

## Deer Hunting in the Hill Country

We are well into the deer season and I am sure that everyone has seen camouflaged hunters in the stores and restaurants and hauling their gear around. People's views of hunting seem to run the gamut from strongly opposed to strong defenders and everywhere in between. Maybe I can put some things into perspective.

I grew up in a hunting family and hunted a lot as a kid, but I haven't hunted in many years. I support deer hunting in Texas as a very important activity, and hunting in general, with some reservations.

The Hill Country has seen an increase in the quality and quantity of deer habitat in the last 150+ years, primarily caused by man. As settlement began in the early 1800s and livestock were grazed continually on the land and wildfires were reduced, woody plants (which provide browse for deer) began to increase making for a better deer habitat. Man also killed all of the large predators to protect his livestock, but the deer benefited as well, and ranchers providing watering places for livestock also helped improve the deer habitat.

Even with all of the above, the deer population was fairly low in the early 1900s, but began to increase after the 1930s when restrictions on deer hunting were first introduced. Then in the 1960s the screw worm fly was eradicated from Texas, the last natural predator of the white-tailed deer, and the population increased dramatically from the 1960s through the 1990s.

Today the deer population in the Hill Country is way above the carrying capacity, meaning they are eating more than the habitat can replace every year. The result is that the deer are malnourished in many places and the habitat is being severely degraded. The excessive deer population is preventing any replacement hardwood trees and shrubs from becoming mature in much of the Hill Country. The severe browseline of all vegetation being eliminated from about five feet down on many properties means the natural habitat of many native birds and animals has been destroyed.

With no natural predators of significance, the only control on the deer population is the food supply, which is inadequate even where folks are feeding them. Hunters are the only other control, (imperfect and limited as it is) that we have on the deer population. Well, there is also vehicles killing deer on the roads.

The problem is that hunting is not controlling the deer population to a healthy level. Not enough deer are being taken. As the population of Texas continues to increase, most of the increased numbers of people are in the cities, and the percentage of people that are hunters is declining. Some advocate extending the season or the bag limit as a way to have more deer harvested. But a hunting license gives the hunter the right to take 5

deer, but the average hunter takes only about 1 deer per year, and studies show that extending the season doesn't increase the number of deer taken significantly.

It has been legal to take does for a number of years now, and that has helped somewhat, because taking does has a greater impact on the population than killing just bucks. If every hunter would take an extra deer, preferably a doe, every year, it might begin to make a measurable difference in the population. Some hunters limit the number of deer they take because they don't want any more meat, but field dressed carcasses can be donated to Hunters for the Hungry or various church charities.

There is a new trend among hunters that may be limiting the number of deer they take, but which I very much applaud. For many hunters these days, the activity is not just a "man's thing", but a family thing. More and more hunters are bringing their families to their deer leases and "camping out" or staying in a hunting cabin and making it a sort of Nature outing or vacation for the whole family. It may be the best experience some of their children ever have in being in the country with Nature and away from their electronic devices, even if the time spent actually hunting is reduced.

These outings are fighting "Nature Deficit Disorder". It may not help with the deer population, but anything that introduces more people to the country and natural areas and Nature in general is a good thing.

Until next time...

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