and headed in. Crossing the border was no problem, and we soon had my gun permit and the appropriate paperwork for the hunt.

Rancho Cuevas proved to be one of the most beautiful properties I have seen in Mexico. It lived up to my every expectation, and then

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WHEN & WHERE TO SEE OUR SHOW

North American Whitetail Television premiered on The Outdoor Channel on Tuesday, June 29, at 4:30 p.m. Eastern Daylight Time. In addition to that time slot, each week the program airs at 9:30 p.m. on Thursday and at 10 a.m. on Sunday. This weekly schedule will remain in effect through September, after which all 13 episodes will re-air in the same order. For more details, visit www.outdoorchannel.com.

Our full season of shows also will be on RFD-TV, a popular network serving rural America. RFD-TV is carried by Dish Network and DirecTV. The program will air twice on Sundays, at 9:30 a.m. and 6:30 p.m. Eastern. (Different episodes will air in the morning and evening.) For updates on the network's schedule, log onto www.rfd-tv.com.

some. In fact, its mystique became evident even before the hunt began; when we arrived, right above the ranch was a double rainbow! And get this: One "end" of this rainbow was right on the hill where I eventually would shoot my buck!

Over the next three days, we patterned deer on the ranch. In the process, we decided on two locations, each adjacent to a "knockdown" natural forage area. It was clear that we would have to work around some obstacles that don't come into play when filming from standard tree stands.

Because there were no large trees present, for each hunt we had to position two tripod stands, making certain the cameraman could cover my viewing area. If he could not see a buck I wanted to shoot, I would have to be patient, perhaps even to the point of letting the deer walk off, no matter how big he was. Such is the game when filming, because the goal is to clearly tell the full story — including the shot — on camera.

Our first evening in the field turned out to be memorable. We saw

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eight bucks, two of which were real shooters! The biggest was a great 10-pointer that would have been phenomenally symmetrical had he not been missing a broken G-2 tine. Cameraman Adan Solano Hurtado could not get the deer in his viewfinder clearly, so we let him go.

That evening, Jim, Larry and Farryl showed me infrared-triggered camera shots of the same buck, and in those photos the missing G-2 was present. The G-2s looked to be perfectly balanced, extending over 12 inches. My hosts also showed me live photos of some huge non-typicals that roamed the ranch, but that big typical just would not leave my mind.

The next day turned to rain. Because a video camera cannot stand up to water, we decided to move operations to a new "knockdown," where an old enclosed tower blind stood. As we were dropped off, Jim casually mentioned that a buck scoring about 220 had been seen in the area. As you might guess, Adan and I immediately climbed into the blind!

The weather was not great for filming, but it was pretty good for calling. In Mexico the rut occurs even later than it does in much of South Texas. Because we had seen several bucks with does, I decided to break out my grunt call.

Thirty minutes into the hunt, Adan nudged me and pointed to his right. The form of a buck appeared eerily in the mist. He was mature, but I could not make out his antlers. The frame was sufficiently large to be the buck we were after, but I just could not see well enough to make a decision. Besides, when filming for television, the camera is master.

We waited . . . and waited . . . and waited. Then I grunted again. The buck picked up his head and walked slowly toward us. At 150 yards, his antlers became clear. It was not the big non-typical, but the typical with the snapped tine! The deer had repositioned himself roughly a mile from where we earlier had seen him.

"Do you have him?" I queried my cameraman.

"*Si*," was Adan's reply.

I waited so the camera could capture enough footage for everyone at home to enjoy and then said, "I'm going to take him."

The buck stopped and dropped his head, and for a moment I lost sight of him. It turns out he was checking a scrape. He then raised his head in typical lip-curl fashion.

Suddenly, there was movement behind him; another buck was coming to the call, as well. As the big typical turned to look back at the intruder, my Thompson/Center Encore 7mm Rem. Mag. broke the silence. The buck flipped over backwards and never moved again.

I turned to Adan for confirmation that the scene had looked good through the viewfinder. "*Bueno*?" I begged.

"*Muy, muy bueno*," he replied.

I breathed a sigh of relief, not noticing the stream of blood running down my face. In my intense focus on killing the buck, I had leaned way across the gun; bringing my Roman nose too close to the scope. I knew I would someday would join the "half-moon" club, and it finally had happened! Fortunately, I wasn't really injured, and we laughed about it as we went to inspect our trophy.

Had the buck retained his broken G-2, his score would have scared the devil out of 172 inches. But not only was that big tine broken, in the two days that had passed since our first sighting, he also had lost a brow tine. But never mind that; I was in love with this buck! And when Gabriel and Jim arrived, they felt the same way.

Now for the acid test: Was the buck fully mature? In observing his body and behavior, I had made him out to be at least 6 1/2 years old. I've aged thousands of deer on the hoof in this manner, but no matter how confident I am in my assessment, there is always a bit of nervousness as the animal's mouth is opened for tooth inspection. As we shined a flashlight onto the buck's jaw teeth, we saw that he aged out just as expected. We all were pleased that I had taken a great buck in his prime.

My remaining time on the trip was spent looking at more bucks and as much of the ranch as possible. We also reviewed the genetics program currently under way on another ranch in the area. Based on what I saw, these guys have their act together.

My return to Mexico had been everything I had hoped for, and I plan to keep returning as long as the guys will have me. In fact, in April I returned to Mexico to present another talk to an annual ANGADI meeting. It was great to see old friends and talk about my memorable whitetail hunt at the ranch of caves.

FOR YOUR INFORMATION

The author's hunt in Mexico will be featured on episode No. 12 of North AmericanWhitetail Television, scheduled to air on Sept. 14, 16 and 19 on The Outdoor Channel and on Sept. 19 and 26 on RFD-TV.

For information on whitetail hunts in northeastern Mexico with Rio Bravo Safaris, refer to the contact information provided on Page 66.