



Bigger in Texas

Hunting enterprises are a big part of many cattle operations in Texas.

by Sara Gugelmeyer

➤ Ranching in Texas, or anywhere for that matter, often means more than just cattle. By integrating hunting and cattle, many ranchers are able to gain revenue, reduce waste and improve their rangeland. Extension specialists agree, hunting and cattle operations complement each other well.

After all, it makes sense. Ranchers own large amounts of land. At the same time, cattlemen are the original environmentalists in that they take great care to preserve the land, making it excellent wildlife habitat. And Texans, especially in south Texas with its 20th century population boom, were the first to put two and two

together and discovered people are willing to pay good money to hunt.

Hunting as a commodity

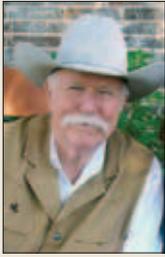
Jimmie Powell is no exception. His father, Virgil, got into the Hereford business near Ft. McKavett in the 1920s, and the family began selling hunting opportunities for whitetail deer and turkey as early as 1956. According to the Texas Department of Wildlife, it was during this time period that hunting became more recreational, rather than primarily being a source of food, and so began the pursuit of trophy game animals. In Texas as early as the 1970s, deer were already an economically important commodity.

Now retired, Texas A&M University Department of Ecosystem and Science Professor and Extension Specialist Emeritus C. Wayne Hanselka cites that by 1991, 28% of Texas landowners were leasing their land for hunting. That number has grown exponentially.

Relatively new to the hunting business is Hereford breeder Loyd Whitehead. In addition to his



Above: Hunters enjoy a chance at a nice buck like this one, killed on one of Whitehead's ranches.
Below: A nice mix of brush and open country is ideal for deer habitat.



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— C. Wayne Hanselka

Hereford seedstock herd, he has several good-sized commercial cow herds on his ranches in West Texas and the Hill Country. For about the last 25 years, he's offered whitetail deer hunting and some antelope hunts on his land.

It's a win-win for everybody involved. Left unchecked, wild game populations can get out of control. Hunters, many of whom are urban dwellers, are constantly seeking places to hunt. And for ranchers, it's a good revenue source.

For example, in the Rio Grande Plains and Coastal Prairie regions of south Texas, Hanselka states, hunting provides a \$20 million boost to the regional economy each year, or 4.5% of the region's total value of all commodities.

Powell explains, "We think it's a good practice to remove a large number of deer annually, including does. Turkey down here are abundant, so we like to hunt those. We make quite a few friends hunting as a result."

Whitehead agrees, saying, "It stops waste. If there's too many deer, when it gets dry or disease hits them there will be a big die off. So we can make money and control our population so we don't get too many and they

overgraze. We try to control our numbers and use good genetics back into what we do."

As Whitehead suggested, it's more complicated than just cashing a check. Just like raising cattle, it takes a high level of management to be successful.

Hanselka says, "Combinations of beef cattle and white-tailed deer enterprises should be viewed in terms of tradeoffs.

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That said, deer and beef cattle can complement each other well. Hanselka adds, "Cattle are primarily grazers, preferring grass, but will consume small amounts of forbs and browse. If grass is limiting a cow will depend more heavily upon other forage components. Conversely, deer prefer forbs and the leaves and fruit of woody browse species. There is very little grass in their diet. Consequently, competition for food between the two herbivores is usually

not direct or severe if a diversity of plants and adequate amounts of forages are available."

To lease or not to lease

Ranchers must make a commitment to wildlife management, regardless, but there are two general approaches to hunting enterprises: leasing or outfitting. The first option, leasing, occurs when a landowner simply leases his or her land for hunting. Details may differ, but, in general, this option turns much of the work over to the lessee, and the rate reflects that. Pricing is generally based on the acreage.

Option two, outfitting, occurs when the landowner sells individual guided hunts. He may be the guide himself or hire a guide, but this option considerably ups the time commitment and knowledge necessary to be successful. Pricing is per hunter and species of pursuit. Hunters are given a certain number of days to kill their animal and trophy fees may be added.

Both Powell and Whitehead offer both types of hunts. Powell explains, "We have done both guided hunts and lease hunting. Our preference is to lease for whitetail and turkey only for the season. We'll do as many leases as necessary to cover the property."

