

*HUNTING
THE SOUTHWESTERN
MONARCH*

by John Wootters

*To down
a mule deer in the
Southwest,
knowledge of terrain
and the animal's
habits is just as essential
as choice of rifle
or binoculars.*

A frozen sun-disc inched its way upward to clear the rim of a mesa across the canyon, its rays spangling every leaf and twig and blade of grass with frost-fire. In the basin below my perch, I checked several trails through my binoculars, noting that not many deer had used them during the night. As I glassed the meadows a mule deer doe and fawn appeared, quick-stepping along one of the trails, but no buck followed them. I lowered the glasses and scanned the basin, shivering, wishing the sun would hurry, but at the same time knowing that the day would soon be too warm for comfort.

My companion, Winston Burnham, and I were seated atop a towering chimney rock, part of an eroded ridge which was the ancient spine of the mesa. Behind us loomed the mesa's shoulder. The flat top of the mountain, twenty thousand acres of table-flat meadows and groves of aspens and ponderosa pine, was the summer range of a herd of elk and mule deer. From our position and within range of our rifles, we could overlook at least three major migration trails, trending downward off the mountain's point into the canyons and valleys where the deer would pass the winter months. Far below us, in the valley six miles distant, closely mown alfalfa fields shone in the early sun like standing water.

It was the morning of the second day of the hunting season, here in southwestern Colorado's vast Uncompahgre Plateau, and that fact was significant. The only con-

venient access for hunters was along the high ridge at the far end of the mesa. As usual, hunting pressure had begun there along a forest road on opening morning and rolled in waves the length of the mountain's level top. From long experience in the area, my companions and I could predict the reaction of the resident deer herd to this pressure. For a day or two the animals would circle and dodge, reluctant to leave their summering grounds even though riflemen were combing this high country. However, the herd was on the verge of beginning its annual downhill drift, especially since snows had blanketed the country a few days before. The infiltration by the hunters would trigger the movement. In high Rocky Mountain regions, where timberline rises to eleven thousand feet and all access is from below, the oldest, biggest mulie bucks are the last of the deer to drop downhill as snow deepens. But in this mesa country, where elevations range from five to eight thousand feet, maximum, and hunters can work from the top down, the big bucks are the first to go. It takes just about twenty-four hours of hunting to convince the heavy-headed old bucks that the time has come to leave the easy living in the high meadows. When they get the message they begin a parade down those trails, overlooked by our chimney-rock perch, which has to be seen to be believed.

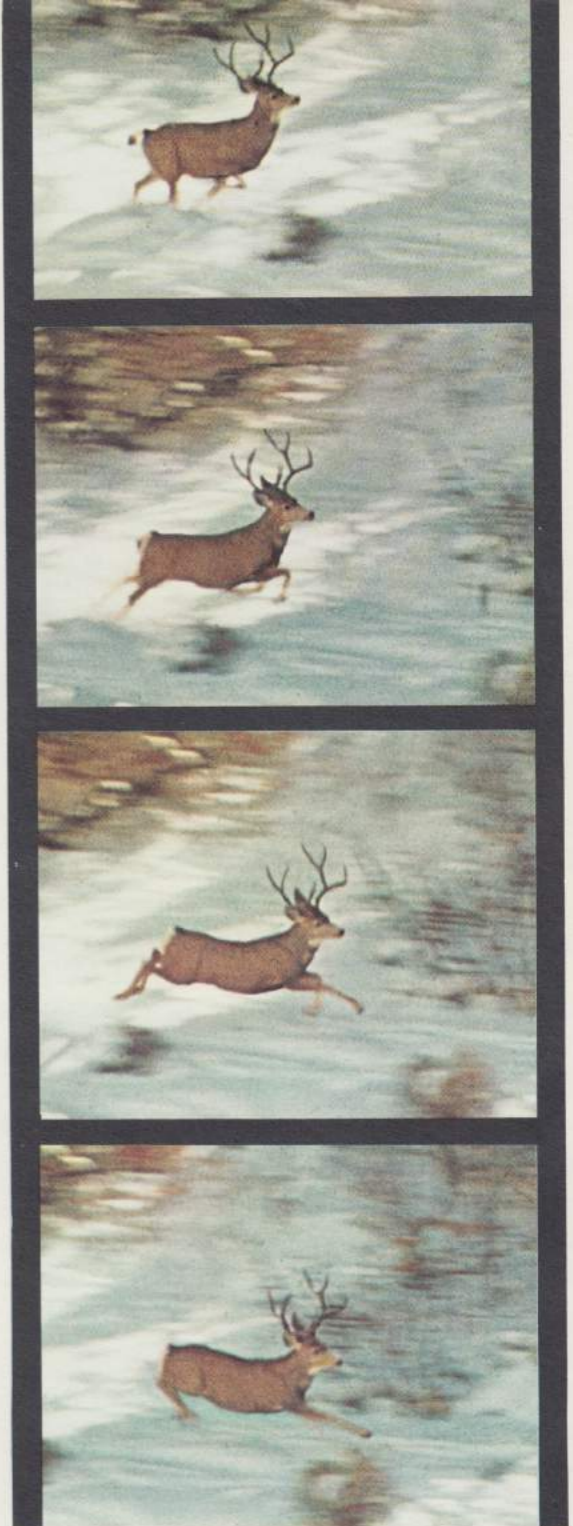
Every animal, during those first few days of the general season, will be headed the

