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.*
in producing high-quality bucks, the
government has encouraged land-
owners 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 asso-
ciation 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 meet-
ing 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 manage-
ment of ANGADI. Through his
efforts, we also arranged an
exchange trip for ranchers and sci-
entists 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 prop-
erty 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 rela-
tionship 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 part-
ners Larry Hlavaty and Farryl Holub.
My research partner, Ben Koech,
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 manipula-
tion of the native brush. The manage-
ment 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 signif-
icant 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 avoid-
ing the harvest of immature bucks,
so a transgressor might not be invit-
ed back.

Anyone familiar with the Cola
Blanca (“white tail”) big-buck con-
test 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 muzzelleader
hunt in northwestern 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 cross-
ing. 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
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 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-typical 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 drenched 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. 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 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 hundreds 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 shielded 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 American Whitetail 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.