

# OUTDOORS

## Javelina hunt yields rabbits, experience

By Mark Hancock  
Battalion Reporter

The moonlight danced over the thick mesquite and cactus as Al King and I bounced along in his old pickup truck on a bone-dry South Texas road. The truck's headlights revealed red and green eyes glaring from the brush, but only for instants before they vanished.

"How much longer?" Al asked. We were supposed to meet the rest of our friends from the Viking Archery Club hours earlier, but as usual our organization was sporadic and spontaneous — we were three hours late.

The only hunters out of a crew of 15 still awake when we arrived were two old-timers slowly sipping nightcaps of tequila and orange juice next to a smoldering fire.

Morning came on a cold blue streak, but the high scattered clouds didn't seem to have any rain in them and they cleared before dawn, leaving a perfect day for stalking the brush. We just hoped the rabbits and javelinas would cooperate, and the rattlers would take a siesta.

The wind was in our favor, blowing from the west, and with the sun at our backs, the two main senses of most wildlife we might encounter, sight and smell, would be markedly reduced. Without sight and smell those

javelina could only hear us coming, but if you had ever heard Al "easing through the brush" you'd know the javelina were in little danger.

"Al, let's try and work this pocket of brush together," I said. "You work one side of this arroyo and I'll work the other." With those last words we separated to scout the thickest patches of prickly-pear for javelina signs.

Thwack! An arrow clattered through the brush across the arroyo, signaling a probable miss by Al, and a speeding jackrabbit confirmed my thoughts. I drew full and let an arrow fly from the 65-pound compound bow, but only stirred up more dust and educated that bunny a little more.

Cottontails were everywhere and after a flurry of action, I had one rabbit and the brush had one arrow. I wasn't about to be outsmarted or outmaneuvered by any old bunny, or so I thought.

"Hey Han, how many you got?" echoed Al. If there were any javelinas in this cactus patch, they had just taken a hike from all the noise.

"Bunnies are winnin' hands down," I yelled back. "Cross over and we'll compare bags."

Al came slipping through the brush with a quiver that was minus two arrows.

"The price of this trip's going up with every shot," he laughed. "How many you got?"

"Just one," I answered, "but scared the hell outta 10 or 15."

We sat down for a minute, Al had a smoke and I had a dip, then we split up again, trying to find those seemingly scarce pigs. There were plenty of signs along the creek beds, but following the game trails turned up nothing but a few deer, more rabbits, and a 6-foot, 6-inch rattlesnake.

Now I'm not one that's afraid of snakes, but this one caught my eye and just about sent me out of my camouflage suit and skunk scent. A brilliant, striking, brownish-yellow reptile, he slowly coiled and watched me as I approached his bed, which was under some washed-out mesquite roots. Closing to within six feet, I placed two arrows well enough into his neck and head to end any of his notions about chewing on this hunter's leg.

It was then I had flashbacks about my snake-leggings still in the car. Al came up as I was skinning the snake.

The day wore on and the sun finally got hot enough to run us under some shade trees for another siesta. Over to our left

about 100 yards away was a beautiful pond that gave life to this dry, parched area. Our concentration broke when we saw 15 fat, greenhead mallards and hens chuckle a feeding call and converge on this oasis of tangled vines, thorns and burrs.

"Han, look way to the left on the far side of the pond, and what do you see," Al whispered. One by one, brown forms in the brush materialized into four doe, with three yearlings and four fawns. The deer didn't see us. As if by signal they drank, looked right at us, and slowly vanished into the brush. We counted 10 more deer, not to mention about 50 mallards, pintails and teal feeding in the pond.

"Al, I haven't heard as much as a snort or a squeal. What's the problem?" I asked.

Al answered quietly: "Maybe if one of us walked down to the end of this little arroyo here and the other sat, one of us might get a shot when the other pushes those pigs out of their cactus patch."

As I walked away I immediately realized what had happened. Once again Al had gotten me to

do all the work while he sat on his rear waiting for my javelina. I walked in the opposite direction I was supposed to, right between Al and the truck, at the other end of the draw. I didn't see Al again until I met him at the truck at 6:30 p.m.

"Where you been?" Al half screamed.

"I walked to the end of the draw between you and the truck and waited for a pig," I said calmly.

Al gave me a hard glare, but couldn't hold his laughter any longer. "You know what you are...?"

"I've known that for a long time," I interrupted.

We climbed into the truck and headed back to camp for a barbecue (we always brings meat from more successful hunts) and rounded a bend in the road, only to see four dark shapes in the road.

"Javelina," Al mumbled.

These four slowly looked our way, one took time to take a nibble of a cactus bloom, and they triumphantly ambled off.

## Whooper population rising

The upswing of the famous whooping cranes that has cheered bird lovers and conservationists for several years has continued this winter. The latest official count of cranes wintering on the Texas coast is 74, including 68 adults and six young.

John Smith, a Texas Parks and Wildlife Department biologist at Rockport, said this figure was reached after the completion of several aerial surveys. However, there is a chance that more of the great birds may arrive this year.

An additional young bird that was originally counted, however, seems to have disappeared. The fledglings were banded in Canada both this year and last with identifying colored leg bands in order to learn more of their population dynamics. Altogether, 13 banded birds are now to be seen, six immatures of this year and seven of last year's young.