same direction—downward—and almost every one of them will be a mature buck. By the end of the sixth or seventh day, the mesa top will still hold a sizable, and nervous, heard of does, fawns, and young males, but very few of the craggy old patriarchs will be found there.

Our tactics are simple: We spend those first few days on the chimney rock and pick and choose between the racks of antlers passing in review below us, meanwhile wishing the horde of hunters stomping through the mesa-top meadows all the luck in the world.

On this particular morning the sun had hardly cleared the opposite mountain when the parade started. Winston jabbed me in the ribs and pointed downward, where I saw a pair of mule bucks on the nearest trail. One was a four-pointer (western count) with spindly horns, but the other carried a set of antlers that made me grunt, roll over onto my belly, and slip my arm into the rifle's sling. It was an easy shot, with the deer standing broadside in the open, no more than one hundred and fifty yards away. I took my time and placed the bullet precisely behind the shoulder, well up in the lungs. The buck died on his feet.

Before we could gather up our gear and scramble down from the rock, a third buck ambled into view on the same trail, and his antlers were even better, with exceptional height and symmetry. Winston reached for his own 7mm Magnum and



Preceding pages: Texas hunter has stalked close for offhand shot at buck which is now aware and fleeing. Above: Film for The American Sportsman-ABC shows spooked mule deer streaking over snow-covered hill in New Mexico.

Right: Startled does and fawn lope away from camera. Far right: Buck senses danger and races for dense cover on mountainside. Bottom: Hunters scan valleys after bucks have been prodded by hunting pressure into coming down from high terrain.

rolled the buck over. Almost before the sun was up, we had a pair of fine bucks to dress, thanks to the hunters above. Three days later, the third member of our party, Murry Burnham, went back to this same chimney formation and selected from among a dozen bucks he scoped that morning a magnificent mulie with massive, nontypical antlers spreading thirty-eight and one-quarter inches at the widest point.

This migratory habit of the mule deer is perhaps the most distinctive of the several differences a whitetail hunter will have to adjust to when he makes his first mule deer hunt. Almost nothing short of a residential subdevelopment or a forest fire can drive a whitetail permanently out of his small home range. The mulies of the Southwest, however, change their living quarters twice each year, and their migrations are both vertical and horizontal. One herd, which winters in California, travels more than one hundred miles to spend the summer in Oregon. Most populations do not wander so far, their "migrations" being better described as a mere vertical drift occasioned by changing weather and forage conditions. Even so, the movements and their timing are of crucial importance to the hunter throughout most of the southwestern range. In some of the area under consideration here—trans-Pecos Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, the Oklahoma Panhandle, and southern Colorado—there is little change in elevation and therefore no vertical migra-

