

# 'Potentially Great Hunting' Across State Says TPWD

AUSTIN -- Last year's Texas deer hunting season was considered text book by state wildlife biologists. This season, hunters may have to throw out the book.

Indicators leading into the Nov. 3 season opener point to potentially great hunting across much of the state, according to Texas Parks and Wildlife Department biologists. But, as they say in advertising disclaimers, *Individual results may vary.*

"Generally speaking, it's a banner year for (fawn) production," said Mitch Lockwood, TPWD deer program leader. "As far as the quality of the animals, the deer we're seeing are in pretty good condition and I expect antler quality and body weights to be above average. Not only do we expect this year's crop to be better, but there are more mature bucks out there simply because harvest was down in 2006."

Whitetails have responded well from last year's extended dry spell, thanks to an unseasonably wet spring and summer, and have taken advantage of resurgent plant growth, Lockwood noted. That bodes well for the deer, but could pose a challenge for hunters hoping to find success from a blind over supplemental feed.

Biologists point to 2004, when timely spring rains created ideal range conditions, healthy deer and high expectations from hunters. Due to the abundance of vegetation available to deer that year, hunters observed fewer animals during the season and overall harvest numbers were down.

When conditions became relatively dry in 2005, deer harvest jumped considerably and, in particular, more mature bucks were killed that season.

"That's what makes this year tough to predict," Lockwood noted. "There will be more deer on the ground this fall, but hunting could be tough early in the season."

Because some parts of the state are drying up as rainfall slacked off in September and October, deer movements and hunting conditions could change. "Deer were seeing so much good native groceries all year, corn was something new to them," he said. "In the Edwards Plateau, we're loaded with acorns. Once those food sources run out, deer should return to feeders."

With the expected high percentage of recruitment into the deer population this year, biologists are urging hunters and landowners to actively manage whitetail numbers.

"It's important for hunters to use those antlerless tags this season and get those excess animals off the range before winter sets in to ensure



there's enough food to go around," Lockwood said. "If folks want help determining how many deer to remove from their property they are welcome to contact their local TPWD biologist for assistance."

TPWD provides wildlife management consultation at no cost to landowners. The agency offers a variety of conservation planning assistance, from habitat enhancement incentives to wildlife resource management. Details about these programs are available on the TPWD Web site or from your local wildlife biologist.

While there are no major changes to deer regulations this year, hunters in eastern and central Texas are reminded that special buck antler restrictions are in effect in 61 counties. Under the regulation, a lawful buck in the designated counties is defined as any buck having at least one unbranched antler OR an inside antler spread of at least 13 inches. The bag limit in the affected counties is two lawful bucks, no more than one of which may have an inside spread of greater than 13 inches.

For additional deer hunting regulations refer to the 2007-08 Outdoor Annual available wherever licenses are sold and on the TPWD Web site.

Following is a snapshot of conditions and observations for the upcoming season for each Texas ecological region.

## South Texas Plains

Deer should be fat this year and fawn crops should be 50 percent or better, even on marginal ranges, according to TPWD district biologist Joe Herrera in Pleasanton. He reported antler quality should also be excellent this fall.

"The deer are not moving much due to the good habitat conditions, and are eating very little supplemental feed," said Herrera. "With the great range conditions consisting of tall grasses and green brush it may be difficult to hunt this season."

With the high fawn survival biologists are expecting this fall, managers will have their work cut out for them trying to keep the deer population at healthy levels before the next drought hits.

## Panhandle

"We're anticipating excellent body weights and horn development, and even though it has gotten dry whitetails should go into the winter in good shape," noted Danny Swebston, TPWD district biologist in Canyon.

"Having too much cover may be a problem during the early part of the season," Swebston added. "In areas where winter wheat is coming up, deer may be moving on that pretty quick. They may be slow coming to feeders in some places."

Swebston recommended in some of the eastern counties of the Panhandle having high deer populations, hunters are encouraged to take does.

## Possum Kingdom

Range conditions are in pretty good shape, said Kevin Mote, TPWD biologist in Brownwood. "We're seeing a pretty good acorn crop and lots of vegetation. The deer aren't moving much and survey results are down because can't see them, but we know we had a high fawn crop."

Mote went on to add, with this moisture the acorns aren't going to last forever. "If the cooling trend continues we should have a great opener," he predicted. "We're seeing good body condition and antler development, and of the does we see, most have twins. We really need to take some does."

"Hunting conditions were really tough last year because it was warm and dry," said Mote. "Deer weren't coming to feeders well last year, even though we were in a drought. If folks got rain starting early in the fall last year, the does came through in good condition."

Just because hunters aren't seeing deer with their eyes, Mote

urged not giving up on the doe harvest because they are out there nonetheless.

## Hill Country

The potential for some quality bucks is out there, but predicting where they will be is the catch this season, according to TPWD biologist Mike Krueger in Kerrville. "It's extremely hit or miss as far as feeders," he explained. "We've got a tremendous acorn crop and they're not going to be cleaned up before the season. Maybe by the rut deer will start coming to feeders, but I expect it will be very shaky."

Krueger said back-to-back years of low fawn production has had an impact and although the deer are making up ground this year, hunters in some areas still may see fewer deer. "We did a spotlight survey on Enchanted Rock State Park and didn't see much of anything because the vegetation was so tall," he reported. "It's affecting deer movement. Things are pretty good for them right now."

He said he's received scattered reports of deer not in good condition and biologists speculate it might be worms. "When you have high humidity and moisture, bacteria and parasites affect the weaker portions of the population and some animals are more susceptible to bugs," Krueger said. "But, overall the quality should be good. When bucks initiated antler growth, rains already started and the deer were able to maintain that through the growing season."

"Generally speaking throughout

the Edwards Plateau, unless you have evidence to back off, hunters need to continue to control deer numbers," he urged.

## Post Oak Savannah

Deer hunting may be more difficult this year, according to Tyler-based biologist David Sierra. "The vegetation will be lush and thick, providing more cover and making deer harder to spot," he noted. "The increased amount of forage and mast will allow deer to move less and bed down early. And again, better range conditions will spread the deer over larger areas and not concentrate them in the bottoms and other prime habitats."

With the mild winter, excellent spring and cooler summer this year deer should not have experienced the usual environmental stresses. This should allow them to put on more body fat and use the extra nutrition to express their full genetic potential, said Sierra. "So I would expect them to be heavier and with better than usual antler development."

Because of the abundant vegetation available, Sierra suggested hunter look for an opening in the woods bordering a native meadow and a stand of oaks or pecan trees. "Because of the excellent range conditions there should be an abundance of both forbs and mast; hunting the edge will allow me to take advantage of both."

If deer are conditioned to come to feeders some will still visit them,

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