

2SHORTGRASS.DOC

Habits and habitat have changed in the hunters and the hunted around Mertzon from a couple of decades past.

Legislation, including severe felonies for headlighting, reformed a long line of poachers and night sportsmen. The end of pasturing milk cows, kid ponies and dogie lambs changed the two-section town site into a whitetail game preserve.

Brushy vacant lots became daytime bed grounds and hideouts for the deer. In the evening on to dawn, the herds crossed streets and alleys as casually as they once walked down canyons and creek banks. New menus expanded their appetites to exotic tea roses, English ivy and previous inedibles like pine boughs, lily stalks and dipper gourds.

Vegetable garden rows turned into trails trampled by cloven hooves. Longterm squash and okra farmers let their patches go back to nature. The most tenacious of gardeners grew weary of fences mashed down to the ground.

The invasion wrecked pet food and bird feeders. Permanent residents like the historic pigeons on the courthouse yard and the woodpeckers down in the city park began to lose weight from the exertion of foraging the townsite. Jot down somewhere in your book, "If times become too hard for pigeons and woodpeckers to exist in the wild,

don't circle the town to learn why, circle the town to find the shortest way to leave town."

House cats and lap dogs suffered less from direct competition. Pets today in Mertzon eat and sleep indoors with the owners in the way of the modern world everywhere. The same must be true of the children. On walks in Mertzon, the only kids visible other than the little ones wrestling and bucking at recess on the school grounds are the big ones climbing through a car door to rush off in a teenage haze, steering new flashy metal in a rumble of smoke.

The whole scene departed from the natural state. The railroad sign at the crossing going to the river lost paint from being a horn rub. Loose gray hairs caught on yard gates and fences. Old flowerbeds looked like sheep trails leading to water.

Deer out in the pastures changed, too. Hombres operating excavators tumbling brush reported brazen does and aggressive bucks following the machines to beat the livestock to the grass uncovered underneath the fallen bushes. The full definition of "sack broke" impacted once the new-age deer started following the feed wagons all winter in a high run to beat the woolies and the hollow horns to the feed grounds. Hands no longer bothered to report that the old doe coming to feed in the Hour Pasture

brought in a set of twins yesterday. Reports, if any, centered an inquiry on how many doe permits the ranch has for the season, instead of blubbering about that ol' doe being such a good mother, or that little ol' spike buck being so cute.

All was mighty different three decades ago. The county road paralleling the railroad right-of-way going through the old ranch reflected in beer bottles spread into amber arrays off the roadbed. Spent brass .30-30 cartridges mounded into piles from emptied clips. Blood, big blood spots of gore and wet, wrinkled hides, told the rest of the story.

The Big Boss' range hogs in the railroad right-of-way took the pressure off the deer kill, once the sausage making season in the county opened after frost. The Boss gave away more hogs than he ever shipped. He expanded his hospitality to allow town people cutting winter wood off the ranch to include the pleasure of stealing one of his shoats on the way home to fatten for winter meat. The Boss is still popular among small elements around town.

Now and then at the bank, one of the fastest headlight shots to ever live in the county comes in on my visits. In his prime, he could get off a shot before the other hunters were able to see the target, or raise their gun barrels.

Be impolite to ask him whether his two sons are hunters. Inquire if they can shoot under light from the side door of a pickup with an old .30-30 saddle carbine aimed by a rear sight so shallow the v-notch is barely perceptible to the naked eye like their ol' dad.

Last season, I reported a citizen put up a deer blind over on the south side of town. At the time, I thought the effort was because he liked to hunt. Now, however, I suspect he erected the blind to build a political base to win a county office.

I don't miss the old days of wild nocturnal hunts, yet the time may come when we have to increase the shooting hours to protect our bermuda grass turf.