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MANAGING WHITETAILS IN THE 21ST CENTURY:

What is Happening to our Deer? Part II

By Dr. James C. Kroll

Author's Note: My wife and I were in the middle of a cemetery near San Antonio placing a stone at her younger brother's grave when my cell phone interrupted our work. It was my sister. The obvious emotion in her voice told me something was wrong. "You will never believe what some guy wrote about you in Texas Fish & Game Magazine," she sobbed. "He called you and some other guys thieves!" Since I was pretty busy at the time, I assured her folks in the public eye often had bad things written about them, and that I would look into it when I returned to east Texas.

The next day, my mother called in a similar temperament. "Several of my friends called telling me some guy called you a bastard," she said. Then, she assured me there was no worry about my legitimacy.

Over the next several days, a host of folks—ranging from state senators to deer hunters—called with similar concerns. I was getting pretty upset! By the time Texas Fish & Game publisher Roy Neves called, I was in no mood to be nice. Yet, his concern for the damage this commentary article had caused impressed me. He genuinely wanted to do what was right.

We agreed the "right" approach would be for me to develop a series of articles objectively discussing the issues around modern deer management. This series is the result of that conversation, and I appreciate his honesty.—JCK

Last issue (in the March/April edition of the *Journal of the Texas Trophy Hunters*), I discussed what is happening to rural land in America. Unfortunately, the day is gone when a family can support themselves from the land. Whether it be farming or ranching, you cannot generate an income from traditional agricultural practices. When added to what is happening with inheritance laws, this translates to an incredible loss of valuable wildlife habitat to other land uses. We are seeing malls and theaters where we hunted geese!

In an effort to save their family heritage, many landowners are turning to alternative enterprises to make a living—and we are not talking about rich guys! These are folks who either inherited their farm or ranch from their fathers, or who have scraped together enough money to purchase their dream property. Texas now leads the nation in fragmentation (the breaking up of land into smaller and smaller pieces).

In this installment, I will present equally distressing news about the current state of our favorite game animal, the white-tailed deer.

By the turn of the 20th century, game animals were reduced to the point of extinction. Market shooting and wholesale habitat destruction had reduced the whitetail to less than 500,000 animals. Most escaped the slaughter by being a little more strange in behavior than their ancestors. Fortunately, though, conservation-minded private landowners and sportsmen began restocking efforts by the 1930s.

I have examined the records for most of the stockings conducted either by Texas Parks and Wildlife or private ranchers for the last 70 years. To my surprise, most of the deer stocked during this period either came from South Texas (mostly the King Ranch) or along the coast. The latter deer represent the Avery Island race of whitetails, which have a late September, early October breeding season.

Landowners invested millions to re-establish deer and to protect them from poaching. They also poured countless dollars into habitat. The combined efforts of state and private interests resulted in well-established herds by the 1960s in most of Texas. East Texas probably was the last place to see huntable populations of deer.

When I first arrived in the Pineywoods, if you saw a deer track you would talk about it for weeks! By the time we established good populations of deer in eastern Texas, herds in many other parts of the state had already experienced die-offs.

The drought of the '50s was a notable event in the Hill Country. Thousands of deer died from being over-protected. The resulting Central Texas herds were much smaller than their ancestors, presumably an adaptation to having less to eat.

Today, there are more than 30 million whitetails in North America, more than when Columbus arrived on this continent. But, that may not be as good a news as you might think.

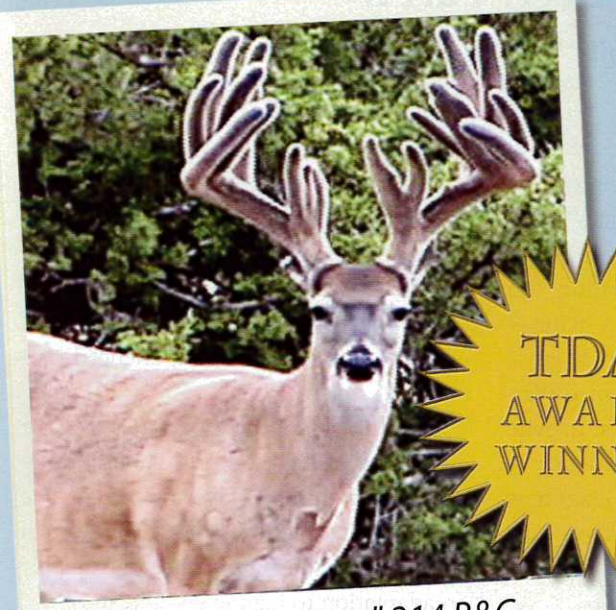
In 1994, Dr. Harry Jacobson and I conducted a detailed study across the range of the species, and came up with some pretty upsetting results. What we discovered was we do indeed have a large number of deer, but numbers do not translate to quality hunting. We found most herds in the U.S. actually are in poor condition. Why?

