

As fluorescent-colored painted buntings called from atop the mesquite trees lining the small stock tank, pyroloxia fluttered low in the dense, thorny understory. Barn swallows cruised the water surface like kamikaze pilots, occasionally touching the surface as they zapped flying insects. Without a breeze, the water's surface was placid. Green heads of leopard frogs projected just above the algae-laden surface along the bank. It was a typical September evening deep in the brush country of South Texas, except for one new visitor—me.

Ensnared inside a makeshift ground blind constructed from a collection of huisache branches and buffle grass, I was awaiting the tank's largest visitor—whitetail deer.

With some shade afforded by a large umbrella-shaped huisache tree, I enjoyed some relief from the hot September sun. Fully clad in camo, I was positioned 20 yards from the shoreline affording my 400 mm Nikor camera lens an excellent opportunity to perform optimally when deer began to approach the water source.

Just before 7 p.m., a doe and two fawns visited the tank and I snapped a few shots of the fawns as they playfully dashed back and forth across the murky, shallow end of the tank. Moments later, a tall-tined eight-pointer appeared at the brush line pausing to watch the youngsters before cautiously approaching the receding shore line for a drink. The soft evening sun radiated from its gray velvet-covered antlers in a silver-colored sheen. As I collected some unique images of the tall-tined buck, I neglected to see additional deer appear at the brush line, and before I knew it, the tank was inundated by deer.

After shooting five rolls of Kodachrome, the sun began to dip below the taller mesquite. Because my film of choice is slow speed for quality images, much light is required. So once the sunlight faded, my filming was over, but not my observation time. Actually, deer observations are inversely proportional to sunlight. The further the sun dropped, the more deer I saw. By dark I packed up my gear and headed home where I prepared negatives and recorded my observations.

Summer in South Texas can be unbearable, but for the deer advocate willing to put up with a little discomfort, the heat affords them a window of opportunity to observe deer. For me, the ability to observe not only deer but a variety of wildlife along the often eroded, sparsely vegetated clay banks of South Texas water catchments (tanks) has always been extremely enjoyable and educational.

Managers and sportsmen spend thousands of dollars annually on aerial deer surveys yet spend little time observing deer in late summer when additional herd information can be obtained at a price affordable to everyone—free.

Why this opportunity is overlooked lies in the fact that most of us are attached to our comfortable, artificially-cooled environment and neglect to get out.

Obviously, excessive high temperatures can be debilitating, but they can be alleviated somewhat by establishing a blind in the shade; plus, late evening hours are characterized by a slight drop in the mercury reduced further by the common southeasterly breeze off the water's surface.

Not only is the temporal inhabitation of a shaded area near a tank physically bearable, it is more important mentally relaxing. The ubiquitous sounds of everyday life are temporarily replaced by vocalizations of a plethora of birds, howls of coyotes, croaks

of the bullfrog, and the shrill of tree frogs. It's a place to get away from it all, yet remain close to that sport we cherish, focusing our attention on whitetail deer.

During late summer, Texas deer hunters learn quickly where deer concentrate. It wouldn't take long for an individual to relinquish a position in an unairconditioned deer blind elevated over a vast expanse of brush in an attempt to spot a buck, unless, of course, a stock tank is located in the central portion of the area.

Water is of paramount importance when it comes to the welfare of life, human or wild. Just think about the anxiety that develops when the Edwards Aquifer drops below the basic accommodation level. Panic seems to override clear and objective rationalization augmented further by front-page headlines addressing the "water issue". However, in time, the situation is abated as water is rationed out with all participants receiving an equivalent rate.

This is not the case in the wild. The last evaporating pool of water in a stock tank is not overlooked by a doe in order for her fawns to obtain the remainder. No way, that is not how Nature works. The doe will deplete the very last drop with no altruistic motive other than for her own survival, negatively impacting her fawns along with other animals in the area which must migrate to other surrounding water holes, if they exist, or perish.

How much water is required is a good question, but the fact is there's never enough water. Humans can develop artificial water resources where they feel it is most desirable, and its benefits often outweigh the cost.