tion. In West Texas mule deer country, for example, the animals are found in abundance in rolling prairie terrain cut by ravines, or in the foothills of the small mountains (which seldom rise more than a couple of thousand feet above the surrounding tableland). Western Oklahoma, some of the prime mulie country in New Mexico, and much of Arizona, too, is more desert than alpine. In more mountainous terrain, the primary problem may be pinpointing the elevation of the herds at the time of hunt. A hunter should bear in mind that the big trophy bucks are last to leave high country where hunting pressure is from below, and the first to leave where hunters can come at them in numbers from above. If local information is not available, or reliable, it pays to spend a few days before opening morning scouting various elevations for sightings, fresh beds and sign, and evidences of feeding.

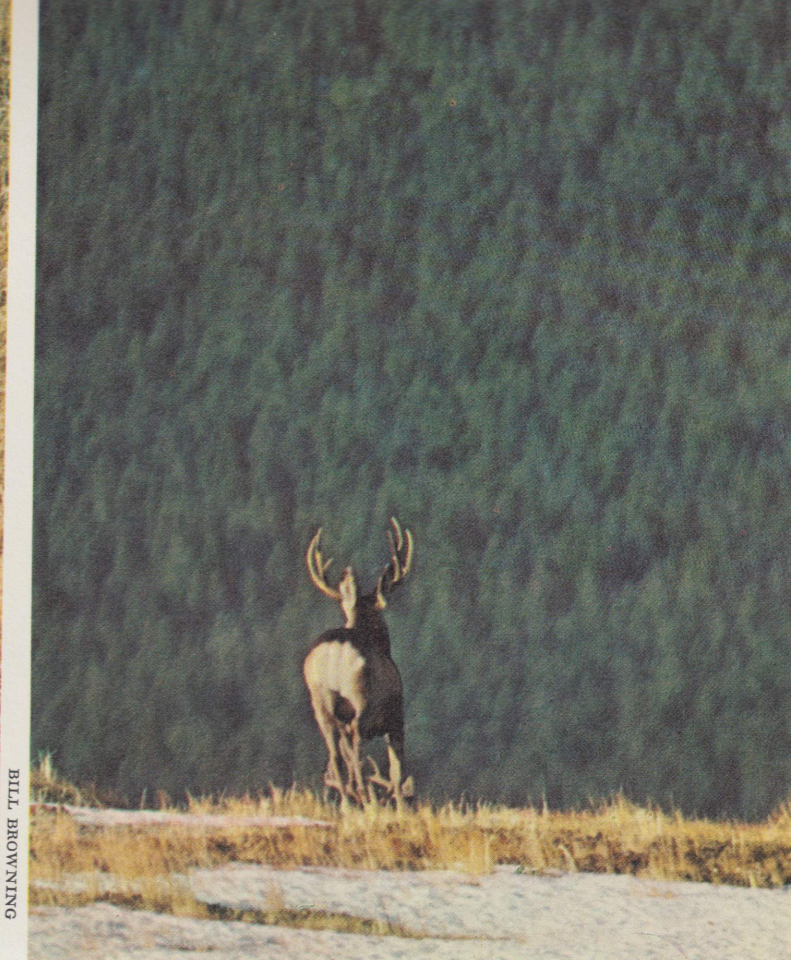
The southwestern states offer a surprising variety of deer country, from the towering Sangre de Cristo Mountains of New Mexico to the rocky deserts of Arizona, and the mule deer has adapted to almost every environment. The species was originally reported, by the Lewis and Clark expedition, to be a plains animal, but improvident conservation practices in the early days and the invasion of their territory by livestock have pushed the mule deer back into remote areas where mankind permits him to abide.

