

## A Plea to Hunters: Take More Deer

With hunting season just around the corner, I thought this would be a good time to discuss the problem of our overabundant deer population and what we can do about it. All landowners and most everyone else in the Hill Country know that the deer population around here is very high. What might not be obvious to everyone is the damage they cause.

High deer populations obviously cause more collisions with vehicles than would be the case if the population were lower, and the high populations also cause the deer to venture into people's yards in search of food and thus cause lots of damage to our prized landscape plants. But these are not the damages that I, and most all wildlife biologists, are most concerned about.

The deer are causing serious and probably irreversible damage to our native habitat and to the way the landscape of the Hill Country will look in the future. The population of deer in Texas has more than tripled since the eradication of the screwworm fly in the early 1960s. The main component of the diet of a white-tailed deer in the Hill Country is browse, which is the leaves of woody plants: trees, shrubs and vines.

Because of the excessive numbers of deer, almost none of the normal replacement seedlings and saplings of our native hardwoods are surviving to become mature trees. If you look around most any Hill Country property, you will see numerous mature trees with trunks of 6 or 12 or 18 inches in diameter, most all of which are probably over 50 years old, some quite a bit older than that. But you won't find hardly any 1 or 2 or 5 year old trees. What is going to happen when the older trees die of drought, oak wilt, hypoxylon, lightning or just old age? The answer is, we won't have any. Rufus Stephens, a wildlife biologist for the Texas Parks and Wildlife Dept. in Boerne, described the situation as a "slow train wreck" in a recent talk.

With no natural predators left to help control the population, the result has been a huge increase in the deer population, but obviously no increase in available deer food. The result is that the deer are decimating the native vegetation below the browseline, and even that is not enough food to maintain the deer in a healthy state. Many deer are malnourished or worse. And in fact, the lack of vegetative cover below the browseline impacts all other wildlife as well, including the black-capped vireo which builds its nest below browseline height.

All the experts I know think the only hope for correcting this situation is hunters. Unfortunately, past experience has shown that they are not doing a very good job of controlling the deer population at any sustainable level. A hunting license allows a

hunter to take 5 deer. The average hunter in Texas takes only one, usually a buck. Harvesting a buck has very little effect on reducing the population, it doesn't reduce the number of fawns born next year or in subsequent years. Harvesting a doe has a greater effect on the future population by preventing her future offspring and their offspring. Some states have begun to require hunters to take one or two does before they are allowed to take that "trophy buck".

Some hunters may be under the impression that harvesting does will reduce the deer population and thus reduce the number of "trophy bucks", but in fact, reducing the population will allow the herd to become better nourished and that will contribute to better "quality" bucks. There is certainly an element of the hunting culture that tends to make some hunters avoid does, and for other hunters, the lack of freezer space at home may be a factor. But unwanted deer can always be donated to Hunters for the Hungry or other charitable organizations.

So, for the sake of the health of the Hill Country ecosystem, for the future of our beloved oaks, and for the health of the deer herd, we need the help of all of you hunters. As Rufus Stephens said, "Please, take more does!"

Until next time....

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