

OUTDOORS

Local deer leases in seller's market

By Suzanne Black

If Brazos County hunting grounds were like the floors of the New York Stock Exchange, they would be covered with orders to sell. But when it comes to signing up deer leases, it's a seller's market all the way.

The deer range in this area is over-grazed. The whitetail deer population is falling and the buck-to-doe ratio is the lowest in the state. Yet landowners lease their land to hunters as if it were the choicest deer country in Texas.

And at one time it was. The Post Oak Belt, which stretches across East-Central Texas and includes Brazos County, was the primary target of a deer relocation program in the early 1950s. The Texas Game and Fish Commission transferred more than 10,000 whitetail deer from a surplus herd in the Edwards Plateau region to the Post Oak Belt. It wasn't long after that harvest regulations were needed to control the growth and overpopulation of the unmanaged herd.

Even through the '60's, large groups of whitetail deer were commonly spotted in open fields in both upland and bottomland areas of the post oak region. Today, however, 75 percent or more of the Brazos County deer herd is contained within a five mile distance along the west side of the Navasota River, Brazos County Game Warden Sammy DeStefano said.

According to the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department's annual deer census, the whitetail deer population in the Post Oak Belt has been declining for several years, particularly in Brazos, Grimes and Robertson counties. The census also reports these counties have the poorest buck-to-doe ratio in the state. Habitat destruction is blamed as the primary cause.

"There's less than 200,000 acres left — that's anything with a few trees on it — that might be considered deer range, and it's all grazed out," DeStefano said.

There are 373,120 acres in Brazos County. What's left for the deer is subjected to heavy hunting pressure from Bryan-College Station and other metropolitan areas. One factor is the development of land. As large tracts are broken up for development, DeStefano said, the hunting of deer becomes more hectic.

"There are more hunters in the woods and more rural residents taking the attitude 'I might as well shoot it because if I don't, my neighbor will,' so there's not as much conservation going on," he said.

Many landowners set their own rules to keep deer lessors under rein.

"We could let in as many hunters as we wanted to," said one rancher, "but then they'd just tromp over everything and kill all the deer off. We're pretty careful about the number of hunters we let in."

Eight Brazos County landowners, who lease out 25,000 acres between them for hunting, all said they don't want any more in-

quiries about hunting leases than they already receive.

One owner said he only leases hunting rights to personal friends or to people recommended to him by friends. Another said the only hunters he leases to are out-of-town ones. Hunters who can leave work and drive to their lease in 15 minutes would be hunting every day, he said.

"We're in the cattle business," said one landowner. "Any deer hunters we let out here have to get along with the cattle, so we're pretty discriminating about who we lease to. We prefer somebody who's just going to be out there two or three weekends during the season."

All of the landowners agreed the number of calls they receive about deer leases is not going down. And for hunters without connections, the outlook is sketchy. Most of the landowners said they lease to the same group of people every year.

DeStefano said any turnover of leases usually occurs during the January or February before deer season, so the hunters have to make their plans a long time in advance.

And of course, if you want to lease, you have to pay the price. In this survey, prices ranged from \$100 to \$200 per hunter, or from \$1.50 to \$4 per acre. Per acre charges vary according to the location of the land and the size of the tract. In general, hunting leases in the Navasota River bottom are more expensive than leases in the upland hill country. Little of the Brazos River bottomlands are available for hunting since they are mostly used for farming.

What good hunting grounds are left in Brazos County are in big demand. And even though the hunting is not as good as it used to be, it's still good enough.



Photo by Lee Roy Leschper Jr.

LANCE LESCHPER, 18, looks over his first whitetail buck, killed in Austin County about 70 miles south of College Station. The five-point

buck is typical of Post Oak Belt bucks this season — deer in excellent physical condition, but with very small antlers.

Early season conditions good

Early indications are that the deer season in Texas is off to a good start. Reports from the opening weekend indicated there are lots of deer, the animals are in very good body condition, and an early rut is getting underway in many areas.

The only minus factor, as predicted by Texas Parks and Wildlife Department biologists, is that antler development is a bit sub-par. This was a result of dry conditions during the spring, according to Charles Winkler, big

game program chief. There apparently was a heavy turnout of hunters on opening day, Winkler said, and a fair number of deer were taken.

Winkler said the deer check stations in Webb County, where the department is conducting an experimental buck permit system, are a good indicator of South Texas hunting. Several nice bucks were brought in the first day, but they were consistently better in body condition than in antler development.

He said because of the range conditions and the rutting season getting underway hunters should get into the field early this year and utilize antlerless deer permits as well as trying for a buck.

"In spite of good range conditions in many areas right now, there still is an urgent need to harvest more antlerless deer because of overpopulation," Winkler said. He said landowners are becoming more aware of this need in many areas, and some even are requiring hunters to take

a doe before allowing them to shoot a buck.

The good range and forage conditions extend almost throughout the traditional whitetail hunting areas of South Texas and the Edwards Plateau, and even northward through the major deer areas in West and North-Central Texas.

East Texas, on the other hand, has fairly stable populations, but not as good forage conditions due to a lack of precipitation, Winkler said.