Throughout his range, the mule deer is

CONTINUED ON PAGE 87



BILL BROWNING



BILL BROWNING



BYRON W. DALRYMPLE

a much more open-country animal than his whitetailed cousin, whose range overlaps that of the mule deer in much of the Southwest. The habits of the two species are radically different. The whitetail is a skulker, a creature of the environmental "edges," a thicket-dweller taking advantage of every scrap of cover. A burglar-bold old whitetail will lie low, even when a hunter passes within a few yards, as long as he thinks he hasn't been noticed, but when he flees, he does it with purpose, putting lots of cover between himself and danger and never stopping until safely concealed. Wounded, he almost invariably goes downhill, especially if leg-shot.

The mulie, on the other hand, is a more innocent soul, even in the same general terrain, posing grandly in the open, fleeing uphill with his comical, pogo-stick gait, even when wounded, and almost invariably pausing to gaze back at the hunter just before he reaches cover or a ridge crest. It has been a fatal error of thousands of deer. And he lacks the nerve of the whitetail; surprise him in his bed and he'll go crashing away in a panic.

In the southwestern regions, mule deer are hunted under two distinctly different sets of circumstances. The first is during the general big-game seasons of the various states, opening from mid-October through November. The weather may be quite warm, there is little or no snow, and the herds may still be peacefully established on their summering grounds. The other set of conditions is encountered during the post-season hunts commonly held in southern Colorado and some parts of New Mexico. These may be declared at any time in November, December, or even January, to allow the harvest of surplus animals which survived the general season, but most of the hunts are in December, when heavy snow has shut the high country off to the

deer, and the rut is in full swing.

During the general seasons the mature bucks are ranging alone or in small bachelor bands of two to four individuals. Although does and fawns may be using the same areas, a trophy buck will rarely be found in their company at this time of year. Hunting techniques comprise all the standard ones for deer hunting—point-sitting, still-hunting, and watching feeding areas at dawn and dusk. The man out after a real trophy head had better haunt the roughest and most inaccessible pockets of country he can find, timberline areas, rugged rim-rocks, and slides. Big-headed mule bucks tend to lie down during the warm part of the day near the ends of points where they have shade and a clear view of their back trails, and where rising thermals will carry the scent of danger to their nostrils from below on either side of the point. Like other mountain species, mulies seem not to be as conscious of the possibility of danger from above, but timber on these preferred points frequently makes a silent approach from above impossible. An excellent tactic involves two hunters working together, combing out each side of a point simultaneously. Either may push a buck over the ridge and right into the cross hairs of the other's rifle scope.

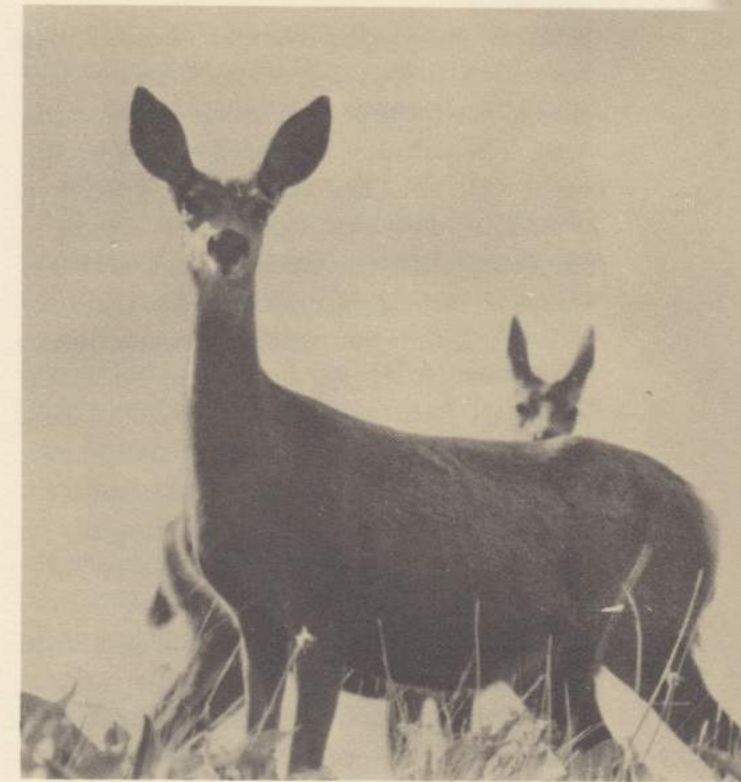
In lower country, the typical bedding spots will be just below the rimrock bluffs. Juniper and piñon shrubs offer shade and shelter in such spots, and the lazing deer have good warning of danger from either above or below. Hunting them from above is impossible, but the hunter who isn't afraid of running shots may be surprised at the game he can flush at midday by working slowly along the slopes or slides a few yards below these bedding areas.