Powell continues, "We do very few guided hunts, most of our hunting is lease hunting. We don't have to spend as much time during the

hunting season and we have enough to take care of feeding cattle and taking care of livestock during the winter time. We'd rather be doing that than guiding a hunt. The hunters that lease know how to hunt and they also prepare their lease for hunting, feeding the deer and preparing hunting sites. It's a better program for us."

The way Powell and most landowners set up a hunting lease allows for the lessee to do much



Providing water year round is a critical part of wildlife management.

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of the work and have control of the deer. Powell splits his properties into sections and each hunter or group of hunters has an allotment they are permitted to hunt. "They have a designated pasture or pastures depending on how much acreage they want to hunt and those are the only pastures they can hunt," Powell says.

The hunters can spend as much time as they like scouting and hunting, and they almost always place some type of deer feed or attractants on their allotted area.

In this way, hunters typically lease the same area year after year, although, Powell says, "If they prefer a different area we'll consider it. But normally they will re-lease because they've gotten acquainted with it, they know the terrain and they probably have their feeders out and they're not too interested in moving them unless there's other hunting that's much better."

This system allows for a long-term relationship with the lessees, Powell says. Much of his property has been leased by the same people for 20 years or more.

That said, it's critical to carefully pick each lessee. Powell says, "We interview them very well before we lease and they have a good understanding that livestock is the primary objective of our enterprise and we appreciate them assisting with that. As a result, we have very little conflict."

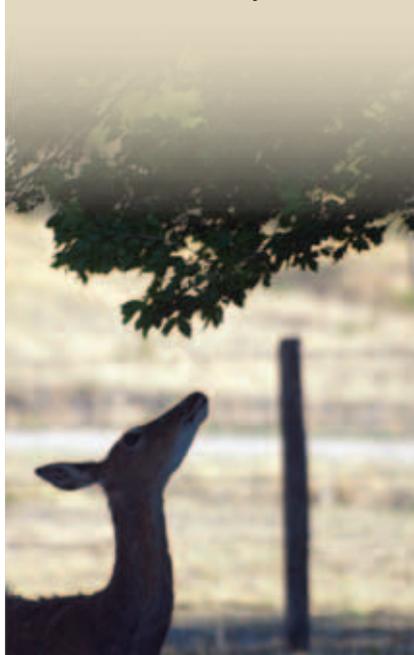
Whitehead's ranches, too, service a lot of lease hunters. He says it is the most profitable but not necessarily the best option. "The most profitable is the lease hunt because on the guided hunts I have to keep feed out year round, I have to have the labor to put the feed out year round," Whitehead says. "I have a lot of costs that I don't have associated with a lease hunt, like groceries and liquor. Guides I have to pay. Booking fee I have to pay. But the reason I do it, is I have complete control that way. I know what's killed, when it's killed. I have a complete record on all of that."

Intense management

Records are even more critical to Whitehead because of his intense management style and improved

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genetics. His ranches use a combination of native deer and non-native deer in regular fenced and high-fenced areas to improve the trophy value of the deer.

He explains, "We do different programs with the Texas Department of Wildlife and Parks breeder programs that allow us to helicopter up to 20 does to put in a breeding pen. Then I lease a buck and bring him over, and drop him off in that pen."

Luckily for Whitehead, one of his neighbors is in the deer breeding business, and they have an agreement that allows Whitehead access to the top-quality genetics carefully selected for antler size.

Whitehead says each of the does is tagged, weighed, aged and pregnancy checked after she is moved into the pen. Then the buck is kept with the does throughout the breeding season. The buck is then

returned to his owner, but the does stay in the pen until after they've fawned. Then they are released onto Whitehead's ranch.

The process is repeated each summer. Those deer with improved genetics are used for Whitehead's guided hunts. Most of the guided hunts are conducted in a high-fenced area. "We have probably 8,000 acres under high fences, with cells within that fence. One cell, for example, is 1,500 acres and it's really brushy, rough country. That's where our best genetics are," Whitehead explains.

"We've got big enough acreage (outside of high fence) so we can also turn deer out of the high fence," Whitehead adds. "Our geographic size lets us turn them loose and they don't leave. We've got feeders up so they've had feed all their lives."

Intense management is more than just counting deer and feeding, though. Hanselka stresses that managing for deer hunting requires four important considerations: grazing management, brush management, revegetation and water development.

As far as grazing management, Hanselka says, "Matching forage demand by livestock to available supplies is basic to grazing management. Texas ranges are generally overgrazed with subsequent loss of biodiversity so producers have to make timely adjustments in stock numbers to prevent overuse of preferred species and to encourage diversity."

