

HEAD EAST, YOUNG MAN

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Over the last 35 years, I have been asked just about every question about whitetails a person can dream up. Based on some of the more recent questions, however, I'm seeing that 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, have become 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. At the same time, our mortality is becoming all too obvious, as we deal with everything from hypertension to prostate cancer and myriad other ills, and all of this can butt heads with the metaphysical and religious needs to leave this earth in better shape than when we got here. 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 No. 1 question I now get is, "I want to buy a piece of land to produce monster bucks, but where's the best place?" I thought this issue's column would serve the purpose of answering just that question.

It's not an easy question to answer, but the following points need to be considered:

- Price of the land
- Productivity of the land
- Controllability of the land
- Genetic potential of the native deer
- A favorable management climate

Let's talk about price of the land. It is a real task to assign per-acre values to land; in some areas, price reacts almost like a commodity, increasing daily. The Real Estate Center at Texas A&M (www.recenter.tamu.edu) has data for 2007 and earlier for seven regions. Each region is subdivided into sub-regions. I divided the cost of land into the use categories of rangeland, cropland, and forest. Here's a summary:

Region*	Cropland	Rangeland	Forestland
Region 1	$350-$650	$250-$1,250	
Region 2	$800-$12,000**	$150-$865	
Region 3	$400-$1,500	$250-$1,800	
Region 4	$900-$4,500	$1,000-$4,500	$600-$2,500
Region 5	$1,200-$2,000	$1,000-$5,000	$650-$1,750
Region 6	$1,000-$2,500	$1,200-$6,500	
Region 7	$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 Pineywoods; Region 5, Southern Pineywoods, 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 the 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 and includes the Post Oak Savanna and Pineywoods regions). This variation is caused by many factors, including proximity to metropolitan areas, scenic beauty, "trendiness," etc. However, for this analysis, one aspect to be considered should be the productivity of the land.

Land productivity is determined by annual and seasonal 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 eight tons per acre, while others yield only a few hundred pounds. Now, 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 every two acres, while another sees only one to 30 acres! *That fact has to figure into the calculation of the "best place."*

Controllability is also important, unless you plan on high-fencing your property. What your neighbors are doing (or not doing) for deer can completely frustrate any management program. Even a large property, if surrounded by small landowners, will be unable to 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.

When buyers are looking at deer land to buy, it seems that genetic potential is seldom considered. Much of this relates to the paragraph above. If the deer herd on a property has been hammered for years, the chance of it having quality genetics is slim. Some biologists insist every deer herd can produce trophy bucks, but I am here to tell you that's just not so. If you surround your property with a high fence, the deer 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're considering normally produce good bucks?* (An interesting note: 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.)

The perfect property would be one that is affordable, even at today's prices, has good annual rainfall, a mild climate, good soils, good genetics, and lies within fairly large landholdings. In Texas, there are few places meeting all five criteria, but one place that does, believe it or not, is East Texas.

So what's 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 landholdings. Let's look at a list of the most popular areas.

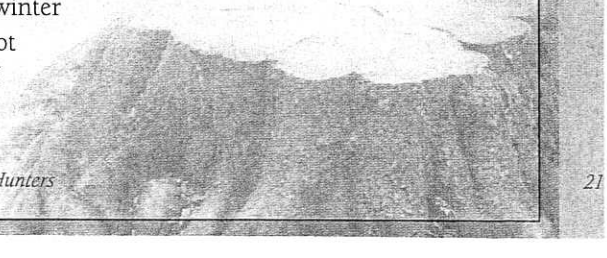
Much of the Midwest produces huge bucks. States such as Ohio, Iowa, and Kansas, are attracting investors in record numbers. Yet for all the big bucks killed in Ohio and Iowa, there are large numbers of younger bucks in most of the overall harvest. Kansas tends to have a lighter harvest, but along with 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, usually 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 your efforts are constantly 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, especially given today's current economical conditions.

One place that does indeed fit these requirements, believe it or not, is East Texas. The timber companies have mostly sold out to TMIOs (Timber Management Investment Organizations) that, 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

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bucks. If you intend to high fence, any sized property is great here. And if the genetics are not sufficient, you always can augment with stocked animals, either from the TPWD TTT (Trap, Transport & Transplant) Permit Program or from breeders.

What makes the eastern half of the state so good is the climate. With adequate rainfall, even in otherwise droughty years, you can grow forage crops that result in high productivity for deer, and if you pick the right parcel, especially one 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, and that's something ranching never will do.

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

