

# RANCHING *Wildlife*

## Texas White-Tailed Deer — 2017 Hunting Forecast



During most summers, I take a short break and head to Colorado, Wyoming, or somewhere out west to enjoy a respite from the hot South Texas temperatures. Of the 16- to 18-hour trip, about 10 of that is just traveling through Texas. That long stretch of travel from South Texas through the Panhandle gives me a chance see the range and habitat conditions from one end of the state to the other.

Those habitat conditions, along with deer population and harvest data from past seasons, provide enough information to make an educated prediction about the upcoming deer hunting season.

In short summary, I'm expecting the 2017 season to be an average year for Texas hunters in terms of the quality of animals taken and average-to-above-average as far as the number of deer harvested.

This year started off with good winter and early spring rains, which resulted in an excellent crop of cool season weeds and early spring greenup of shrubs throughout the state.

Those great habitat conditions early in the year provided a solid foundation for deer to recover lost body weight as result of winter stress/rut and set the stage for good antler development for the upcoming season.

Unlike the previous 2 years, where widespread consistent rain and good habitat conditions persisted through the summer for much the state, 2017 saw dry weather patterns take hold in May and continue into early

August. The drier conditions late in the season will likely have some impact on the final stages of antler development and possibly on fawn production, but hunters should still expect a good hunting season.

Table 1. Twelve-year average estimated Gross Boone & Crockett scores by ecoregion based on TPWD age and antler survey data collected each hunting season (2005-2016).

Ecological Region	3.5 Age Class	4.5 Age Class	5.5+ Age Group
Blackland Prairies	113 7/8	118 3/8	144 5/8
Cross Timbers	118 3/8	126 4/8	122 5/8
Eastern Rolling Plains	108 3/8	126 3/8	124 3/8
Edwards Plateau	106 2/8	119 3/8	126 1/8
Pineywoods	113 7/8	129 2/8	122 6/8
Post Oak Savannah	113 1/8	118 6/8	124 1/8
South Texas Plains	103 5/8	126 6/8	130 6/8
Western Rolling Plains	116 7/8	141 7/8	141 0/8
<b>Statewide</b>	<b>111 3/8</b>	<b>123 7/8</b>	<b>127 5/8</b>

Dry conditions were not uniform across the state and spotty rains from May through July left patches of green across the landscape in the western two-thirds of the state.

Landowners and hunters with properties lucky enough to receive some of the early summer rains and that have remained green may expect better than average deer quality this fall. Rainfall was more consistent in the eastern portion of the state keeping the habitat in good shape, but still drier than last year when flooding and excessive rain were issues.

Statewide deer population growth indicates a slow and steady increasing trend. The 2016 deer population estimate was 4.3 million deer, or about 44 deer per 1,000 acres, and happened to be the highest estimated deer population in the last 12 years. The statewide white-tailed deer population is expected to be consistent with the 4.1 to 4.3 million deer estimate we've seen the last several years. White-tailed deer densities are not uniform across the state and some ecoregions support much higher deer densities than others.

### Hill Country

The Edwards Plateau, commonly referred to as the Texas Hill Country, supports the highest deer population in the state with a 2016 estimate of 2.6 million deer or 130 deer per 1,000 acres in the region.

Among the 6 deer management units (DMU) within the ecoregion, DMU 6, which encompasses the Mason and Llano County area, supports the highest deer density in the state at 285 deer per 1,000 acres. As a hunter, if your focus is on seeing numbers of deer, the Edwards Plateau might be the destination you consider for your next hunt this fall.

The 2017 deer population in the Hill Country is expected to be about the same as 2016, considering harvest was a bit lower than expected in 2016 and the region experienced a moderate fawn crop necessary to sustain that population level. Hunters in the Edwards Plateau are encouraged to harvest their bag to help to keep deer populations in check with what the native habitats can support.

### Cross Timbers

The Cross Timbers region of north central Texas has the next highest deer population with the 2016 estimate of 739,200 deer or 60.5 deer per 1,000 acres. The 2017 population for the Cross Timbers is expected to remain stable. Although fawn production is expected to be good in the Cross Timbers in 2017, the increase in estimated harvest in 2016 will likely balance out fawn production this year and keep the population stable.

Looking back several years ago to previous fawn crops and projecting those numbers to the 2017 season, hunters should expect to see a good number of 1.5-, 4.5-, 5.5-, and 7.5-year-old bucks relative to other age groups for the Edwards Plateau and Cross Timbers region.

The number of 6.5-year-old bucks should be noticeably lower this year as a result of the poor fawn crops during the 2011 drought. That's not to say there are still not a good number of mature bucks in the population. In fact, 2016 should be an excellent year for bucks in that 4.5- to 5.5-year-old age group as a whole, relative to the last several years for these regions of the state.

### **Rolling Plains**

West of the Cross Timbers is the Eastern and Western Rolling Plains ecoregion, which encompasses that area from Albany westward into the eastern panhandle of Texas. This region is generally drier and deer populations are much lower compared to the Cross Timbers or Edwards Plateau, but this region still produces quality bucks and a good population of deer.

The 2017 deer population in the Rolling Plains region is expected to be similar if not a bit higher this year compared to 2016. Deer density estimates for 2016 were 37.3 deer per 1,000 acres in the Eastern Rolling Plains and 22.76 deer per 1,000 acres in the Western Rolling Plains. Projected number of bucks in the 2.5-, 5.5-, 7.5-, and 8.5-year-old age class will be higher relative to other age groups in the Western Rolling Plains, and in the Eastern Rolling Plains, the buck age structure will be more like that of the Cross Timbers with more bucks in the 2.5-, 4.5-, 5.5- and 7.5-year-old age groups.

