

Dr. Deer's Whitetail World

BY DR. JAMES C. KROLL

Whitetails And Private Landowners

A colleague once made an interesting assertion: "Two hundred or so years ago, Benjamin Franklin opposed the bald eagle as the national bird because it was a bully that fed off carrion, among other things." He went on to point out old Ben wanted the wild turkey to be our national symbol. Well, obviously Ben Franklin did not prevail, so, according to my colleague, "The government got the bald eagle, leaving the wild turkey to the hunters and landowners."

My friend then finished with, "Today, there are millions of wild turkeys. But up until just recently, the bald eagle was listed as an endangered species!"

This statement about government inefficiency is certainly not true in all particulars, but it does raise an interesting point. Just what *is* the role of the private landowner and hunter in deer management? A great deal has been written about the importance of hunters in wildlife management, but you see very little about the role of landowners. It's interesting to note that 80 percent of the wildlife lives on 60 percent of the land — private land, that is. This fact puts some credence to my colleague's assertion. The private landowner must be very important, indeed!

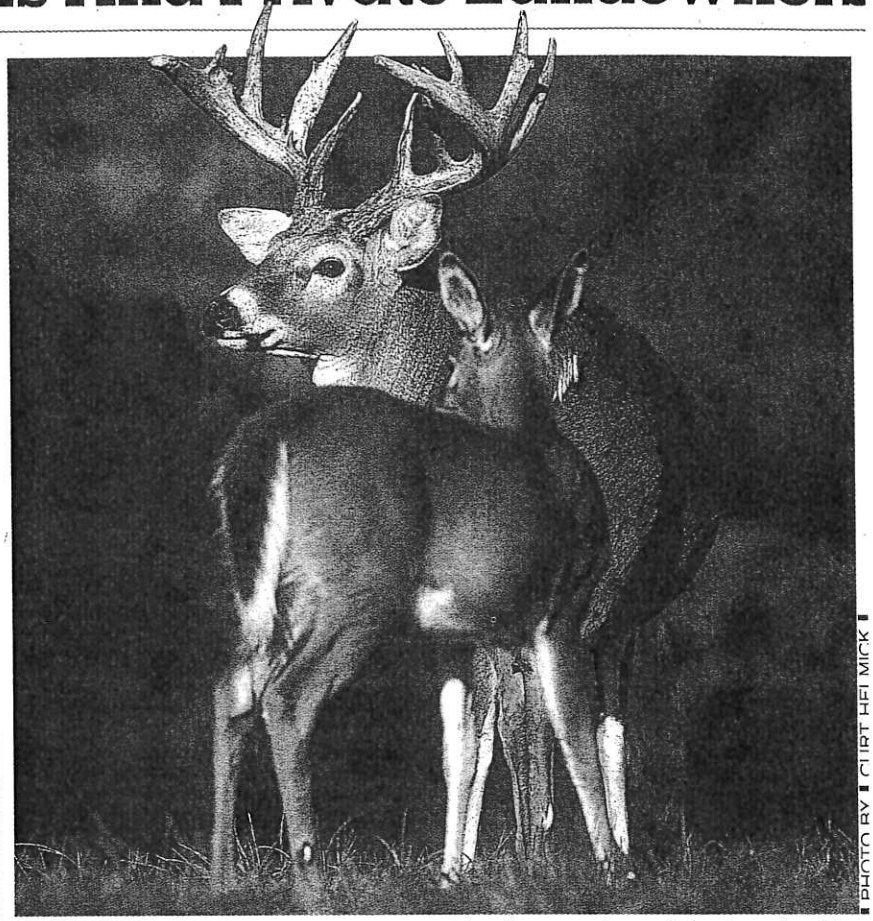


PHOTO BY CURT HEI MICK

From an historical perspective, private landowners have been involved in managing and protecting deer for at least 100 years, and it is vital for this trend to continue well into the 21st century.

A LOOK BACK

Starting in the very early portion of the 20th century, the stocking records for white-tailed deer in Texas show that, almost without exception, these animals came from private ranches and properties. Since there were enough deer on these properties to allow removal for restoration efforts, someone had to be doing a pretty good job of protecting them! I live in eastern Texas, where deer conservation and management was somewhat late in coming about.

I began my work at North Boggy Slough Hunting and Fishing Club (Houston and Trinity counties). The land belonged to the Temple Family, who, at one time, happened to be the largest landowner in our state. If you've been reading ***North American Whitetail*** for much of our 25 years, you may recall that in the mid-1980s I killed one of the biggest deer ever taken in our state at Boggy Slough. He was known as the "Boggy Slough Monster," and he sported 9-inch bases and 4 drop tines. He was descended from a small remnant population of Kansas whitetails that once inhabited the Piney Woods region of Texas.

A Captain Ray had hog-fenced off about a section of land to protect a group of deer from hog predation and dog-hunters. Captain Ray defended this handful of animals literally with his life. Eighty years later I was the beneficiary of this man's work. And so were several other hunters who also have taken monster bucks from the national forest that surrounds Boggy Slough (now totaling about 25,000 acres).

I'm often amused when landowners call me wanting to find some deer with "superior genetics" to stock in their area. A man representing a cooperative management area in central Texas called me not long ago asking this very question. "Why do you want to do that?" I queried. He replied that some bucks from South Texas (famed for its big-antlered bucks) would help increase antler size for their cooperative.

