

2008-2009 Deer Season Prospects Good Says TPWD

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natural feeding areas to find deer, especially when trying to locate those older age class bucks that are wise to hunter activities.

If you're a hunter looking for quality antlers, be cognizant of those ranches or hunting leases where population management and maintaining deer numbers below the carrying capacity of habitat is a primary concern. Well managed properties that have in place sound wildlife habitat management programs, practices, and plans usually reap the benefits during the fall hunting seasons. These examples of good land stewardship usually stand out during stressful times.

Central Texas

Rainfall amounts throughout Central Texas have been below average since early last fall when the faucet was turned off after the exceptionally wet spring and summer of 2007, according to Mike Krueger, TPWD district biologist in Kerrville. Deer did not come through the winter in as good as nutritional condition as they would have with a wet winter, so they undoubtedly were not in optimum condition when bucks initiated antler growth last spring and does were entering the last stages of pregnancy.

"It continued to remain dry during the antler growing and fawn rearing period this summer and because of this, I expect fawn survival and recruitment will be below average," said Krueger. "Ditto with antler quality; I expect it to be below average and too late to salvage even though habitat conditions have improved somewhat in recent weeks."

Body conditions heading into

the season are improving, thanks to an unexpected acorn crop.

"Nature is amazing in showing the ability to offset a set of poor conditions with a set of unexpectedly good conditions," Krueger noted. "A decent acorn crop can put some fat on deer this winter, but it would be too late to help improve this year's fawn production or antler quality."

TPWD technical guidance biologist Mike Reagan in Wimberley had similar things to say about this season.

"I am seeing a lot of acorns on most ranches in my areas," Reagan reported. "A lot of them began falling in September, but there seems to still be some on the trees. It should make hunting a little tougher. I also think antler growth will be below normal, but I have seen excellent antlers on some mature bucks. Yes, the fawn crop is well below normal in the eastern half of the Edwards Plateau. In most of this country the fawn crop ranged from 10-30 percent, but on some well-managed ranches it was more like 40-60 percent."

In the western parts of the Hill Country, TPWD technical guidance biologist Joyce Moore in Harper had this to offer.

"The far western Hill Country counties fared much better through the drought as they had more summer rainfall," she said. "Exceptional fawn crops of 60-100 percent are the norm in Sutton and Schleicher counties. As you travel east from Junction, however, fawn crops declined to about 40-50 percent."

"Right now the acorns and a few recent showers are saving the deer herd, but I am telling my co-op folks

that unless we get more rain, the winter will be very stressful," she pointed out. "I am hearing many reports of declining antler quality, except for the high-fence folks who are intensively feeding protein—they say their antler quality is much better than in 2007. They believe that a dry year actually causes the bucks to consume more protein feed rather than in a wet year when they would prefer native forage."

Last year was the second year of antler restrictions in all or portions of seven Edwards Plateau counties (eastern Comal, eastern Travis, eastern Hays, Williamson, Bell, Coryell, and Lampasas).

Post Oak Savannah

The ample winter rains this past season and into the spring produced favorable range conditions throughout most of the Post Oak, according to David Sierra, TPWD district biologist in Tyler.

As opposed to other parts of the state, rainfall was sufficient to maintain good range condition throughout the summer and set the stage for an above average deer season.

"Mild weather conditions seem to have made life easier on the deer," said Sierra. "Excellent habitat conditions allowed them to forage less and denser vegetation provided more screening cover. And again, better range conditions will spread the deer over larger areas and not concentrate them in the bottoms and other prime habitats."

Surveys suggest that deer densities across the Post Oak have remained stable or have slightly increased for the past 10 years. Harvest data collected during the 2007-08 deer season indicate yearling bucks (18 months old) comprised about 27 percent of the total buck harvest. Also, harvest data from the past few years suggest a trend of increasing numbers older bucks in

the annual harvest.

Health indices such as antler measurements and body weight for yearling bucks in the Post Oak have also been increasing over the past 10 to 20 years. This trend should continue this hunting season because the yearling bucks of this season was the fawn crop of the 2007 growing season, when good range conditions prevailed throughout most of the summer and winter.

"With the mild winter, excellent spring, and the amount of summer rainfall deer this year should not experience the usual environmental stresses," Sierra noted. "This should allow them to put on more body fat and use the extra nutrition to express their full genetic potential. This coupled with the increasing numbers of older deer; hunters can expect to find better than average body weights and antler quality in the upcoming deer season. Deer will be in great condition, but somewhat harder to locate."

Pineywoods

Although the Pineywoods enjoyed similar ideal winter condi-

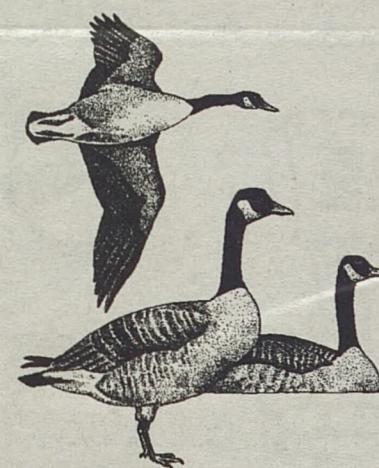
tions as the Post Oak, East Texas lacked the spring and summer rains to maintain habitat.

"It was looking pretty rough before Ike," said Gary Calkins, TPWD biologist in Jasper. "It was getting to the point where even the beauty berries were shedding leaves and the ponds were drying up. I had not seen it this dry in awhile."

Calkins said the dry summer conditions will likely impact acorn production as some oaks were dropping acorns early.

"Last year we had a really good fawn crop and carryover of older deer so we were set up age structure wise, especially in the northern counties," he noted. "All we needed was the weather for antlers and we could be okay because we were already through antler development when things turned dry."

Those areas entering the third year of antler restrictions appear to be showing positive results, particularly in Rušk, Panola, Cass, Cherokee and Houston counties, and prospects are favorable for this season.



New

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District Office in Fort Worth or Galveston or visit www.swd.usace.army.mil and click on the appropriate district office.

* The Texas Animal Health Commission regulates the movement of feral swine for disease-control purposes. For more information please call the Commission at (800) 550-8242 or see www.tahc.state.tx.us.

Education

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tion is required on certain areas of Texas (Hagerman National Wildlife Refuge, Pottsboro and Camp Bullis, San Antonio).

Note: Bowhunter education does not substitute for Hunter Education certification.

For course information, please consult the TPWD Hunter Education section (www.tpwd.state.tx.us/publications/annual/general/hunterEducation) or call toll-free (800) 792-1112 (menu 6) or call (512) 389-4999.

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