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MARCH 1943

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Field & Stream



Vol. XLVII

MARCH, 1943

No. 11

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Field & Stream is a trade and technical magazine publishing trade and technical news for sportsmen, sporting goods dealers and the industry. Issued monthly by Field & Stream Publishing Co., 515 Madison Ave., New York. Yearly subscription, U. S. A., \$2.00; Canada, \$2.00; foreign countries, \$3.00. Single copies, 20c.

ELTINGE F. WARNER, *President*. IRVING T. MYERS, *Vice-President*. J. WILLIAMS MACY, *Vice-President*. FRED KLANER, JR., *Vice-President*. ELMER J. CHAMBERS, *Secretary-Treasurer*. Western Advertising Office, Wrigley Bldg., Chicago, Ill. Coast Advertising Offices: 1038 Henry Bldg., Seattle, Wash.; 300 Montgomery St., San Francisco, Cal.; 530 W. 6th St., Los Angeles, Cal.
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Cactus BUCKS

by ROB F. SANDERSON

A tale of hunters and horses and dwarf
spike-horned deer that lived in a range of des-
olate mountains down in Sonora, old Mexico



ON a promontory Ramon reined up his spare-boned bronc, shifted sidewise in his Mexican saddle, and with a wide sweep of his arm completed a grandiose gesture out over the cañon.

"This, señores," he announced impressively, "is the Cañon of the Cactus, the doorway to the big basin between the mountains where live the many dwarf deer."

He turned to look for a moment at Carl, Jack and me individually, to make sure that all three gringos adequately appreciated the importance of his words. Frankly, we were unimpressed. In the United States, the location might have been a National Monument. The precipitous cañon slopes were studded with grotesque cactus, and along the bottom green cottonwoods traced the bends of a small stream. But, saddle-sore and covered with desert dust, we were less interested in the view than in the water a quarter mile below.

Rolling our spur rowels, we sent the broncs sliding stiff-legged down the steep talus rock. Soon we lay on our bellies, drinking among the rocks. Just downstream the horses sucked the clear warm water with heaving sides, and pawed and splashed as if they couldn't get enough.

"I can actually spit again," Carl exclaimed in mock surprise, demonstrating the statement with a most luxurious exhibition.

No person who hasn't forked a saddle for two days across the Mexican desert, with only a two-quart canteen to wet his whistle, can appreciate the feeling.

By late afternoon we had ridden far



Not much bigger than a dog

up the cañon. The shadows lengthened fast. The arid chill of a cloudless night settled down on us as we made camp. It was good to sit around a hot, bright driftwood fire while a trio of cottontails sputtered in the skillet. Off in the darkness we heard the hobbled horses clump awkwardly among the rocks.

But, most of all, it was good to think that tomorrow we would at last arrive at the remote fastness of a big inter-mountain basin. In the cactus forests that grew there, our Mexican informant told us, lived many strange little deer weighing but forty to fifty pounds at maturity. The bucks grew twin, smooth, single-pointed horns with never a single fork or off-shoot. For these reasons vaqueros called the deer *cabrita*, meaning "little goat."

I had never heard of these strange pygmy deer, let alone read of or seen one. A queer venture at best, this trip

through the unmapped desert to the remote cactus basin lying deep between a jumbled maze of volcanic mountains. Although we half expected the elfin *cabritas* to be nothing more than the fantastic folk lore of honest but superstitious peons, the three of us were equally seized by the insuppressible yen to go and see for ourselves, even though it meant many days in the same dust-caked clothes and nights bedded on saddle blankets soaked with horse sweat.

Next morning we entered the basin. About thirty kilometers long, it lay in the shape of a deep platter. A fairly level center flanked the stream bed; the stream flowed underground through most of the basin. Out from the level area was a ring of arroyo-sliced hills. This was in turn ringed with a relatively wide belt of bed-rock hills. The basin ended against a wall of high mountains, often footed by sheer cliffs. Cottonwoods grew along the



The cactus wastes are scenic in a grotesque sort of way

stream, and the foot-hills were covered with cactus. The mountain summits supported scraggly but substantial oaks.

