

Whitetail University

As the first cool front of the year arrived in the brush country of South Texas, a young college student ensconced in an elevated deer blind was living his dream. With the sudden drop in temperature, a surge in deer activity occurred as older, recalcitrant bucks began to appear crossing the semi-open chaparral. The youngster estimated each deer's age and antler size in inches and jotted notes for later reference. After glassing several mature bucks exhibiting ten or more points and scoring in excess of 150 inches, the young man's excitement level escalated in anticipation of seeing one of the old monarchs known to frequent the area. As the sun dipped below the pastel, orange-colored evening horizon, a buck appeared 100 yards from his position. The large, dark-bodied buck with jet black, damp hocks appeared and rapidly vanished back into the sea of brush, but not before the young man could distinguish 16 points on massive, wide sweeping beams. A rack of this magnitude does not require much time to critique before a decision to shoot is made, but the young man was not hunting. He was scouting the area for a client who would be arriving in a few days.

The harvest of a predetermined segment of the standing crop, in this case, "deer", is one of the most fascinating phases of wildlife management. The student was working on the ranch as a wildlife intern. It was a vital part of his learning experience which would eventually lead to a career in wildlife management. His field activities included much more than scouting; he was involved with food plot development, estimating vegetation abundance and utilization by deer as well as identification of the species making up the vegetative component of the ranch. He also participated in habitat manipulation practices employing techniques such as prescribed burning, surveying

wildlife populations, data collection, and of course, participating in the most exciting part of the program—hunting—all of which he studied in the classroom at SWTJC in Uvalde.

Guiding an individual to a deer is not difficult, particularly in Texas where an estimated 4,000,000 deer occur. But to harvest the correct animal takes patience, and above all, skill. The guide must not only know how to locate the particular animal but be proficient at estimating its age and antler size, a skill that requires practice.

On intensively managed lands, the harvest is composed of only those bucks satisfying predetermined criteria. At one time sportsmen would shoot the first nice buck observed, but that is changing. Sportsmen have become more discretionary as to what they shoot. Many of them have at least an idea, sometimes exaggerated, as to what would satisfy them. Therefore, the biologist must have knowledge of overall herd quality and composition and know what should be removed. This is satisfied by obtaining a good estimate of the mature buck component.

For example, if 100 bucks are observed on a survey and 20% of them are five to six years old, no more than 20 mature bucks should be removed. If harvest exceeds the recommended quota, younger bucks are subject to removal prior to maturity “their optimal antler-growing years”. In some cases, managers recommend harvesting only 50% of the mature trophy-racked bucks. In this case, only ten trophy bucks would be harvested with the remainder consisting of mature bucks demonstrating undesirable phenotypic (visible) characteristics. Based on these criteria, the student’s scouting activity becomes even more important because there is little room for error. A professional guide’s objective is to satisfy hunter and harvest criteria simultaneously.

Unlike bass fishing, there is no such thing as shoot and release. Once that trigger is pulled, the decision, right or wrong, is final.

Biologists depend on data collected on population surveys in conjunction with harvest statistics such as age, weight, and gross score of the antlers in inches, if male, of the animals removed. The consolidation and analysis of this information insures the manager of making the correct decision.

Scouting and harvesting the appropriate buck is one of the most enjoyable aspects of deer management, but in order to become a professional wildlife manager, much more is involved. Individuals with the goal to become experts in this arena must make several choices in order to reach their objective.

The first choice is to select a college that has a wildlife management program in place. Texas colleges offering degree programs in wildlife include Texas Tech University, Texas A&M University, Texas A&M-Kingsville, Sul Ross University, and Texas State University. All of these are four-year programs leading to a B.S. degree with an option to become a certified wildlife biologist by The Wildlife Society.

For those interested in a two-year technical program, Southwest Texas Junior College in Uvalde now offers an Applied Science degree in wildlife management. The program began in the fall of 2005, representing the first and only technical two-year program offered in the state. One of the most unique locations in the state to study wildlife, Uvalde represents the crossroads separating the oak laden, river-rich Balcones escarpment to the north with the low-lying buck-rich brush country to the south, and the Chihuahuan desert to the west. With species ranging from whitetail, mule deer, and antelope to the rare golden-cheeked warbler and black-capped vireo, a degree at SWTJC-

Uvalde presents students with a rich diversity of wildlife to study. The region is as attractive to naturalists in search of rare birds, amphibians, and plants as it is to sportsmen searching for a trophy buck. A variety of exotic occupants such as axis deer, blackbuck antelope, scimitar-horned Oryx, zebra, even cape buffalo, afford students a unique opportunity to observe and study exotic animals, some of which are rare, even endangered in their homelands.

As lead wildlife instructor at SWTJC's new wildlife program, I will afford students practical management skills that I have acquired over the last 30 years as a certified wildlife biologist in private land management.

Courses will include introduction to wildlife management, range and wildlife ecology, wildlife conservation, and wildlife management techniques, all of which can transfer to Texas A&M-Kingsville towards a four-year bachelor's degree.

Additional courses include wildlife identification, wildlife outdoor recreation and management, wildlife preserve management, and wildlife propagation, handling and management.

Courses were designed to meet the challenges presented to future wildlife technicians by the consolidated effort of professionals recognized in the profession.

Wildlife identification is a course dedicated to the field identification of animals, birds, and insects, and their importance to the ecosystem. In the Wildlife Outdoor Recreation and Management course, students will be introduced to techniques applicable to the outdoor recreation industry such as booking clients, entertaining guests, liability, safety concerns, and communication skills. Ethical standards concerning the use of

natural resources will be an important part of the course. Students will also acquire both photographic skills and outdoor writing skills.

The course in Wildlife Preserve Management will cover both conventional and nonconventional wildlife management techniques such as but not limited to deer management on open range and high fenced operations. Topics will include determining and conducting harvest, identification of vegetation preferred by wildlife, identification of common parasites and diseases, acquisition of legal permits required for particular harvest objectives, and a thorough knowledge of the advantages and disadvantages of game deterrent fences. Students will also learn how to collect, analyze, and consolidate data into an annual report. Mapping habitat with state-of-the-art GIS equipment will also be practiced. The Wildlife Propagation and Handling course will provide students the necessary skills for raising both big game and game birds.

Course work will be complemented by visits to recognized wildlife management areas to observe the theory studied in the classroom as applied in real life situations. Students will be able to participate in some of the most exciting techniques employed in the profession. Some of these will include capturing deer with the aid of helicopters, bottle raising fawns in deer husbandry operations, and prescribed fire.

Two courses will require students to work with private and state wildlife professionals in the field to obtain hands-on practical experience.

The wildlife management program at SWTJC will provide a practical hands-on experience in the field of wildlife management. The objective is to provide well-trained wildlife technicians capable of satisfying the demand for an increasing number of technical wildlife management positions throughout the state. The first and only junior

college in the state offering a two-year technical degree in wildlife management, SWTJC in Uvalde may be the place you want to be to begin a challenging and rewarding career in wildlife management, or simply enrich your outdoor experience by understanding our unique wild surroundings.