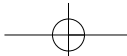


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# Mulie Magic

**Stalking desert mule deer is never easy,  
but the reward is well worth the pain.**

By Zack Walton

**I**t's hard not to scream when you're standing on a cactus wearing nothing but socks. But after two straight weeks of practice, I was getting pretty good. I decided to put the pain in the back of my mind and continue to sneak forward. Knowing the group of mule deer had to be close, I tried to focus on anything but the needles piercing my toes. Just then, I was snapped back as to why I was doing all this. I could suddenly see the wide-racked four-point mulie reappear through the mesquite. He was intently following two does.



**(Left)** *The author with his big prize, taken during a spot and stalk adventure in the desert.*  
**(Left below)** *The author's friends also tagged out with nice Coues whitetail bucks.*



The buck was obviously in full rut. His large, swollen neck gave his body the perception of being front-heavy. As he began moving around the group of does, I couldn't help but focus on him, and while doing so, a doe had picked up my location. The cagey "mule head" bounded away, taking with him she and the others. It was developing into a trend this trip. However, she went only 200 yards before settling down.

I began watching the group, trying to anticipate their next move, when the scene quickly turned into a spectacular show. Over the next few minutes, I saw the large buck mount a doe several times, finally breeding her, square off with a smaller 3x4 and level

cacti and bushes just to prove his dominance. The group had settled down and grown in size when two small bucks joined in on the fun. With light fading, I laced up my boots and began closing the distance on the deer.

I had to skirt the group of deer to get the wind in my favor by dropping off the hilltop and circling them. I stayed a couple-hundred yards away and continued "dogging" the group until they disappeared into a small draw. By slipping into the depression, the deer allowed me to get in front of them without being seen, so I ducked out of sight and ran down a wash to where I thought the herd would go.

Shortly after finding my feet were again full of thorns, I eased my head above some rocks and saw big ears moving every which way. The bucks were chasing does back and forth in the confined canyon. What a circus. Three different times I had a 20-inch-wide 3x4 stop well within bow range. "The deer don't know you are here, find the big boy," I kept thinking to myself. Soon enough, the wide four-point popped out from behind some quail bushes hot on two does. He was easily twice the size of the does he pushed in front of me at about 50 yards. I was hoping I had finally met up with a large mule about to make his last mistake.

There is not another animal I have chased more often, for longer periods of time, than desert mule deer of the Southwest. Every year I spend my Christmas vacation in the high desert. I have been going with my family for the better part of two decades. And for the past 15 years, I've bowhunted the various animals that call the cacti-infested area of Arizona home. This past year was no exception and on Christmas night my friend, Shawn Wood, and I left to meet up with my parents.

The holiday season is when I love to hunt mule deer, because they are more active and bucks are always "twitterpated." Bowhunting mule deer during this window can be a blast. Bucks fight cactus and each other. Their I.Q.s plummet to that of a stuffed animal, and they swell up like a second-rate boxer after a few rounds with Iron Mike. And the sight of one classic desert giant, with wide, flared antlers stretching from horizon to horizon, is enough to bring you back.

I had my first introduction to these big-eared desert dwellers 15 years ago on the morning of my first bowhunt for deer. Arizona allows hunters to chase big game at the age of 10, (two years before my home state of California), so my first deer hunt was in the Grand Canyon State. That



Walton shot this deer during the same trip, but one month prior in December of '06. Arizona allows one buck during a calendar year.

morning I found myself in the middle of a group of mule deer and at the age of 11, I shot my first deer with a bow.

I wish it were always so easy. The fact is, the mule deer in southern Arizona are easy to hunt with a bow, but difficult to kill. You can get within 150 yards with little effort, but closing to within bowrange is a minor miracle every time. Throw in the fact that when the rut starts, large bucks usually will have between one and 20 does with him—and you will have more eyes, ears and noses to go through than a plastic surgeon in Hollywood. That's when the challenge begins. That's the challenge I was faced with that January afternoon.

The deer were running in circles. "Wait for the buck to stop," I told myself. When one doe stopped and the buck lowered his head to sniff her, I drew my Hoyt and settled on the last rib of the quartering-away buck. I remember thinking, "Constant tension. Squeeze through."

When the arrow struck, the buck kicked his rear legs high in the air like a bull looking to rid himself of a cowboy. Surprisingly, the shot did not spook any of the deer, but as I scanned the group, I could not find the buck I had just hit. But he still had to be there. The other bucks were still

## "You can get within 150 yards with little effort, but closing to within bowrange is a minor miracle every time."

chasing does, and the other deer were feeding on cactus, all of this within 50 yards of where an arrow crashed through the biggest deer in the bunch.

Finally, I found him concealed in some ocotillo about 20 yards from where I shot him. I could tell he was badly hurt, but that I should put another arrow in him. *Control the shaking.* My second shot hit low as I misjudged the yardage, but he didn't move. The next shot slid right under the buck's large chest and still, he didn't move. It was obvious ... adrenaline was out of control now. The other deer had spooked away and here I was failing to put a second arrow in the large buck right in front of me. Somebody get me a bag to breathe into. I told myself to calm down and make the shot count and the next arrow smacked home.

At impact, he busted through the ocotillo for 100 yards before stopping. The arrow had broken off from his sprint, but I knew it had hit him through the shoulder. The buck slowly

walked off, stopping frequently. I watched him for 10 minutes before he limped into a wash. Since the sun had just set, I decided to leave the deer overnight and come back with some help in the morning.

The night lasted for an eternity, and after searching in the morning, with help from my dad and Shawn, we found the buck 150 yards from where I last saw him. Both of the arrows had penetrated the chest cavity, the first slicing the liver before cutting through the bottom of the chest, and the second hit both shoulders and cut through the top of the chest.

The trip was a wonderful success, as I had seen lots of animals and taken a marvelous mule deer that was 26 inches wide and gross scored right at the Pope & Young minimum. Along

with the one-horned buck I'd taken on the last day of the December season, and I had two archery-killed bucks in difficult terrain. To make the hunt more amazing, everyone in my hunting party took animals.

My Christmas-time trip is a perfect ending to my bowhunting season. The high desert offers sunshine during a usually cold winter at home and an opportunity to hunt a different time of the year for me. And with the right amount of luck, I get to bring home my last, and best present of the season. ←

### EDITOR'S NOTE:

The author is a pro staffer for *G5 Outdoors* and used *Montec broadheads* for this hunt. He also used a *Hoyt Trykon XL*, *Easton Axis 300* arrows, a *7-Deadly Pins* sight from *Spot-Hogg and Nealy's Custom Bowstrings*. When not bowhunting he lives in *Modesto, California*, with his wife, *Anne*.