

28SHORT.DOC

Two ranches in Irion County, maybe three, stocked a small amount of whitetail deer in 1940s. Much earlier, Grandfather Noelke kept a few does and a buck penned in a high fenced trap behind his barn. No such thing existed as hunting leases. The first deer killed on the old ranch had metal tags in their ears designating Cherry Springs as their point of origin.

Along during the drouth of the 50's, deer increased around Mertzon, especially on the ungrazed townsite and up Spring Creek on a vacated cattle ranch. However, the screwworm program in 1961 soon caused deer to spread all over the shortgrass country. Out west, where deer survived the settlement of the lands, the black tail, or mule deer also increased. Deer were always plentiful west of the Pecos River. The Big Boss and some of his cronies leased a place south of Marfa years before commercial hunting reached our country. Charging to hunt was slow catching on, especially among the oldtimers. Shooting doves or deer were looked on as base hospitality to offer your city friends.

Nowadays the redcaps swarm into the ranching communities in the fall. Weeks before the regular season, bow hunters show up wearing camouflage costumes and draw black rings around their eyes and mouths like Halloween goblins. Before opening day, the next onslaught hits to bait feeder pens with yellow corn and high-priced protein blacks. (Tip: To avoid paying \$185 a ton for number two

shelled corn, buy number two cans of creamed style corn at the grocery store. Save empty cans for targets.) Landowners pocketing the final payment of the leases are hard to tell from feed dealers meeting the demand in marked-up sacked goods. Merchants and hamburger and chili joints delight at the freewheeling trade of the big holiday. And our newest rail service, the Southern Orient, could not piggyback all the rolling stock and mobile homes being towed to the camps.

Outdoor writers claim 15 million hunters are licensed in the United States. In Texas, sales of 48,000 non-resident permits put the state's numbers over a million hunters. If these pundits of antlers and turkey beards are correct, Central Texas must be a free zone. After the mid part of October, small towns like Brady and Mason have nearly that many pickups pulling flatbeds, circling the courthouse square. The traffic isn't as upsetting as the way the citizens change during deer season. Even where folks know me they are so exhausted from jerking the caps off beer bottles and dealing hamburgers off their arms, they snap off directions to the restroom like they lived in the Bronx.

Another reason I take exception to the inconvenience is our operation has plenty of game, but only short-term hunting prospects. I don't know what's wrong. Nowhere in the West are the skies as star filled to camp under than on the big plateau at the ranch. Coyotes howl and the great horned owls hoot in the stillness. The native pecan trees Mother planted around the house attract plenty of fox squirrels and

bandit-faced raccoons. Porcupines gnawing on the hackberry trees leave exciting horn rubs all along the draws. Turkey feathers accumulate every spring after the gobblers migrate through to Devil's River and Spring Creek. The game census shows seven does and five bucks need to be harvested off the ranch every season, or enough hunting for 12 guns. But I can't seem to generate any interest for a season lease, and to lease by the day, I have to rent movies to finish their afternoons.

The way out, I think, is to organize a program similar to the one doctors invented when they thought up HMOs. Our outfit can specialize in the esoteric, like stalking prairie dog towns and still hunting around badger dens. Thrown together with the ranches having deer runs and turkey roosts, we'd have a full menu for any type hunter.

A fellow named Charlie Scruggs wrote a book on the history of the screwworm eradication program in the 1960s. Mr. Scruggs, you may remember, was a prominent farm journalist and rancher. He highlighted the big contributors and noted how many of us paid in at 20 cents a head on sheep and four bits a head on cattle to share half of the expense of distributing sterile flies with the U.S. government and later with the Republic of Mexico.

Seems like we herders always manage to fall out of the limelight. More is heard every day of new environmental groups and vigorous animal rights people on a grand mission to save the world. But I don't think I've ever seen a word

about how we restored the whitetail deer in our part of
Texas.