We found that the deer occupied the hills between the flats and the mountains. Droppings and tracks were in places thick as in a sheep yard. However, the deer themselves weren't in evidence.

The hunting problem was rapidly narrowed to one phase: how to see the deer. We found fresh droppings. We heard hoofs disturb the rocks. But so smart were these cactus-dodging phantoms that not until late in the day, after miles of energetic hunting, did we glimpse one.

Had I been alone, I'm sure my American companions would have accused me of being under the spell of the desert. But Carl was with me, and we verified each other with uplifted right hand.

Verified what? The neatest disappearing act since Houdini. The *cabrita* jumped, crossed an open sandy wash, and disappeared completely into a three-foot growth of brush! Yes, three feet—not up to my belt. Carl wanted to go over and see if there was a hole in the ground.

This was completely demoralizing. Most of the growth was high enough to obscure all but the immediate ground vision from the hunter's eye if he were afoot. The only chance for a shot was to stay on horseback. But the horses' shod hoofs, clapping on the exposed rock, warned the bedded deer well ahead of vision or rifle range.

"What chance have we against deer that can disappear like rabbits?" com-

plained Jack during a camp discussion that night.

On the morrow, with a trio of camp helpers who would have been invaluable had their efficiency equaled their formidable appearance, we headed for the higher limestone and lava hills. Thoroughly tired of saddle-bag rations, we wanted fresh meat. We figured the rougher topography and scantier cover would give us a better advantage in shooting perspective. While the deer sign in the new locale was not so encouraging as in yesterday's area, the prospects of corralling one of them with a well-placed slug appeared to be infinitely greater.

The strategy of the day was to encircle the likelier-looking hills with a ring of riders, send one or two over the crest, and close in. This prevented the old shell game that the hillside deer would play with one or two hunters. The size of one of these hills can best be judged by the time it took to work one on horseback—averaging about one and a half hours for each hill.

No action occurred until mid-morning, when Jack, riding on the other side of the hill from me, loosed three thunderous shots. The echoes played tag across the rock slopes, and then died out, leaving the air very still and vacant. I knew it

slope. Apparently they had slipped ahead of us far enough to deem themselves temporarily beyond danger and would show themselves in flight.

Dismounting with a jump, I jerked my .270 from its scabbard and fell to kneeling position. Of the four animals I spotted one as obviously a buck. His rapid flight over the uneven slope was hard to catch in my peep sight.

Sighting quickly as I swung the barrel along, I squeezed. "Wham-am-am-am!" echoed the report. Shattered rock exploded just under and behind the little buck. He leaped wildly.

I swung the sight past him again. Wham!—closer. Wham!—above and ahead. Then, just as he was jumping into safety behind a boulder the size of a shack, I squeezed again. The echo shuttled away, leaving the slope quiet and motionless. The animal had disappeared along with his cohorts.

Marking the spot by the enormous boulder, I rode on to join the others.

"Luck?" asked Carl.

"Not sure," I replied half-heartedly, with the evasiveness of a hunter who does not like to admit he has missed several shots.

Jack, a deer-wise old Southwesterner, insisted that I go on over and make sure



Guadalupe looks over the volcanic mountain country

was Jack because Carl always yells after he shoots.

When the spread converged at the end of the drive, Ramon had Jack's little buck, neatly dressed out, tied behind his saddle cantle by rawhide thongs. About the size of a goat, the dwarf deer was, judging from the teeth, about four years old; yet it had perfectly smooth, prongless horns. The color of the hair was about that of a Gray Hackle, with reddish brown around the rump and fringing the white tail.