In the warmer reaches of the Southwest, mule deer appear to suffer somewhat from heat during the general hunting season,

having already grown their winter coats by this time, and I've found them actually lying in a bank of old snow. If no snow is available, they'll do their nooning in deep shade on the northern slopes, so it is a mistake to do all your hunting on the sunny, protected, south-facing points which fairly shout *deer beds*.

Hunting the postseasons is a different proposition altogether. The snow is usually deep in normal years, not only in the timberline country but also in the valleys, and the cold is an enemy to be reckoned with by deer and hunters alike. These are the "trophy hunts," held when even the biggest bucks are ranging in the valleys, and the rut is like fire in their veins. Deer concentrations are easy to locate in the snow, and the animals themselves are conspicuous against the white background from great distances. In much of the postseason region, the staple winter fodder of mule deer is sagebrush, and they may be observed a long way from any cover, far out on the open flats. That same openness of terrain, however, can complicate the task of stalking within sure rifle range. Other favored feeding areas in December will be those offering bearberry, scrub oak, juniper, or serviceberry bushes.

The biggest bucks are much more interested in sex than in food at this time of year, however, and the rut diminishes their native caution. A dominant male may lord it over three or four does for a time, but if a female decides to wander off, the harem-master seldom interferes. Mulie bucks do fight for breeding privileges, but these migratory animals do not stake and defend a breeding territory, as do the whitetails. Battles royal between rival bucks are less frequent and less serious than among whitetailed deer, but they do cause considerable damage to the antlers of the males, apparently during periods of exceptionally cold weather.



Colorado does, typically alert, watch intruder.

The old South Texas trick of simulating a buck fight by rattling a pair of antlers together has, to my personal knowledge, been successful at least twice in attracting mule deer bucks. It was done in southern Colorado and in western Texas, which suggests that if knowledge of the technique were more widespread, it might open new vistas in mulie hunting.

These snowy postseason hunts have been held regularly in the San Juan region of southern Colorado and on the Jicarilla Apache Indian Reservation in northern New Mexico, and occasionally in other areas of both states. The southwestern hunter who covets a mule-deer trophy for the Boone and Crockett Club listings probably has better odds during this "trophy hunt" on the Jicarilla Reservation than anywhere else in North America. During the last few years more record heads have been taken here

than in any other similar-sized region—at least sixteen, as of my latest information. One hunting party from Texas killed three record heads on a single trip to this reservation in 1966. The Apaches charge a stiff tribal fee for the hunt, and limit the number of permits issued, but the results seem to be worth the price of admission for a serious trophy hunter. The tribe also holds a regular-season hunt, and some exceptional heads always seem to turn up on this less-expensive hunt, too.

Within our area, the next best big-trophy region is probably the Uncompahgre National Forest in southwestern Colorado, the mesa country described at the beginning of this article. Trophy quality is declining rapidly here, as it is wherever hunting is heavy, but there are still some rugged, remote pockets of country in the Uncompahgre where bucks have a chance to live the seven or eight years required to reach record-class trophy proportions. The San Juan postseason hunts, previously mentioned, are hard going but produce some excellent antlers. Arizona's famous Kaibab country on the rim of the Grand Canyon was formerly known for its big mule deer heads, but hunting pressure there has made them scarcer lately. For the real giants, it's axiomatic that you must get into areas where not many hunters go; the publicity given the Jicarilla Reservation will no doubt soon reduce the flow of records from there.

