

UP on a STUMP

By Horace Gore

THE COST OF HUNTING IN TEXAS

A common sense approach

We hear a lot of complaining these days about the cost of hunting. By far, the most complaints are about the high cost of deer hunting. Folks want to know why landowners are charging so much to kill a buck (or doe, or both). The hunters who have contacted me complain that hunting has become a sport for the rich or that they can't find a place to hunt. Some have gone so far as to blame Texas Trophy Hunters for creating the high cost of hunting.

Have you ever tried to dance without music? Probably not, because dancing requires music. By the same token, hunting requires game and a place to hunt. Whether it's music or hunting, someone has to provide it. Both have a price, and the participant has to pay.

It seems that a lot of hunters still want to hunt for nothing, just like we did 60 years ago. Back then, hunting had little economic value, and you could simply ask permission to hunt and go hunting. Times have changed, and hunting has taken an economic position in our society. Today, a landowner may depend on hunting money to buy a new pickup or to pay college tuition. Hunting revenue may even be used to pay high taxes on urban property.

Not all Texas hunters pay to hunt—that is, not with money. About half of the 525,000 deer hunters, and about the same number of dove, quail, and duck hunters hunt for free on lands owned by friends or relatives. Also, the majority of hunters who pay to hunt live in the city. Most city folks don't have any idea how country people live or what it

costs to farm or ranch or maintain rural property. It's expensive to maintain a deer herd in today's society, and deer eat just like other forms of livestock.

Deer habitat is a static commodity, and a landowner can select hunters according to the price they will pay. Good deer hunting demands a higher price than poor deer hunting, but there are those who want good hunting for a low price. Sorry, folks, those days are gone.

I have had calls from people in Houston and Dallas complaining about the high cost of deer hunting, and that they can't take their kids hunting. I remind them that Texas Parks and Wildlife controls almost a million acres of land in the Pineywoods of East Texas. Much of this land has deer and a permit to hunt is less than the cost of going to a college football game. The usual answer is that there aren't enough deer on the state properties, and that they don't want to put up with other hunters. They readily admit to spending a lot of money on other sports such as football games, golf or skeet shooting, and maybe an ocean cruise now and then. But they don't want to pay the price to deer hunt.

Although there are only a static 72 million acres of deer habitat in Texas, with some 525,000 hunters vying for this hunting territory each year, a diligent hunter can find a place to hunt. The quality of the hunt, and the amenities demanded will determine the cost.

A typical deer hunter will pull up to the lease in a new pickup, pulling trailers full of four-wheelers, ice chests full of steaks and drinks, and deer stands. They tote fancy binoculars, spotting scopes, rangefinders, fancy guns

with fancy scopes, and the best camo clothing—you know, the essentials of the modern deer hunter. Actually, the cost of the hunt may be small compared to the other expenses that go with an elite deer hunt.

One big change since the “good old days” of free hunting is that there are a lot more deer today, thanks to the efforts of restocking by the state's game and fish agency. Following close behind the increase in deer came an ever-increasing number of deer hunters. For the last 30 years, Texas has had almost four million deer and over a half million deer hunters. Now, we have more hunters than places for them to hunt. The economics of deer hunting has changed from a casual sport to a thriving agricultural business.

In America, most people have a choice in anything they do. They can drive a Ford, or for more money, a Mercedes. They can live in a double-wide, or for more money, a mansion on the hill. They can eat bologna (rebel steak) or for more money, beef rib eye. Any of these choices will serve life's needs, but the high end is obviously better and more expensive than the low end.

The next time you hear someone complain about the cost of hunting, look around to see just how “poor” that person is, and how they spend their extra money. It's very possible that they have a choice of fitting deer hunting into their lifestyle. The cost of hunting in Texas will fit into the budget of almost anyone who really wants to deer hunt. Their choice is where to go and what to hunt. 