Whooping cranes are an ancient species that for hundreds of thousands of years have winged their migration routes across the North American continent. At their peak they probably never numbered more than 2,000, but their range was from the Arctic to central Mexico, and from the Rockies to the Atlantic. With man's settlement, the numbers and habitat shrunk. The most drastic level was reached in the winter of 1941-42, when only 15 were counted along the Texas coast and six in southwestern Louisiana.

Since then, the majestic cranes have received worldwide attention and every effort has been made to encourage their comeback.

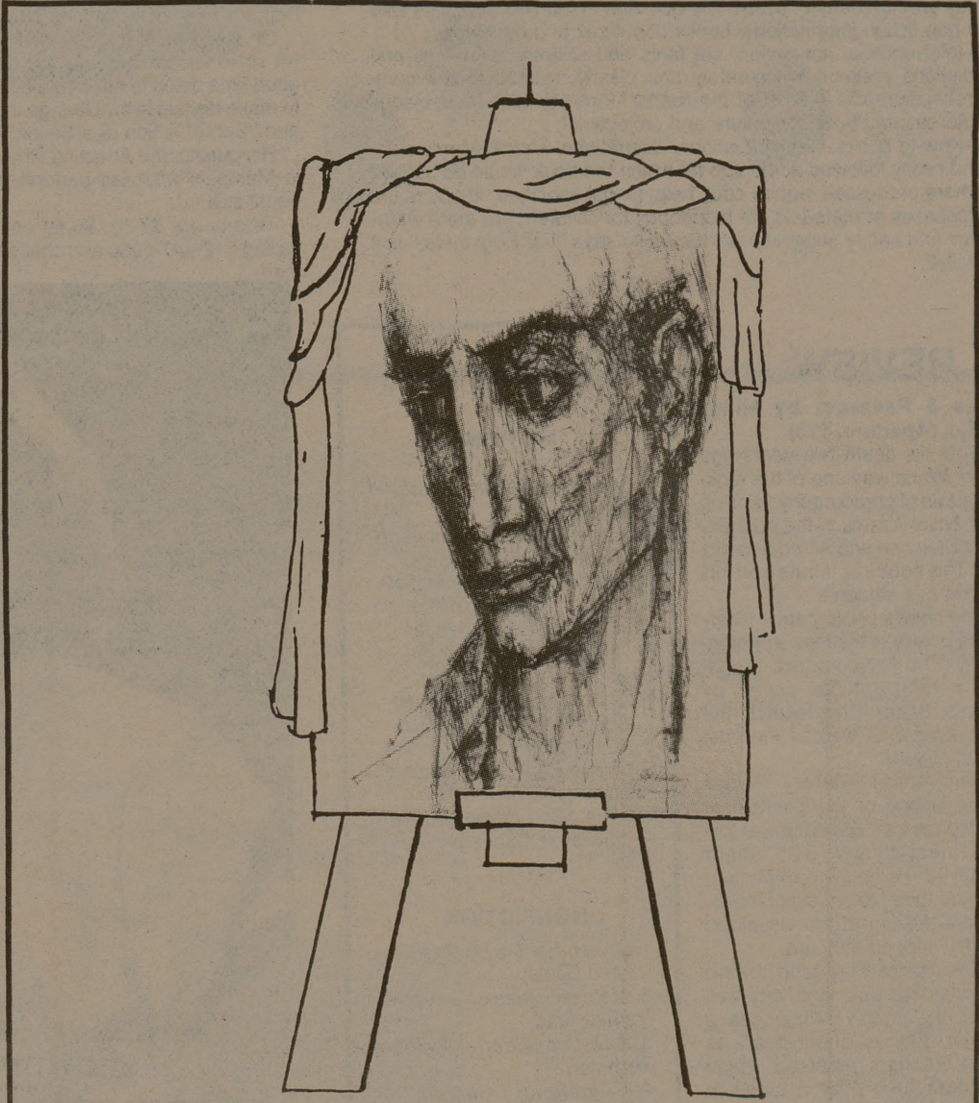
The Gulf Coast wintering grounds of the cranes includes the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge, Matagorda Island and Isla San Jose across the Intracoastal Waterway. Here the birds stay in individual territories from October to Mid-April, when they migrate the 2,600 miles back to their nesting and summering grounds in Northern Canada.

In 1975, widespread efforts were made to monitor the exact migration route, in order to be able to divert the birds from such dangers as diseases and oil spills. In that same year, American and Canadian biologists started a foster-parent project, whereby some eggs were transferred from their Canadian nests to those of greater sandhill cranes on the Grays Lake National Wildlife Refuge in Idaho.

The sandhill crane experiment has been encouraging so far, Smith said. The young birds have been readily accepted by foster parents and have seemed to adopt the sandhill migration route, wintering in New Mexico. Although they copy some of the sandhill's activity patterns, they show no interest in pairing with them, and tend to assume dominance over the territory. Biologists are studying these developments with great interest.

The latest count of the cranes associated with the sandhill flock is nine, which includes three hatched this year.

A number of whooping cranes are in captivity. Of these, there are 22 at the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Laurel, Md., two at the International Crane Foundation in Baraboo, Wis. and two at the San Antonio Zoo. With the 74 counted on the Texas Coast, the total number of whooping cranes known to exist in the world is now 109.



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