Early in the afternoon we worked higher in the hills. My position was well up on the hillside, where I commanded a broad view. I rode along, giving a third of my attention to stimulating and guiding my horse, a third to dodging cactus barbs, and a third to deer scouting. Suddenly, on the next hill ahead, a small herd of deer jumped. Breaking above the brush on each leap, they fled along the

of the little buck's status. Taking young Bernardo with me as a tracker, I rode over to the other slope. Owing to the unevenness of the terrain and the limited visibility, I was unable to orient my position. Though I could clearly see the location from which I had shot, I could not find the big boulder.

Figuring the angle of my line of sight, we crossed deer tracks. Bernardo followed them across the brush-covered rocks to the boulder. Behind it the little buck had collapsed. He was drilled neatly through the heart—purely luck. He had collapsed at the end of the last leap.

By triangulation I found the distance to be about 310 yards, and by expanding this to 400 I persuaded my companions grudgingly to appraise it at 300 yards.

This buck was slightly larger than the first. His horns bowed in a gentle curve. Of course, they had no side points. One of the two antlers, however, had a very

slight blunt nub near the end, as if with a little encouragement a small Y might have formed. This was the only sign of a prong we saw on any of the six specimens we bagged during our stay.

Then we began the home circle. We saw a large number of does in small herds of two to five, and crossed a fresh lion track. Guadalupe, the toughest vaquero of the lot, opined that lions were one good reason why the lower hills held more deer. Lions like rough, rocky country, and deer don't like lions. Off in the distance, buzzards wheeled high in the late afternoon sky, and we suspected a lion kill. But camp was a long ride in the other direction.

THE two deer livers were quickly wolfed by hungry hunters who had formed a frying-pan gallery during the cooking. Frijoles and prunes served as a filler. Comfortably stuffed and thoroughly fatigued, I dozed off, head on saddle, without removing my hat.

In the morning we stayed in camp. We had our fresh meat, and now the horses deserved a long-due rest. As Carl put it, "If a horse eats all night and you ride him all day, just when does he sleep?"

The two little deer, skinned out by the vaqueros the evening before, had cooled stiff in the night air. Though the noon sun of these winter days burned our noses red, the sharp chill of the nights frosted the human breath. If hung in the shade during the daylight hours, the skinned venison kept well. The dry desert air dehydrated the surface tissue, forming a shell-like crust. This durable crust rendered the meat impregnable to dirt, bacteria and the few odd blow-flies which inevitably gather.

The turnover in the meat department was fast enough to solve all refrigeration problems, and by the end of the second day the small carcasses were ready for the mongrel dogs which had followed from Ramon's adobe rancho, despite frequent stonings and a voluble vernacular calculated to turn them back.

Horses and riders refreshed after a day in camp, we left in the gray of pre-dawn for the broken foot-hills at the head of the basin. As the river ran under the boulders and gravel for most of its course through the valley, we had a sizable water supply, according to the standard of this country, and suspected the existence of a well-watered cañon at its head. This was an ideal condition for wild

turkeys, if any inhabited the area; so we set out in quest.

The river bed, however, split up into strings of surficial boulder beds which dispersed widely from each other. These looked identical to the channels made by the annual flash floods that tormented down in summer from the high mountains; so, fearful of wasting time on a fruitless venture, we took again to the immediate foot-hills to try for deer.

Before we had progressed far we realized the error of hunting from lower to higher levels, as our quarry was alert to our approach and retreated to higher altitudes. We consoled ourselves that the return trip would be fruitful.

But fortune soon smiled. As we rode into the higher foot-hills we approached a rim-rock with a U-shaped indenture and vertical lava sill sides. I reflected that with a small amount of fencing it would make a huge corral for some lucky rancher.

At the time, a number of deer were working ahead of us, unseen. Near the rim-rock they broke cover—four of them. Quickly dismounting, I fed four hulls through my .270 at a range of over 250 yards. I was unable to ascertain my

success, but Guadalupe, who was riding near me, assured me I had wounded a buck.

We quickly followed the blood trail. Retreating upward, the wounded buck and the three does worked into the rim-rock corral, which was about four hundred yards across at this place. Realizing that their retreat was being cut off, they headed toward us on the run in an attempt to slip by.