West Texas, particularly the region between the towns of Marfa and Presidio, has at least as many mule deer per square mile as any other portion of the range, but this is the Mexican, or "desert," subspecies, substantially smaller in body and horn than the Rocky Mountain race found farther north. The very biggest heads of this variety are rarely better than the average, mature Rocky Mountain trophy, so if an outstanding mule deer head is your primary goal,

be certain to inquire of the state game and fish department as to which regions hold the larger subspecies.

Where elk are not also on the agenda, the mulie hunter enjoys wide latitude in selecting his shooting equipment. My own favorite combination for all western hunting is a battered, beloved old Remington bolt-action rifle, chambered for the 7mm Magnum cartridge and mounting a 2X-7X variable scope. The cartridge may be a bit much for most mule deer hunting, but it has ridden so many miles on my shoulder or in a saddle scabbard in the mountains and on the plains that I'd be betraying a friend if I left it behind. Furthermore, everything I shoot at with the old Remington falls down, and my confidence in the rifle is unshakable.

That confidence and familiarity with a given rifle is, in my opinion, far more important than any technical specifications, and this belief has been supported by companions who are just as deadly with their .270's, .280 Remingtons, .284's, .30/06's, .308's, and 7x57 Mausers as I am with my "Big Seven." The 6mm family of cartridges, with proper bullets and in the right hands, is perfectly adequate for mule deer, as is the ancient .257 Roberts. Even the .30/30 class of cartridges, including the .32 Special, the various .303's, and the .35 Remington, has undeniably slain more than its fair share of mule deer, but the average visiting hunter, with limited time and a relatively large investment in the hunt, is better assured of success and satisfaction with more modern ballistics at his disposal, plus a good scope sight of at least four power.

In short, almost any good whitetail rifle will serve well enough for mulies, which are no tougher and not as much bigger than whitetails as popularly supposed. The chief difference is in the ranges at which the two species are taken; the whitetail average is well under one hundred paces, while mulies

average closer to one hundred and fifty yards in most areas, with a possibility of shots up to three hundred.

Plenty of mule deer are downed each season with the several .300 Magnum cartridges, but both game and hunter will more than likely be overgunned by such cannons, and they are usually heavy for scrambling around all day at the higher elevations.

Far more important than selection of a cartridge is the choice of bullets, and more important yet is the placement of those bullets on the target. For all the more modern .30-caliber rifles, the 150-grain bullet is the correct choice, and it's not bad in the various 7mm's, either. The rounds of .25 caliber and smaller demand the heaviest available slugs, whether handloaded or factory-loaded. Moderately-quick expanding bullets are desirable for mule deer, as contrasted with the emphasis placed upon penetration for shooting bigger game such as elk or moose.

I regard a good pair of binoculars as equally essential to my mulie-hunting kit as a good rifle. Magnification of 7X to 8X is about right, and can be had in compact glasses, but sharp definition, or resolving power, is more important. I remember one day in southern Colorado when I sat down to rest weary legs and lungs at the head of a gentle canyon folded into the mountain-side. It was late morning, and deer movement had ceased an hour earlier. I idly lifted the binoculars around my neck and began scanning the slopes below me. Within five minutes I'd located three bucks, lying in the deep shade of the timber on the north-facing wall of the canyon, and one of them was a dandy. Without the glasses I'd have sat out my rest period, risen, sighed, and trudged on, probably never realizing that my trophy was within rifle range at that moment. The big buck's hindquarters were actually in the sun, but to my naked

eye they looked exactly like one of the plentiful boulders on that slope.

