THE BEST PLACE

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Over the last 35 years I have been asked just about every question a person can dream up about whitetails. Based on the most recent questions, however, the average person is becoming more informed about deer. One new area of questioning relates to a phenomenon we identified about five years ago. "Baby boomers" are moving to the land in record numbers. The non-conformists of their generation it turns out became nothing more than hyper-versions of the older generation they rebelled against! Years of hard-charging and over-achieving have left folks frustrated and tired of not being in control. Further, our mortality is becoming all too obvious, as we deal with everything from hypertension to prostate cancer. There also is the metaphysical and religious need to leave this earth in better shape than when we assume the helm of planet earth. When you add all this to a desire to produce trophy bucks, it is easy to see why real estate prices are through the roof!

The number one question I now get is, "I want to buy a piece of land to produce monster bucks. Where is the best place?" I thought this issue's column would serve the purpose of answering the question. It is not an easy question to answer, so it will take a few steps to arrive at a conclusion. Here are the important points to consider:

- ✓ Price of land.
- ✓ Productivity of the land.
- ✓ Controllability of the land.
- ✓ Genetic potential of the native deer.
- ✓ Favorable management climate.

It is a real task to assign per acre values to land. The price is almost like a commodity, increasing daily in some areas. The Real Estate Center at Texas A&M (recenter.tamu.edu) has data for 2007 and earlier for 7 regions. Each region then is subdivided into sub-regions, so it gets pretty complicated. I divided the cost of land into use categories: rangeland, cropland and forestland. Here is a summary:

Region*	Cropland	Rangeland	Forestland
Region One	$350-$650	$250-$1,250	
Region Two	$800-$12,000**	$150-$865	
Region Three	$400-$1,500	$250-$1,800	
Region Four	$900-$4,500	$1,000-$4,500	$600-$2,500
Region Five	$1,200-$2,000	$1,000-$5,000	$650-$1,750
Region Six	$1,000-$2,500	$1,200-$6,500	
Region Seven	$800-$3,200	$1,200-$10,000	

**Region 1, Panhandle and South Plains; Region 2, Far West Texas, Trans-Pecos and Big Bend; Region 3, North, Central and South Central Texas; Region 4, North Texas, North Texas Transitional, Northeast Texas and Piney Woods; Region 5, Southern Piney Woods, Coastal Prairies and Brazos Bottom; Region 6, Hill Country, South Texas, Coastal Plains, Coastal Bend and Rio Grande Valley; Region 7, South Grand Prairie, Central Basin, Blacklands, Post Oak Belts, Edwards Plateau and Hill Country.*
***Irrigated cropland only.*

So, the price range for entire state for deer habitat (Rangeland and Forestland) is $150 to $10,000 per acre. Rangeland has the greatest variation, while forested land has the least. The vast majority of forested land occurs east of IH-35, including the Post Oak Savanna and Piney Woods regions. This variation is caused by many factors—including proximity to metropolitan areas, scenic beauty, "trendiness," etc. However, for this analysis one aspect should be productivity of the land which is determined by annual and season rainfall and soils. Looking at the rainfall for the State, this ranges from about 20 inches at Cotulla to almost 50 inches at Nacogdoches. Soil types vary in potential forage yield, but some may be able to produce upwards of 8 tons per acre, while others only a few hundred pounds. A deer consumes around a ton of forage annually, so potential forage yield, influenced by soil type and rainfall, can translate to one property being able to support a deer to two acres and another one to 30 acres! That fact has to figure into the calculation of the "best place."

Controllability is important, unless you plan on high-fencing your property. What your potential neighbors are doing for deer can completely frustrate any management program. Even a large property, if surrounded by small landowners, cannot produce trophy-class deer. Our recent antler study clearly showed properties as large as 9,000 acres still had deer leaving and arriving to and from adjacent properties.

The genetic potential seldom is considered. Much of this relates to the paragraph above. If the deer herd on a property has been "hammered" for years, the chances of it having quality genetics are slim. Some biologists insist every deer herd can produce trophy bucks, but I am here to tell you that is not so! If you surround your property with a high-fence, the deer so confined are a sample of the local population. You "reach in and take a handful of deer," that may not have the genetics you want. So, you need to pay attention to this aspect. Does the area you are considering normally produce good bucks? Somewhat in support of the assertion by biologists, I have reviewed the stocking records for the entire state of Texas since the 1930s, and most of the deer either came from the King Ranch area or north of Corpus Christi.

So, what is the answer? The perfect property would be one that is affordable, even at today's prices, has good annual rainfall, mild climate, good soils, good genetics, and lies within fairly large land-holdings. Let's look at a list of the most popular areas.

Much of the Midwest produces huge bucks. States such as Ohio, Iowa and Kansas are attracting investors in record numbers. Yet, for all the big bucks killed in Ohio and Iowa, there are large numbers of younger bucks in most of the harvest. Kansas tends to have a lighter harvest, but along with the other two states winter kill is significant. Plus, you cannot grow cool season crops in any of these states. Lastly, the management climate is not suitable for trophy deer management. The seasons are too short, bag limits too restrictive and there are serious limitations on weapons, all making herd control and culling impossible.

The Southeast has a generally mild climate, with abundant rainfall. Small property size in many of these states makes management without a high-fence very difficult. Plus, in many of these states high-fences either are illegal or you can have them if you do not hunt the deer! The management climate in all but a few southern states does not support trophy management.

In Texas, there are few places meeting all five criteria. The entire state enjoys a very favorable management climate. South Texas clearly is the most popular deer management area in the country. It has quality browse and good genetics in most instances. However, it is a "boom or bust" geographic region, where you constantly are affected by the survival of fawns. Feeding is an option, but at about two pounds per deer per day, that translates to a sizeable expense.
One place that does indeed fit these requirements, believe it or not, is eastern Texas. The timber companies have mostly sold out to TIMOs (Timber Management Investment Organizations), who after extracting value from timber, now are selling sizeable tracts at relatively low prices. Many of these tracts lie within what once were large hunting clubs, managed for quality bucks. If you intend to high-fence, any sized property is great. If the genetics are not sufficient, you always can augment with stocked animals, either from the TPWD TTT program or from breeders.

What makes the eastern half of the state so good is the climate. With adequate rainfall, even in droughty years, you can grow forage crops that result in high productivity for deer. If you pick the right parcel, surrounded by hunting clubs, you can produce trophy bucks without fencing. Yet, if you choose to fence a property, our research has shown you can produce as much as one mature buck to 50 acres! Our findings show you can grow the same number of trophy bucks on one-third the land it takes to do the same thing in South Texas. At the same time, you also can manage for timber, which can produce a real profit over and above deer; something ranching never will do.

So, this is the answer I now give to anyone asking, "Where is the best place to grow trophy deer?" East Texas may not have the mystique of South Texas or the Hill Country, or the scenic views; but, if your goal is to grow large numbers of big bucks, you might take a look at timberland.