When it comes to brush management, most cattlemen think of clearing it, but brush is important deer habitat. Hanselka says, "The most common brush pattern is strip clearing, with cleared strips alternating with strips of brush. This pattern is generally the most acceptable from the standpoint of economics and mutual benefits for deer and cattle. With the advent of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and Geographic Positioning Systems (GPS), installing patterns has become more sophisticated by 'sculpting' mosaics onto the landscape."

Revegetation after brush clearing is critical for deer and cattle production. Hanselka says

the planting of some type of grass usually follows mechanical brush management practices. But he adds that encouraging forb production in those areas helps to maintain habitat integrity for deer.

Finally, Hanselka says, "The lack of permanent surface water on south Texas rangelands is a limiting factor to both deer and cattle." And it's important to keep in mind wildlife use when designing and building a place for cattle to drink.

Building relationships

No matter whether it's lease hunting or guided hunting, having a good relationship with an outfitter can ease the process.

Powell says, "We have an outfitter that handles the relationship with the hunters once they make the leases. The outfitter has the ability to bring hunters in, sign our leases and do the interviews. They are experienced, and they're good hunters, they're good with people."

Whitehead, also, uses an outfitting company to his advantage. Because liability insurance is such a costly and critical part of any rancher's foray into the hunting business, Whitehead uses off-duty San Angelo, Texas, policemen as outfitters. "All my guides and people, everything that has to do with the guided hunts I use San Angelo police department employees. They are real good with gun safety. My insurance company acknowledges that and gives me a discount on my liability insurance. One man is in charge and he hires the guides and manages things."

Even so, Whitehead maintains control over every aspect of the operation. He starts each season with a deer count. Whitehead hires a wildlife biologist

(the same every year) to count the number of deer on each of the nine ranches he owns. This is done in the fall before hunting season. Using a helicopter, GPS and a computer, the biologist gives Whitehead a detailed description of how many deer are in each pasture. And more than that, the report includes how many does, fawns and bucks and even how many points the bucks have. The biologist then gives Whitehead a recommended number to kill from each pasture. Whitehead uses that information to determine how each pasture should be managed.

However, he only has control over the areas he reserves for guided hunts, not the lease hunts.

Whitehead says, "I give all the information to the lease hunters. Then after the season I ask for a kill record which includes how many deer were killed, how many of those were does, how many were bucks, the weight of each deer killed and their ages, which is real helpful to me and my management."

Whitehead adds, "I give them light suggestions. My rate (for leasing) is \$10 an acre and I don't want more

than one guy to 250 acres. So they pay enough they don't want to be told what to do."

Significant revenue

For a deer lease on Powell's ranch, the rate is around \$7 or \$8 an acre or lower, but he does not use improved genetics, which significantly lowers his costs. "We lease by the acre and some places are better than others. We do not have imported game, we don't have game that is extremely unusual. We have some excellent deer and turkey but we do not have imported game," he says.

For the most part, deer hunting rates are based on the size of the antlers, which can be measured using the Boone & Crockett (B&C) scoring system. Although it's important to keep in mind that separate records are kept for deer with improved genetics as opposed to strictly native deer. Still, some hunters will pay high dollar for a big buck, whether it's native or not.

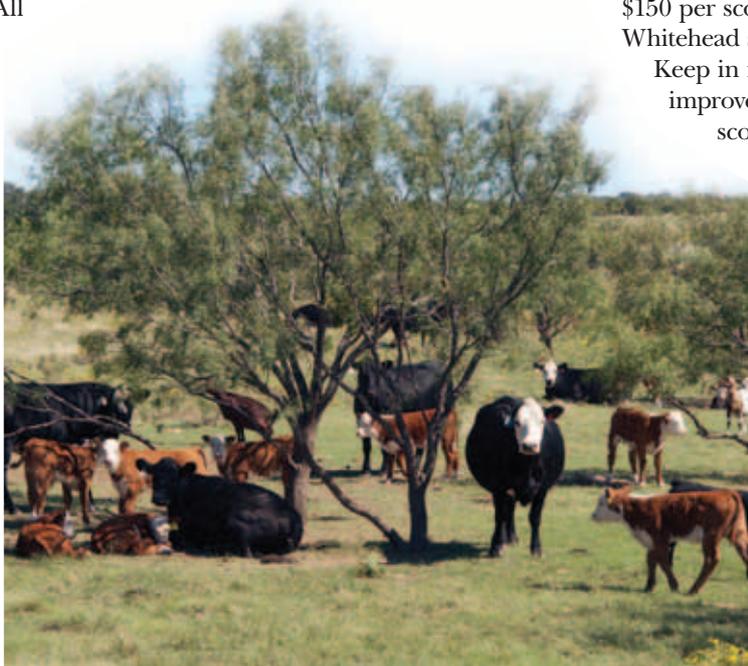
For example, Whitehead's guided hunts, most of which are in a high-fenced area, sell for \$3,700 for a four-day hunt, which includes meals and lodging on the ranch. On top of that is a substantial trophy fee if a large buck is killed. "I think it's \$150 per score point over 150 B&C," Whitehead says.