### **South Texas Plains**

The South Texas Plains is known for the exceptional bucks produced in that region and a moderate deer density compared to other areas of the state.

The 2016 estimated deer density for South Texas was 383,870 deer (22.97 deer per 1,000 acres) and the 2017 population is expected to be comparable to the 2016 numbers. Hot temperatures in June and July may have had an impact on fawn survival this year, which could moderate any chances of population growth for 2017.

South Texas has been plagued by dry conditions over the last 6 years, so the fawn crops have been relatively low but consistent, which translates into a relatively even distribution of bucks among all age classes. Hunters may notice a larger number of 2.5-, 4.5- and 5.5-year-old bucks relative to other age classes.

With so many ranches in South Texas pursuing more intensive deer management options, the expectation of harvesting a trophy-quality buck should be within reach of many hunters in the region despite gaps in age classes and the impact of dry conditions. I do expect some exceptional bucks to come out of South Texas in 2017 based on a few photos of bucks I've seen that were passed on last season; they should hit their peak this season.

Deer in South Texas have also been enjoying an abundant mesquite bean crop that should help to maintain deer in good body condition and have a good finish to antler growth.

### **Pineywoods**

Deer populations in the Pineywoods ecoregion were down a bit in 2016 with an estimate of 221,890 deer (15.51 deer per 1,000 acres). The extensive flooding that occurred in 2016 along some of the better habitats in the bottomland, near the major river drainages, resulted in poor fawn production in 2016.

The 2017 population is expected to see a slight increase since fawn production will likely be significantly higher than in 2016.

Range conditions in the Pineywoods are in good shape with more consistent rainfall in the summer of 2017 and, as such, deer should be in good body condition.

Antler quality is expected to be average to slightly above average this year. The Post Oak Savannah ecoregion deer population continues to grow and the 2016 estimated deer density was 41.6 deer per 1,000 acres.

The 2017 deer population estimates are expected to be similar or slightly higher than the previous year. Buck age structure for both regions should be similar and based on previous years fawn crops, hunters should expect to see more 4.5- and 7.5-year-old bucks relative to other age classes. There is a fairly even distribution of bucks among the other age classes. Antler-restriction regulations continue to improve the buck age structure in these regions and are reflected in the annual harvest where Age and Antler surveys conducted by TPWD wildlife biologists indicate 61 percent of bucks are 3.5 years of age or older in the Post Oak Savannah and Pineywoods.

Antler quality statewide is expected to be average in 2017. As mentioned previously, most of the state had good habitat conditions going into the winter and early spring, which helped bucks recover from the rigors of rut and ultimately gave them a good foundation to start the antler growth cycle this year.

Despite dry conditions and decline in the nutritional quality of native forage beginning in May, bucks will still develop good antlers this year, but they will probably not finish out the antler growth cycle as strong as would be expected during years where rainfall and good forage quality continue later into the summer. Those properties that have an intensive supplemental feeding program will probably not notice much of an impact to antler quality from the drier conditions this summer.

The statewide average Boone & Crockett (B&C) score for bucks 5.5 years old or older was 127.6. The statewide average B&C for bucks 4.5 years old was 123.8. These are respectable quality bucks for anywhere in the state.

Hunters looking for those trophy-quality animals might focus their efforts in the Western Rolling Plains region where the 2016 B&C score for bucks 5.5 years old and older was 141.

For those hunters who haven't found a deer hunting spot for this fall, consider putting in for one of the drawn deer hunts conducted on TPWD Wildlife Management Areas (WMA) and State Parks.

Each year, some excellent quality bucks are bagged on our WMAs and lots of hunters go home with an ice chest full of venison from an antlerless or spike buck hunt. You can find out about the draw hunts at [tpwd.texas.gov](http://tpwd.texas.gov). Type "Drawn Hunts" in the search box in the upper right of the website page. The deadline for application for firearm hunts is Sept. 15.

### **Chronic wasting disease testing requirements**

Changes have been made to the chronic wasting disease (CWD) testing requirements for the 2017 season. Those changes are listed below and for additional information on CWD, please type "Chronic Wasting Disease" in the search box on [tpwd.texas.gov](http://tpwd.texas.gov).

- Modification to boundaries in the Panhandle and south-central Texas CWD zones
- Mandatory testing and carcass movement restrictions now apply in the south-central Texas CWD Zone
- New operating dates and time for all CWD check stations
- Hunters now have additional time (48 hours) to provide CWD samples from harvested animals within a CWD zone to a check station

- Texas Animal Health Commission (TAHC) has new CWD rules that apply statewide to harvested exotic CWD-susceptible species such as elk, red deer, sika, moose and reindeer. Go to [tahc.texas.gov](http://tahc.texas.gov) and type “Chronic Wasting Disease” in the search box, then click on the listing “Elk & Deer” for more details on TAHC rules.

I hope you spend time hunting with friends and family this season, making memories and enjoying those times outdoors. You can't get those missed opportunities back, so take advantage of every day you have a chance to spend time afield. Good luck this year and have a great hunting season.

*“2017 Hunting Forecast” is excerpted from the September 2017 issue of The Cattleman magazine.*