

Once the deer hunting season concludes, several decisions must be made, most important of which is whether to find another lease.

The answer to this question is challenging, but a few suggestions may assist you in the decision making process.

Sportsmen should be patient. The decision to relinquish what initially appeared to be a satisfactory lease should not be based on a single season. Locating optimum locations to hunt on any particular area takes time, particularly if the area is composed of several thousand acres. Based on my experience, hunters seldom know the lay of the land well enough to harvest the really big deer until their third year. Once they become familiar with the land and its occupants, they begin to place blinds, establish food plots, etc. in positions advantageous to both the hunter and the hunted.

Rainfall is critical for the production of nutritious forage required by deer. Nutrition equates to antler development. Even in deer herds supplemented with a high protein diet, average antler size in dry years does not equate to that realized in wet years. When rainfall occurs, however, is more important than how much is received.

For example, the average annual rainfall in Dimmit County is 14 inches. Over the last 21 years, I have recorded rainfall records from a low of eight inches to a high of 40 inches. However, there were years that received excessive amounts of rain, yet failed to yield the quality antlers expected. Why? Because of timing. Most of the rain fell outside the time deer needed it most, or in some instances, all in one month. In reality, 14 inches of rain can be more beneficial to antler growth when distributed equally throughout the year than a year experiencing 30 inches of rainfall occurring outside the critical spring antler development period. Thus the decision to remain on a lease can be

influenced by precipitation, fortifying the importance of maintaining rainfall records, so that its impact can be added to the equation.

Now, if you have been on a lease for an extended period of time and remain dissatisfied, it is time to move.

It is not difficult to locate a place to hunt, but not all landholdings offer all the desirable amenities. Thus it is advantageous to make a wish list that can be refined throughout the search.

For example, a year round lease is attractive because it affords sportsmen time outside the hunting season to conduct activities that are not only enjoyable but beneficial to the ranch and its occupants. Shredding, disking, planting food plots, even supplemental feeding are activities that are conducted outside of the hunting season. These tasks are often neglected by landowners simply because of their schedules not to mention cost. To a management-oriented group of hunters, these activities are considered collateral benefits. They are therapeutic, granting them a respite from the office and the rapid paced city life they endure daily. Sportsmen are more than willing to pay the additional cost, knowing that they get to participate in managing their own deer herd.

Choosing a lease is much like selecting a new pickup truck. They both offer the basics. But it's the add-ons that make one more attractive than the other. For example, any truck can deliver an occupant from point a to point b when it is dry, but in muddy conditions, a four-wheel drive vehicle is required. Drive over rocky country, and a much heavier duty truck elevated high off the ground facilitates movement. Every one of these additional traits represents an adjusted cost to the consumer. The same holds true for a hunting lease. Housing, electricity, and water are valuable amenities (add-ons) that add

to overall lease cost. Thus one must know what they are looking for in a lease, what the general market price should be, and what they are willing to spend.

Search criteria should be developed prior to reviewing potential leases. If you're simply looking for a piece of Texas real estate offering a getaway without much emphasis on deer antler quality, locating an affordable lease is relatively easy. There are many areas that provide an aesthetically pleasing environment though antler quality may be less than desirable, but the price is right.

If your objective is to hunt bucks exhibiting 160 or more inches of antler, you may need some deep pockets. Price is based on supply and demand, which is particularly evident on high quality open range land. High fences are rapidly usurping open rangeland, and as a result, the price to lease high end open range is escalating, not to mention less available.

When an attractive piece of real estate is located, its size and location plays a critical role in its value. A small land tract may be affordable, but not adequate in size to yield the caliber of bucks you are after. On the other hand, a 2,000-acre area may be adequate to yield a nice buck or two, but its price will be exorbitant.

Another consideration is the number of bucks you would like to shoot on an annual basis. With an excessive buck harvest, the genetic potential of the deer herd along with the nutritional status of the habitat is irrelevant because bucks will simply never reach their optimum antler-growing years of six or older when those desirable traits are exposed. In other words, deer must be managed.

Abused landholdings should not be overlooked because they often represent a lower entry fee. Savvy sportsmen actively search for characteristically "shot out parcels"

with the intent of developing their own quality deer herd. As long as quality habitat exists, leases can augment the production of trophy deer by managing for them. Thus, it's important to remember that the trophy deer do not have to exist when a lease is signed.

The advantage of obtaining an abused deer herd is affordability. The drawback is time to turn it around. Sportsmen must exercise an ultra conservative buck harvest the first few years to allow those older deer to develop. This costs money, but you are still hunting, and remember, you hunt to kill, but you don't have to kill to have hunted. It's a philosophy that has yielded some tremendous bucks for patient individuals.

In South Texas, a harvest of one trophy buck per 1,000 acres was once a general rule of thumb. I consider a harvest of 2,000 acres per buck more effective. Strict adherence to the 1,000 acres per buck rule is possibly the most affirmative and productive technique applied towards big buck production. I am totally convinced that if you do not have bucks dying from natural causes in the older age classes, you are not managing for optimal antler size. Thus, conservative buck harvesting practices are critical on any landholding if one wishes to at least have a chance at ever seeing one of those outstanding whitetails.

The acquisition of open range leases is becoming extremely challenging because they are highly sought after, particularly those large enough to support high quality bucks.

For those individuals disinterested in having their deer scored for the Boone and Crockett record book, high-fenced management buck hunts may be an affordable short-term alternative.

As antler size continues to increase on the older established high fenced hunting operations, the average size of rack acceptable to those individuals increases as well. The result is a surplus of mature bucks in the 130 to 140 range that normally occupy the highest percentage of the male segment of the population. Harvesting these surplus bucks by using hunters not only makes economical sense; it is the most ethical method to control this segment of the buck herd. Thus if there is a reason to get excited about high fences, it may be that they may provide affordable hunts for bucks in the future that would please a very high proportion of the hunting public.

Cost is always a factor. Don't expect to relocate to another ranch with larger deer at the same cost. Lease fees parallel the quality and availability of land. If you have a lease, review its other attributes such as location, housing, water, electricity, even aesthetic features such as serenity and beauty, before moving. Sometimes we focus so much on rack size we forget about the many other intangible features deer hunting affords us such as camaraderie around the campfire, or the simple fact that you can share the experience with your children and friends.

Treat a lease like a real estate purchase. A well-managed area with all the necessities including trophy deer is like a well-manicured piece of property with a value based on its image. Better the image, higher the price. Any real estate agent will tell you more money can be made by purchasing an old weathered ranch with little improvement because it can be fixed up with money saved on the initial purchase. A deer lease is no different except for the fact that once a trophy buck falls to your gun under your management, an exalted pride above and beyond that of simply taking someone else's

product occurs. The buck becomes something more than the last buck you shot but the buck you actually help create.

Captions for slides. All photos by Bob Zaiglin.

1. One alternative to our obsession with trophy deer is the availability of short-term affordable hunts for deer exhibiting less than desirable antler qualities.
2. Collateral benefits of a lease include quality family time outside the hunting season conducting activities like shed hunting, filling feeders, or simply spending a weekend at camp.
3. Spring turkey hunting is a most attractive feature of year round leases, a value that cannot be measured in inches of antler.
4. Hunting hogs while working on the camp outside the hunting season is one of the most overlooked benefits of a year round lease.