Keep in mind, some deer with improved genetics could easily score 200 or more — that's an expensive deer.

Multiply that by about 10 hunters a weekend and six or seven weekends during the season, and one can see there's a reason that Whitehead is a "control freak," as he describes it.

"It's tremendous control," Whitehead says. "A lot of those guided hunts are cull hunts for a certain fee, where they come in and we tell them which deer to kill.

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Cattle, like these on one of Whitehead's ranches, coexist happily with deer, even in high-fenced areas.

They can't just shoot any deer. We don't do any really big trophy hunts until well after the breeding season is under way so our older, bigger mature bucks can be the sires. Every little trick helps."

Plenty of deer are harvested by lease hunt as well. Whitehead estimates around 120-130 hunters seek deer through lease hunting on his ranches. Now, with lease hunting there's no 98% success rate like on Whitehead's guided hunts. However, a lot more than 120-130 deer are killed because many does are shot to help manage numbers.

Powell, too, estimates around 100-120 hunters are hunting on his leased areas opening weekend. That number will then decrease as hunters fill their tags. Still, many cattlemen are likely to think, "No way am I letting 120 people run around my ranch on one weekend!" Surprisingly, though, conflicts are rare.

"If you have a good understanding of the hunters and they know when you're going to be working cattle," Powell says, it's rarely a problem. "For instance if you are in a fall calving program you're going to be seeing the cattle every day feeding, and then you are going to be numbering the calves and registering them and that takes a certain amount of time in the pasture. But our cowboys know that hunting usually takes place in early morning or late afternoon so they're understanding also of the fact that hunters should be given some consideration. They're not very often disturbing one another."

Whitehead even runs commercial cows in his high-fenced area without any problems, he says. "The only problem I've had is there's got to be a good strong, stout pen around the feeder. If not, the cows will tear it down to get to the feeder and they'll eat about \$1,000 worth of feed in three minutes."

Cattle are primary

Cattle are still the primary businesses for these ranchers. Powell has a sizeable herd of

More than deer

While whitetail deer hunting in Texas is a large part of the economy, there are many other species of pursuit in the lone star state. Texas is such a large and diverse state there are seasons for all these species:

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| chachalaca | mule deer |
| common snipe | pronghorn antelope |
| dove | quail |
| duck | rabbits and hares |
| Eastern Turkey | sandhill crane |
| goose | Sora and Virginia Rails |
| King and Clapper Rails | Rio Grande turkey |
| javelina | squirrel |
| Lesser Prairie Chicken | teal |
| pheasant | woodcock |
| moorhens (Common Gallinules) and Purple Gallinules | |



registered Herefords from which he sells around 100-125 bulls every fall. He also has a crossbreeding program to produce top-quality black baldies that are sold as feds to the packer. Whitehead, too, has both commercial and registered cows from which he sells around 100 Hereford bulls a year and commercial crossbred females.

For Powell and Whitehead, it's worth it to add hunting to their enterprises. Even though most of the ranches in Texas offer hunting in some form or another, the demand from hunters is high. Powell says, "Primarily because they are occupants of large cities and they like to get out away from the crowds and enjoy a peaceful life for a few days."

Whitehead adds, "I've got third generation people on the lease hunts. They'll pass it down from generation to generation. Then, I've got a waiting list so for anyone that drops out I've got about a 15-person list of people looking for a deer lease."

What's more is these hunters are a captive audience to the ranching way of life. Powell says, "Hunting is a beneficial program. It allows the landowner to encourage good management and to inform those people who are not acquainted with ranches or ranch operations. It gives them a chance to learn of the need and necessity of producing food and fiber for the population. We need to educate our population a little better about why we're out here and what we provide." **HW**



The brush in the background does more than serve as a nice backdrop for this picture of a young Powell bull; it's critical for deer cover.