Ramon and Guadalupe spurred their broncs ahead at a gallop. Swinging their rawhide riatas into wide loops, it was apparent that they intended to rope the buck. But the little buck was too agile and outmaneuvered them. At this time I was Kodachroming the episode on my 16 mm. movie camera. The little buck passed within thirty feet of me at a gallop.

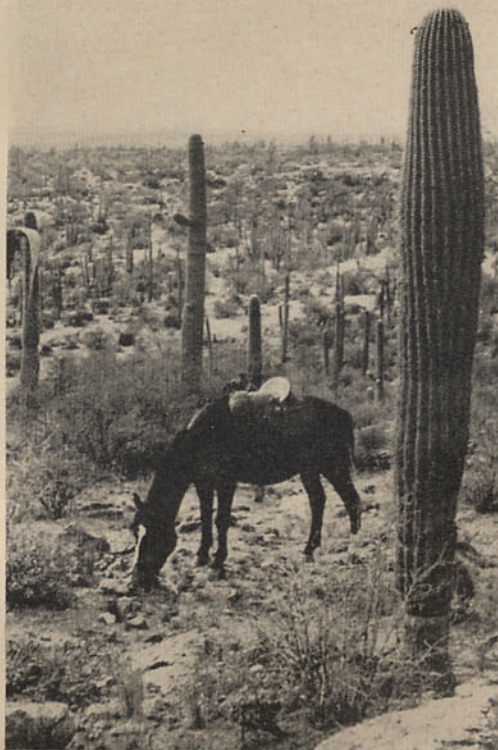
I vaulted off my bronc, lost hold of my camera and grabbed for my carbine in its saddle scabbard. My gun-shy bronc, knowing the symptoms preceding heavy fire, took out, with me running alongside, frantically tugging at the gun-stock. By luck the rear suspending thong gave way, letting the boot fall and dumping the gun in my arms.

The buck was now out of sight over the down-slope curve of the ground. Scaling a steep boulder, I was able to balance precariously for a snap shot before losing balance and tumbling back. My brief pause at the pinnacle was not long enough to appraise the result of my shot, and I surmised a miss. However, after a search in the tall grass, I found my camera, and when I joined Ramon and Guadalupe they were dressing out my buck. The little deer had been clipped neatly through the back by my lucky .270 soft-point.

MEANWHILE I had missed action with Carl and Jack. Working along the rim-rock, they jumped a pair of deer. Carl had made a fine shot at a hundred-yard running target. It was a yearling with immature antlers. Feeling along its back-straps, I knew it would be the tenderest venison of the trip. By this time I felt we had a sufficiently large supply of venison, and my palate wanted a change.

So in the morning I rode off solo to the eastward for turkey, while the four horsemen headed toward the adjacent foot-hills for the second buck still outstanding for Carl and Jack. Young Bernardo stayed to watch camp and rest a (Continued on page 55)

We paused to let our weary mounts rest and graze



NEXT MONTH

THEY KNOW WHAT THEY WANT

By JOHN ALDEN KNIGHT

Imitating the naturals with your fly

BATTLE OF BAITS

By HART STILWELL

The old argument of spoon versus plug. And the largemouths decide it

LOOK OUT, OWL!

By RAY P. HOLLAND

A dead hawk is a good hawk

JUST THE RIVER

By GORDON MACQUARRIE

In which the Old Duck Hunters turn their attention to trout

MEET MR. PTARMIGAN

By C. E. GILLHAM

Introducing a grand game bird

Away from shore, the wind caught me again. It seemed worse than on my earlier trip. Or perhaps my arms were just weary. I hadn't the faintest idea what I would do if I didn't find him. Maybe he had made the point across Shallow Bay. He could handle a boat—indeed he could. There was comfort in that. Maybe he had landed there and was afraid to try going back in the quartering wind. Maybe. . . .