Although there are plenty of deer on the range, they actually exceed carrying capacity by many factors. Sex ratios and reproduction are skewed so heavily, the health of the herd is threatened. Sex ratios and especially age structure is so far from natural, we may never be able to correct the situation.

Ask yourself if there are enough quality bucks on your hunting territory? The answer probably is NO! Then, ask yourself why not? If we examine the harvest and population data provided by Texas Parks and Wildlife, the answers are simple: We have been harvesting the wrong deer and too few of the right ones!

The percentage of yearling (18 months of age) bucks in the harvest for many regions is way beyond the optimum. It does not take a mathematician to figure

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out there is no way to get mature bucks when you shoot half or more of your yearlings. Sex ratios often are so skewed there are not enough bucks to go around, resulting in late fawning, which affects everything from first year antler growth to fawn survival.

So what's wrong with having only young bucks? After all, not everyone wants to shoot a trophy deer; there's meat to consider. Well, there are several good and valid reasons that have nothing to do with trophy hunting. Most importantly, it has to do with the role of the hunter in wildlife management.

If we are to continue having access to hunting, and if the public will continue to support our favorite sport, we have to prove to them what we do is "good" for the deer. What is good for the deer is to exist in natural conditions. This means natural sex ratios and natural age structure.

Nature meant for whitetails to live in populations in which the primary breeding was done by the older, more experienced males. They had to fight their way up the ladder to join what we call the "breeding pool." In herds with heavy harvest rates on yearling males, this never happens. The result is weaker animals than nature intended. So, having older males is not about trophies, it's about good management. It just so happens hunters help us out by being attracted to trophy antlers.

Here at the Institute (for white-tailed deer), we have monitored deer harvests for more than 30 years. In the last dozen years, the average buck harvested from East Texas hunting clubs has not changed more than a few decimal points. He has less than an 11-inch spread, has seven points and is almost 2 years of age. Weights and reproduction have not changed either. We have in effect a stagnant herd in the Pineywoods.

The deer range throughout the country is being depleted by too many deer. In our study, Dr. Jacobson and I discovered not a single state or province was controlling their herds. We are in a runaway situation. In fact, the whitetail now "enjoys" being the most dangerous animal in North America, responsible for more than 200 human deaths and millions in damages annually. When you add in the cost of landscape destruction, crop damage and disease, it makes for a very unpopular animal with the general public.

Recently, I was approached by a lady and her daughter in the Chicago Airport. "Are you a hunter," she questioned. I thought to myself, "Here comes another attack by an anti-hunting fanatic." I pushed out my chest and proudly said, "Yes, I am!" She then asked me why we didn't kill more deer? Surprised, I tried to explain there were not enough hunters to kill all the does that needed removing from the landscape. She walked off in disgust.

A popular morning talk show host recently referred to deer as "raccoons with antlers," and proclaimed we should kill them all. The sad truth is deer now have achieved the same pest status as rats and raccoons. Upscale housing developments such as Hollywood Park in San Antonio are doing everything they can to rid themselves of the many deer sleeping on their lawns. What a sad state for such a magnificent animal.

To make things worse, we are losing hunters slowly, but surely. Our best guess is we have about 20 more years of hunters before they all reach an age at which they no longer can venture into the field. Some say we are losing them to higher prices and loss of opportunity, but the data do not substantiate these claims. The unfortunate truth is we are losing them to changes in lifestyle.

The hunting party is being replaced by the golfing party. It provides all the pleasures of hunting, without the discomfort of being out there with ticks and Lyme disease. It may cost as much, but it is easier to do. Our children, unlike many of you reading this article, do not have ready access to hunting, so they spend time at the mall, instead.