Not only quantity, but distribution of water is critical to wildlife and domestic stock. Equally distributed water not only affords all occupants an ample amount, but in

the case of deer and domestic stock, it disperses the pressure applied by these animals on the habitat, affording highly preferred plants an opportunity to regenerate.

The ultimate time to view deer around water is late August through September. At this time, water reserves reach their lowest level and temperatures their highest, forcing deer to concentrate around fewer water holes. It is also a time when deer become more tolerant of humans because their demand for water is one of survival, not luxury, a fact most understood by coyotes, which also concentrate around water holes in order to increase their efficiency as deer predators.

Accumulating deer population data is another reason to observe deer at these virtual oases located in the middle of the South Texas desert-like environment. Not only can one obtain information on herd dynamics such as fawn survival and sex ratio, but antler characteristics as well. At no time outside the rut will mature bucks venture from their impenetrable hideouts as often. They are especially forced out from their protective zones during severe dry periods like the drought we are presently experiencing. Thus, one is capable of previewing a good representation of the present antler quality. In addition, you never know when that buck of your dreams will show up, giving you the initial advantage of knowing a great prospect exists while fueling your desire to pursue the animal later in the hunting season.

Acquiring deer herd information is important, but the major reason I spend my late summer evenings around water is to film wildlife. Not only is it challenging, but very entertaining, because you never know what the animals will do, and sometimes they allow you to capture unique behavior on film.

Selecting an area to observe deer at a water source is not difficult. Some of the largest-racked bucks I have ever filmed were watering right within the confines of ranch headquarters. Deer using local water sites are often accustomed to people, simply because they see people often, affording excellent opportunities to capture them on film. However, I like setting up on isolated water areas in hopes of seeing those bucks that are virtual recluses. The simple fact that I never know what will show up next keeps me coming back.

The watering site, whether a stock tank or trough, is of no consequence. I prefer to film from small, extremely recessed stock tanks because deer are forced further out into the open, allowing lighter, in turn higher quality photographs. Deer utilize water troughs as well. A distinct advantage of filming at a water trough is that you can focus your lens on the portion of the trough a deer will most likely drink, saving precious time by having the animal in focus when it arrives.

Concealment is critical. I wear camouflage, including gloves and a head net, plus I build a natural looking brush blind within 25 yards of my objective. Deer approaching water troughs exercise more caution than deer entering the larger space around a stock tank. Thus, you must keep movement to a minimum, and a blind helps conceal movement. A good tip is to take out two unexposed rolls of film and have them laid out within easy grasp when needed. This will give you the opportunity to reload swiftly while you have a desirable deer within filming distance. Another tip is to carry an extra camera loaded with film to save not only time, but eliminate the noise of reloading near the subject. A cable release is also advisable because deer are quick to detect the ubiquitous sound of a motor drive.

Although observing and filming deer over that favorite watering hole is enjoyable, it is one practice that should be conducted with concern for the welfare of deer.

For example, if only one source of water is available to deer, avoid disturbing the animals. In other words, alternate film sites or avoid visiting the same tank every day, because before long, the disturbance will discourage deer from returning to the water. Too much human activity will force animals to investigate other water sites or force them to return after dark.

Visiting a water hole on a sultry South Texas summer evening is one way to capitalize on extreme temperatures and enjoy whitetail deer at the same time. Whether it is a unique image or a super buck you are after, late summer represents a shallow window of opportunity to enjoy and learn more about our most popular big-game animal—the whitetail deer.

Captions for slides. All photos by Bob Zaiglin.

1. Water is the paramount ingredient to survival of whitetails in the harsh, unforgiving environment of the “monte”.
2. The observation of a trophy-class buck at a water hole prior to the season adds impetus to the winter’s hunt.
3. Knowledge of a buck or two located at that certain water hole can make the difference when it comes to relocating that animal during the hunt.
4. Savvy deer hunters like the predator coyote know where to find deer in hot, dry conditions.
5. At no time outside the rut can more bucks be observed than in late summer around water holes.
6. Unlike man, deer do not conserve water and will follow a dwindling water supply throughout the late summer period.
7. Mature bucks exercise more caution when visiting man-made water sources, but utilize them readily.
8. Observing whitetails at water is an unquestionably must-do activity during the late summer for all deer enthusiasts.