

Mule Deer Revival

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 Photos by Russell A. Graves, Ben Masters, and Wyman Meinzer

When I saw him across the field, I knew the deer was special. Or, I should say, special in the context of mule deer in the Texas Rolling Plains. I've seen mule deer bucks as big as this one in the Trans-Pecos or on tightly managed ranches in the southeastern Panhandle but none this big in any kind of free-range context.

At first, he had his head down in the grass that was burnished a pale yellow after a dry summer and a curing freeze back in early November. Even from 100 yards away, the width and mass of his antlers was obvious. This was the biggest mule deer I've ever seen in northwest Texas.

Deer like this are rare around here so I had to attempt to get a picture. The wind was in my favor and the sun at my back so I crept easterly towards him taking care to move slowly and use the spotty junipers as cover. Within five minutes, I was 40 yards away - a perfect distance for an image. Raising my camera, I took one frame and he looked up. Not directly at me, but past me. I knew he could see me but he wasn't spooked. So, I sat with him for 10 more minutes as he fed.

Big, wide and mature, he was the antithesis of most mule deer

I've seen around here over the past two decades. Fork horns and six points are fairly common but wide and heavily massed mule deer bucks have always eluded me.

Are the big deer that much smarter and able to evade detection better than smaller deer? Even better than a whitetail? I don't think so. Big mule deer are simply rare.

But it shouldn't be that way.

Conventional wisdom dictates in this modern era of enlightened deer management, mule deer antler sizes should be getting bigger and bigger. If you were to take an average of whitetail antler size over the past quarter century, chances are you'd see the trend line heading up, albeit ever so slightly. Mule deer, at least anecdotally, seem to be headed in the opposite direction.

The Problem

When I first moved to Childress County in 1993, it was not uncommon to see big-antlered, mature mule deer. It was not uncommon to see big herds of mule deer in wheat fields. Sometimes more than 100 deer grazed in the fields, and at least 15 percent would be of trophy quality by most standards. By the end of the decade, I could



see that the numbers of mature deer were diminishing.

My analysis isn't scientific at all - just a general observation. But, it was an observation that seemed to hold true even as the years ticked by early in the new century.

In the early 1990s, the Texas

AgriLife Extension Service reported that across the entire Rolling Plains, just over a million acres was leased for hunting. As word got out through the outdoor media in the late 1990s about the quality of whitetails and mule deer, the

number of acres under lease steadily increased as did the number of hunters. While correlation does not imply causation, the number of mature mule deer began to fall precipitously.

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