

Bucks should look good, that is if they show up for hunters

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If a few things align correctly, and that is always a big if, this could be one of those years when Texas deer hunters bring in lots of trophy bucks.

Although the Texas summer was, well, a Texas summer, it was not bad enough to offset the good start to antler growth in the late winter and spring. Because of that, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department biologists across the state are predicting above-average antler quality this season that opens Nov. 4 statewide.

Of course with the good always comes the bad, and this year that means a bumper acorn crop in many areas that is going to keep some deer away from feeders, at least early. Adding to that were the September rains, which will have winter wheat crops sprouting and pulling deer into the fields.

“I would anticipate the bucks to demonstrate their full potential in antler development. With reports that I have gotten, plus my own visual observation ... all deer seem to look healthy and in good condition,” said Johnny Arredondo, TPWD wildlife biologist from Kerrville.

His sentiments were echoed in the South Texas brush country and to the east in the Post Oak and Pineywoods regions.

“Overall I would say antler development is average to slightly above average depending on exactly where you fell on the rainfall totals,” said David Veale, regional biologist for South Texas.

“I believe we will observe above-average antler quality this year, primarily due to timely spring and summer rains the past three years. Some of the camera survey data we have received from landowners suggests that antler quality on mature deer is exceptional,” added John Silovsky, acting regional biologist for the Post Oak and Pineywoods regions.

The same reports are coming in the Cross Timbers and Oak Prairies regions of the state.

Arredondo said that while the Hill Country’s fawn crop may be down from last year’s by from 80 to 100 percent, there was still enough fawn survival to maintain a population that biologists consider too high.

The biologist said much of the Edwards Plateau had good rainfall into summer and then began getting rains again in mid-September that should produce fall forbs.

“With the recent rainfall, I would predict that we will be going into a good fall and hope to get more moisture during the winter months to assist bucks during the rut season,” Arredondo said.

He added that portions of the region should have good mast crops that could keep deer from feeders.

One change in the region is that hunters in portions of Bandera, Medina and Uvalde counties are required to take deer to mandatory Chronic Wasting Disease check stations in Hondo or Tarpley (https://tpwd.texas.gov/publications/pwdpubs/media/pwd_bk_w7000_1942.pdf).

South Texas hunters will have to deal once again with the loss of the 2011 fawn crop. Those bucks would be some of the top-end trophies this season.

“The loss of the 2011 fawn crop continues to impact mature bucks, but my guys are seeing good numbers of mature and even post-mature bucks on aerial surveys right now,” Veale said of the region.

The biologist said after a good winter and spring the region dried out quickly, resulting in a smaller fawn crop.

It only recently started getting rain, making it hard on bowhunters and early hunters using Managed Lands Deer permits.

In East Texas, hunters may benefit from last year when harvest numbers were down.

“Hunting was tough last year due to weather and ample mast production. Carryover should be good, which will add to the quality of deer seen this year,” Silovsky noted.

He added that while East Texas also lost a fawn crop in 2011 it wouldn't have the same impact it will in other areas of the state where management allows them to age more.

“We are happy to see 3.5-year-old deer at the locker plant. A 6.5-year-old deer is a rarity for East Texas, drought or not. Fawn recruitment is poor throughout the deer range here, averaging 25 percent or less, mostly due to limited fawning cover, even in good years. So trying to identify a missing age class can be difficult,” Silovsky explained.

The biologist said with education, antler restrictions and more antlerless deer harvest, that age structure is improving in East Texas, but it is still hard for hunters to let a good young buck to walk for fear someone else on the lease or a neighboring property will shoot it.

Hunters throughout East Texas may face the same issues they did a year ago.

“Weather and the mast crop can greatly influence hunter observations/harvest. It looks like we are going to have another decent mast crop. What's good for deer is generally bad for the deer hunter,” Silovsky said.

In the Cross Timbers region of North Central Texas, hunters should also be looking at average to above-average quality this season.

The Cross Timbers region is unique because it has smaller landholdings to the east and larger ranches to the west.

“As you move west of a Brownwood-to-Wichita Falls line you see significantly larger ranches, lower hunting pressure, and thus more bucks making it to maturity. That's not to say that there aren't some really nice deer taken every year in our eastern counties from well-managed properties. Wildlife management associations in our southeastern counties also help to promote a more well-balanced age structure,” said Kevin Mote, Cross Timbers regional biologist.

Mote said after a dry summer the region did get rain in August and September and that wheat sprouts followed.

“Combine that with what is shaping up to be a decent acorn crop may make hunting conditions a little more challenging, but it will also put those deer in better shape going into the rut and winter. That means more deer making it to next year ... a year older, wiser and hopefully more inches of antler material,” Mote said.

Just over a month ago there was concern about the impact Hurricane Harvey flooding might have in the Oak Prairies region. But in regards to deer it seems limited.

“Right now, I don’t have any evidence that the flooding negatively impacted the deer population significantly,” said TPWD regional biologist David Forrester. “We know we lost cattle and so you would assume you lost some deer as well. We have had reports of dead deer here and there, but not significant numbers. The surveys I’ve seen pre- and post-Harvey events haven’t changed a lot either. However, these surveys are going to be from areas that weren’t as flooded as others. Because it happened late in the fawning season, I think most fawns were big enough, they could move with the adults and stay out of harm’s way.”

Forrester said the flooding could have a bigger impact on hunters.

“I would also anticipate a lot of hunters are possibly going to get later starts to hunting this year. A bunch of properties in the Brazos, San Bernard and Colorado river bottoms were inundated, and feeders, deer stands and camp houses were impacted. Add to this that some of these hunters-landowners’ personal homes and properties were impacted, so the recreational property or recreational aspect of a property may take a back seat to other concerns,” Forrester said.

Forrester said antler quality is expected to be average to above average, but suggests hunters in flooded areas pay attention to deer numbers and if they notice a major reduction to back off their harvest.

“Hunters may also need to give displaced animals time to move back into country that was underwater for a decent time. Remember too that those areas have experienced a major disturbance, which is negative in the short term, but creates an environment for new growth and successional growth, which is a positive in the longer term,” Forrester said.

The general season runs through Jan. 7 in the North Zone and Jan. 21 in the South.