When I was a child, I could walk out our back door and start hunting the small game prized at our table. I stopped when I got tired, having crossed many fences and many properties. Today, the land is so broken up into fragments, you never could do this—and it's not about paying to hunt.

Did you know only 18 percent of the Texas deer range is leased for hunting? The remainder is owned by folks who do not want hunters on their property or prefer to hunt their land themselves. In addition, Americans are working harder and longer than ever before.

How many of you have two jobs? Hunting takes place during leisure time, mostly on weekends and holidays. Fewer and fewer Americans have free time for hunting. Unfortunately, that's why the ones who have enough money to do so buy package hunts on intensively managed ranches. They cannot afford to waste time on low-quality hunting. They are tired of harvesting the same yearling buck season after season.

So, with that rosy picture, what can we do about it? Are we all booking passage on the Titanic? If you will hang in there with me through the final installment of this series, I think we can offer some solutions that will assure both quality deer and quality hunting for many decades to come.

No Spread, No Problem

By Lewis Berniard

"Lewis. Big Bubba. Call me on my mobile. Showtime!" Those words put in motion a hunt that had been anticipated for months, but that seemed at times destined not to happen.

It all began about two years ago when I met Bill Glendening (also known as Big Bubba Whitetail) just prior to the start of the 2001-02 season. After a whirlwind week, I was fortunate to harvest a buck grossing 174-3/8 with an outfitter that was a good friend of Bill's.

Later that season, Bill showed me some video of bucks fighting on his ranch in Maverick County. The larger of the two was really impressive. He was 5-1/2 years old at the time and his sheds later gross scored about 177. Bill mentioned that they might hunt him the next year, depending on what he looked like. I was impressed, but I never thought I'd be the one doing the hunting.

[CONTINUED ON PAGE 34]

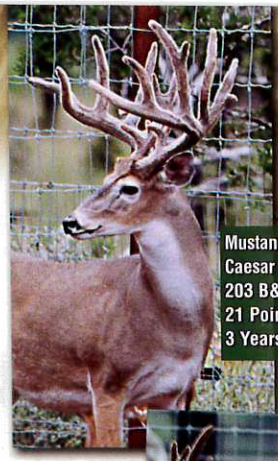


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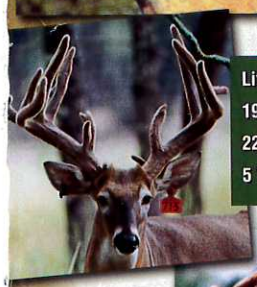


Rocket
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4 Years Old

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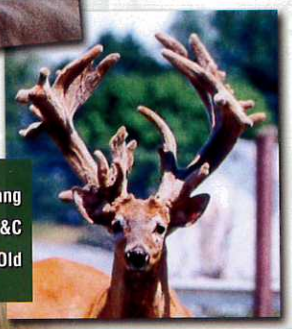


Mustang
Caesar
203 B&C
21 Points
3 Years Old

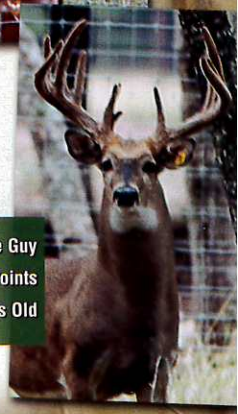


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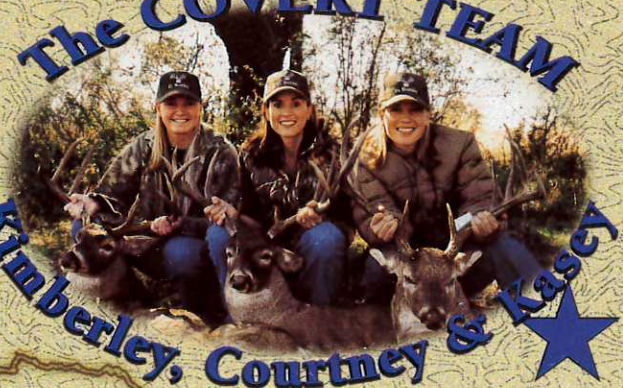
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