Silence ensued when I patiently told him that the deer already established in his area had come from the King Ranch, one of the most famous trophy buck areas in our state. The point is that private landowners both big and small were responsible for keeping whitetails from being wiped out.

MANY GRASSROOTS HEROES

Taking this argument one step further,

where do you think much of what we know about managing whitetails originated? Yes, university scientists like myself have produced a wealth of information in the last 30 years, but many of the tried-and-true principles came from landowners trying to do a better job of manage- ment. My dear friend and respected colleague Al Brothers is famous for his landmark book, *Producing Quality Whitetails,* published in the late '70s. He'll be the first to tell you that most of the information in his book was made possible only by having the support of his boss, H.B. Zachary, who allowed all this to happen.

This story has been repeated across our nation time and again, whether it be Alabama, Texas, Pennsylvania, Michigan or a host of other states. Private individuals and private landowners deserved the lion's share of credit for the deer hunting we have today. So, where will these folks figure in during the 21st century?

The so-called "North American Wildlife Model" has focused on one major tenet: Wildlife belongs to the people and not to any one individual. That's true, and I would have it no other way. Many hunters, especially those in the Northeast, benefit from this hard-held belief. Yet, with a few exceptions, much of the "public" hunting in the Northeast takes place on private lands. It's safe to say that most of the quality bucks also reside on private lands, where they enjoy protection and nurturing from landowners.

The exception would be in some of the Canadian provinces where "Crown land" is so vast and hunting pressure so low that bucks are given the opportunity to reach maturity. If you take the private landowner out of the equation in say, Pennsylvania, that state's nearly 1 million hunters would have to go to another state to find places to hunt!

THERE IS A PRICE TO PAY

So what motivation is there for private landowners to continue in this role? For some time, I've heard hunters say with great authority that they are being "priced out of the market." Some time ago I saw an interesting cartoon. In it, two hunters were leaning on a fence, each with a handful of pheasants. Behind them was a farmer with sweat pouring from his brow, putting in what obviously was pheasant habitat. The caption read, "Boy, it sure is nice to live off the land!" The farmer is frowning.

Hunters are going to have to come to the realization that there is a price to hunting. It may be paid in many ways, including lease fees or contributing to the cost of managing the land for deer. I've learned through 35 years of deer work that "many a beautiful theory has been murdered by a ruthless gang of facts!" Data clearly show that the amount paid by hunters for hunting rights represents less than 10 percent of the total cost of hunting.

I once managed deer hunting leases on a large family estate. We were charging $3 per acre per year for the rights to hunt deer. The first group of hunters I met with showed up in a caravan of 4-wheel-drive trucks, each pulling trailers loaded with 4-wheelers. "I sure hope you don't price us out of this lease," was the first thing the president of the club said as he climbed down from his brand-new truck. Hanging in his back window was a Weatherby rifle outfitted with a Swarovski scope!

THE LIABILITY ISSUE

The right to private ownership of land is a major component of the Constitution. This right conveys the flexibility (within reason and public safety) for the landowner to do many things with his land. The property where you hunt deer could legally be converted from woodland to grassland or even a housing development by the owner. That same landowner faces many costs and concerns, including taxes, lost agriculture revenues and liability. Our recent studies show that even if a landowner has no interest in being paid for hunting rights and is a supporter of hunting, he or she may still not allow you on the land out of concern for liability.

We are a litigious society, and letting you and your buddies hunt deer could mean the loss of the family farm! So, although wildlife in America belongs to everyone, the private landowner has been entrusted with its stewardship, and he controls access to the game.

Incentives to manage for deer might include tax advantages, subsidies or outright payments from the hunters. As a recreational group, hunters and fishermen — as well as the agencies responsible — will have to decide, sooner or later, if these recreational activities are a "welfare good." You may not think of public hunting as such, but it is! So, if the answer is "yes," then we next must determine *how* we are to bare the cost. State DNRs could purchase hunting rights to private lands and then, through a lottery system, pass these rights on to hunters. Of course, state legislatures would then have to pass liability relief for the landowner in return. Annually, state agencies collect over $1 billion in licenses and fees, so some of this "wealth" could be passed on to the folks who pay the bills (hunters).

States such as Texas and Mississippi offer assistance programs (going generally under the title Deer Management Assistance Program, or DMAP) to landowners who want to manage their deer. Under DMAP plans, landowners receive incentives such as increased bag limits and longer seasons. In my opinion, this partnership needs to be expanded across the whitetail's range. Cooperatives are often presented as a panacea for increasing hunting opportunity, but they work only in areas where the owner actually lives on the land.

The sad truth today is that most of us who own rural land do not even know our neighbors. I am surrounded by three landowners. One lives 90 miles away, another lives in another state and the third property is in an estate. After 30 years of land ownership, I have never been able to get any of these folks interested in a cooperative. So, there is no single solution to preserving our deer hunting heritage.

Quality deer hunting can remain within the reach of most hunters in the 21st century — provided that partnerships develop between state agencies, private landowners and hunters. We all have to "bend" a little to do this. State agencies will have to give up some control to the landowner, and private landowners will have to involve the public more in the management of deer on their land. What's more, hunters will have to realize the true cost of hunting and be willing to pay the price. By working together, I believe that we can guarantee our grandchildren the prospects of still being able to harvest some big bucks!