The Benefits of Whitetail Cooperatives

Situated up in a huge live oak tree in central Texas, the hunter leaned to his right, facing north to adjust his safety harness when a chilly breeze hit his face. The northern horizon was inundated by cold dark blue clouds. Before he could zip his lightweight jacket, the temperature plummeted to an uncomfortable low.

At any other time the hunter would have descended the tree for warmer clothing, but this was the peak of the rut. He was certain the sudden drop in temperature would augment buck activity. Minutes later, the tumultuous clouds were overhead when a doe stepped into a clearing, nervously looked back, and rapidly moved off into the cedar-laden understory. Almost instantly, a 10-point buck appeared, nose to the ground, in pursuit of the doe.

Classifying the buck as a 2-year-old, the discretionary hunter decided to pass on the shot. As the anxiety of the moment wore off, the hunter felt really good about his decision until the mid-morning silence was shattered by the crack of a rifle not far from his blind. He immediately descended the tree and walked some 250 yards to the lease boundary where, on the other side of the rusty barbed-wire fence, he saw several individuals learning over the buck he had just passed up.

Scenarios like this are common across deer country, particularly on small land tracts, but it happens on large landholdings as well. There's nothing wrong with it, particularly if the fellow on the other side of the fence is a youngster collecting his first buck. But to a hunter practicing quality deer management, witnessing a buck he passed up only to be shot moments later is understandably discouraging.

How can this situation be resolved? Some promulgate the construction of game-proof fences. Yes, a fence could prevent this situation, but it is not the ultimate answer.

High fences can negatively impact fair chase on small acreages. Hunters in some instances become so familiar with the lay of the land that their ability to locate a particular buck, particularly during the rut, is reduced to an event less than challenging.

More importantly, high fencing small landho9ldings, particularly void of adequate escape cover, erodes away the anticipation of observing new or different deer. It is this anticipation of not knowing what can show up next that makes deer hunting so fascinating.

A Better Solution

Possibly the best way to enhance antler quality on small landholdings is to consolidate adjoining landowners. After all, a healthy deer herd is a byproduct of cooperation between hunters and landowners, regardless the size of a landholding.

Climatic impact on deer populations is obvious, but even ideal weather conditions cannot rectify poor management decisions. For example, a group of hunters can accomplish a recommended doe harvest, but its benefit cannot be realized if an excessive number of bucks are harvested simultaneously.

There's no advantage for one landowner to establish a deer management program if adjacent landowners do not adhere to the same principles. Cooperation is a basic precept to establishing a deer management program—whether it's on a large area of 10,000 acres, or a small parcel of 300 acres. Nowhere, however, is lack of cooperation more debilitating to a deer herd than on small acreages.

A wildlife cooperative engaging several landholdings with owners and hunters willing to work together to improve the quality of their deer herd is one critically important piece of that puzzle called deer management.

A wildlife cooperative can be defined in this text as the event when two or more parties agree on a common objective and work together to achieve it. The goal of a cooperative does not have to be the production of trophy deer, for there are a variety of objectives. Participants coordinate their efforts by setting guidelines as to rack size, particularly point count and age of bucks allowed to be shot, while controlling the doe population to enhance and sustain the quality of the herd.

The genetic potential of the bucks in the herd comes closer to reality when you establish "edge" habitat. This can be done by shallow disking or shredding native habitat, developing food plots and creating water sources.

Cooperatives in Action

Hunting clubs, popular in the Piney Woods of East Texas, have demonstrated just what a cooperative can achieve. However, this type of association is actually a group effort amongst lessees on a particular land tract. Wildlife cooperatives are different in that they originate from one landholding and expand with the cooperation of adjacent landowners.

A wildlife co-op's major advantage lies in the fact that it can originate anywhere at any time with no restriction to size.

For example, if you hunt a 50-acre parcel, there is little you can do to improve the deer herd. Deer quality on an area that small is dependent on adjacent landholdings. However, by forming a wildlife cooperative with 10 similar tracts, you would have 500

acres to work with. This acreage, under one management scheme, would augment the probability of increasing the number of bucks entering the older age classes, which would be reflected by an increase in antler size. With success, the co-op would hypothetically attract additional members and increase in size.

This sounds great on paper, but the ability to consolidate the efforts of many landowners is challenging. That's why wildlife management is actually people management. The deer might be dependent on several uncontrollable weather factors, but the infrastructure to a sound, successful deer management program is the people involved.

Trying to Get Along

Neighbors seldom agree on how a particular land tract should be managed; if they did, there would be no need for fences, high or low. However, when people decide to consolidate their efforts, the results can be impressive and rewarding.

Organizing a co-op is sometimes difficult because—in our fast-paced lifestyles—we seldom find time to learn who our neighbors are, let alone get to really know them. This is where a certified biologist plays a vital role as a liaison between potential parties. Most state game agencies afford landowners technical support. This might be the most appropriate channel to follow when investigating one's desire to begin a co-op.

New Ideas on Old Roads

The concept of deer management cooperatives isn't new. Wildlife cooperatives have been in existence for many years. According to Texas Parks and Wildlife figures, there were two management cooperatives in South Central Texas in 1990, increasing to 27 by 1998.

According to Bob Carroll, district leader of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, 151 wildlife cooperatives encompassing 1.84 million acres existed in Texas in 2003. In fact, in Carroll's region alone, co-ops made up 1,073,566 acres.

The most publicized Texas wildlife co-op includes 2,500 landowners and encompasses 458,000 acres in six counties. The size and scope of this co-op is not, however, its most impressive feature. Its most unique characteristic is the desire and commitment of all participants toward achieving their goal: to improve deer herd quality, particularly bucks.

The group solicited the help of Texas Parks and Wildlife via Carroll to implement antler restrictions requiring a buck to have one unbranched antler, a minimum inside spread of 13 inches, or six points or more on one antler to be legally harvested. The program was initiated in 2002 as part of a three-year study.

Based on harvest data collected by biologists from these counties during the 1990s, yearling bucks made up 52 percent of the buck harvest, compared to 36 percent during the first year of the co-op, then dropping to 28 percent in 2003. Also during the 1990s, 2 ½-year-old bucks made up 27 percent of the harvest versus 16 percent and 17 percent, respectively, during the first two years of the project. The 3 ½-year-old bucks, representing 16 percent of the harvest in the 1990s, increased by 9 percent (25 percent total) in 2002 and 17 percent (33 percent total) in 2003. Uniquely, 4 ½-year-old bucks increased from 4 percent to 23 percent and 22 percent during the first two seasons under antler regulations. It is obvious that the discretionary harvest exercised by the members is allowing bucks to enter the older age classes.

Conclusion

The most important point concerning wildlife cooperatives is that hunters are taking the initiative to manage their own renewable resources. This new attitude is critical to the status of not only our deer herds, but of the hunters' image, particularly in the public's eye. It is also important to point out that a co-op can work as well in the Northeast as it can in the deep Southwest.

All wildlife co-ops should be applauded for their commitment toward a common goal. They should also be commended for acquiring the assistance of professionals towards that end. Remember, the hunter is the ultimate decision maker—every time you pull that trigger, you make the ultimate management decision.

Deer and Deer Hunting, December, 2004