I halted at the narrows. I was heaving like a bellows. There was just one thing to do—catch my breath and get right across to that Shallow Bay blind before it got too dark. The direction didn't worry me so much as the rough water. I could make it across if my rowing arms held out. My heart was hammering.

Then he appeared, and I yelled with relief, a yell that he could not hear in the wind. There he was, rowing for the mouth of the narrows against the wind! He had taken off the old brown mackinaw. His white police suspenders stood out like an X in the fading light, for, of course, his back was to me.

Never in my life has the slivery gunwale of a rowboat felt better in my hands. I found myself over my boots as I hauled him in the last twenty-five feet. His mackinaw floated in the half-filled boat. He picked it up and shook the water out of it. The first thing he said was: "Don't ever mention it to my wife! She'd never let me hunt again."

Then he slapped my shoulder, and between us we hoisted his boat upside down on the sand to empty it—the old ritual of the Association. Ten canvasbacks rolled out of it, and he explained, "I just picked the ones with the longest necks when they came by."

Two pairs of oars whisked us back down Deep Bay and we hurried to the warm cabin. Once inside, I knew that he was trying to hide a great weariness, trying to make light of a bad time. I strung the ducks on the back porch. The wind was rising, if anything, but morning and more of it had little appeal right then.

I POKED jack-pine kindling under the kettle where the oatmeal bubbled. Then I swept the hearth, for something to do. Over a bowl of that steel-cut oatmeal he told me what it had been like.

"Half-way over I was sorry I'd started. But there I was, and I made it. I'll bet a thousand ducks passed across that point—in range. Seemed like every web-foot in north Wisconsin was up and moving."

"They'd come busting out of the snow, and I'd let 'em have it. Everything was moving—mallards, redheads, cans, blue-bills. Then I picked up and started back."

I helped him pull off his boots and found dry things for him. I brought one of the big blankets and tucked it around his shoulders. He leaned back in his chair before the fire. The warmth from it began to get in its work. The tenseness left both of us, and Jerry's stub of a tail showed he had caught the change in our moods.

I got him a bowl of that precious oatmeal, and he was grinning at me when I handed it to him. I was afraid to say anything. Sentiment of the surface kind is foreign to the Old Duck Hunters. I jiggled the stove lids, piling in more wood. There was supper to get.

And then he yelled like his old self from the other room: "Say, how many ducks did you fetch in?"

"Five, I think."

"H-m-m-m. Ought to be ten. Say, you got another dab of that porridge?"

All was well in the big red cabin when I brought the porridge, for he said: "Tomorrow morning we'll go back across Shallow Bay, wind or no wind." Then he added: "Damn it, you burned the oatmeal!"

CACTUS BUCKS

(Continued from page 38)

horse which was developing a saddle sore.

After following many small stream beds, I became quite confused. I had a near encounter with a band of javelinas, which I tracked for two hours unsuccessfully. Then I discovered a small gold nugget lying on the uneven bed-rock of a cañon floor. The remainder of the afternoon I spent hunting for more gold, and in my avarice overstayed my time.

At sunset I was still fully an hour-and-a-half ride from camp. For the first time during the trip I blessed those mongrel dogs, which insisted on yapping at the eerie choirs of coyotes. Faintly catching the sound of their barking, I was able to find my way home. Of course, once I had arrived safely in camp, I assumed the

sole credit for my nocturnal navigation.

Jack and Carl both had their bucks, bringing the camp larder well up to all needs. Now that the novelty of the pygmy deer had been dispelled, we were ready to move on. I was anxious to get to Guaymas for a winter fishing trip, and then move south to the Yaqui Indian country to hunt tigers and giant desert mule deer.

In the morning we saddled by firelight, packed our scant equipment, and hit the out trail. In two days we would be back to Ramon's little adobe rancho, beside a little valley where the river flows underground. Here he had told incredulous gringos of a strange spike-horned pygmy deer. And we were the three gringos who had been loco enough to penetrate to the fastness of an unnamed basin, lying between the ranges of desert mountains which saw-tooth along the low horizon.



Duck Hunting... 1943



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