To an experienced whitetail hunter, the antlers of the first adult mulie buck he sees will appear tremendous, through the binoculars or otherwise. Where an outstanding whitetail rack may spread to twenty inches (inside), a mule deer head is not in the bragging class until inside spread reaches close to thirty inches. I've measured the ear-spread of a giant mulie buck at twenty-two inches (probably slightly less in life, with his ears held at the alert) so it's obvious that any rack which barely spreads outside the ears is inferior. However, when the first main fork of the beams extends outside those ears, the head is getting interesting. Seen from front or rear, a good rack has a distinctive, boxy, square appearance, seeming to be about as high as wide, with massive beams and long points. In fact, a trophy head will not only be wider than the ear tips, but wider than any other part of the body. Symmetry, in a potential record head, counts heavily, so the trophy hunter must make certain that the typical mule deer formation is complete—each beam branching, with each branch forking once more, for a total of five prongs on each side, counting the stubby brow tines. If there are additional points, it's desirable that they be paired (one on each side).

A record-class nontypical mule deer's antlers are nearly indescribable, but the instant you see them there'll be no doubt in your mind that they're something special. In general, if the head has the big, square look, with lots of spread and heavy beams, it's necessary only to make certain that no obvious deformity exists before shooting.

I've found—and most experienced trophy hunters agree—that any rack of antlers always looks smaller than it really is when viewed from a position steeply above the

animal. (This is true of all antlered game.)

Through most of the Southwest, a good saddle horse can take a lot of the work out of hunting mule deer, and even more out of getting the carcass out of the woods once the game is downed. However, although I grew up in a saddle, I prefer to do my hunting afoot and alone. A horse is just too much trouble. If I ride up into game country and tether my mount, then I must plan my day's hunt to bring me back to him. In unfamiliar terrain this is always inconvenient and sometimes unexpectedly difficult, requiring hard climbing through hunted-out country at the end of the day. In more level terrain, game is sometimes spotted from a horse (many hunting horses are excellent game-pointers, by the way), whereupon the hunter can dismount and execute a stalk, returning immediately to the horse when the game is killed, lost, or refused. But when that big buck is jumped by a rider, he must dismount and get his rifle into action, a process which uses up the few seconds which always seem to offer the best chance.

Altogether, my favorite tactics are to camp high in the game country (keeping quiet around camp), walking, riding, or being hauled as high as possible before daylight, and spending the day hunting down the mountain at my own pace. That pace is ultraslow, allowing plenty of time to study the terrain below me, planning routes, glassing likely lying-up spots during the midday hours, and generally soaking up all the sights and sounds and smells of the forest at my leisure. Every kind of mule deer country has its distinctive character and its own delights. The towering mountain country offers the incredible cleanliness and majesty of high parks and ridges, with cross-canyon vistas of aspen stands saffron against the green-black spruces. There is a stillness and a privacy here, a sensation of possessing

all the eye can see, that justifies the effort, deer or no deer. The perfume of this land is the pungency of moist, dead aspen leaves alternating with that of the conifers, and it stirs my hunter's heart every autumn.

The desert reaches of the mulies' range have a completely different appeal, at least for me. This is harsh country, a man's kind of country, where every form of life commands respect. The ocotillo, staghorn, and prickly-pear cactus are formidable, and the yucca's daggers will never be risked a second time by the newcomer. All the birds, mammals, and reptiles are tough and hardy and defiant. Everything in the desert seems to run to extremes—daily temperature ranges may be as great as fifty degrees, the weather is either extremely dry or extremely wet, and plant life adaptations are so extreme that the stranger will term them weird. But the deer are here, too, softening the arid land with their grace and beauty.

The mule deer is, to my eye, the loveliest of America's deer. In the segments of his range north of the southwestern regions discussed here, he is larger, but there he takes second place among big game to elk, moose, and other animals. In the Southwest, he is our biggest game. And since he must often be taken at very long range in open country, he is among our most demanding.

His whitetailed cousin is a politician. He accommodates; he adopts a subtle *détente* with his enemy, Man. The whitetail is the slick quick-change artist, living by his nerve and wits, learning new habits and modifying old ones into a behavior pattern which has become perhaps the most successful in big-game history.

But the mulie is, by contrast, our defiant aborigine, an honest, noble, straightforward, perhaps rather simple, beast of surpassing grace. Both species are admirable, but, in the Southwest the mule deer is a well-crowned king. ©