

DEER SEASON IN TEXAS

IT'S A FAMILY AFFAIR

BY PATRICK BEACH

Victor Moberg grew up in the 1960s as the grandson of Austin's king and queen of sausage making, so meat was a regular item on the menu at home. A lot of those meals included venison.

His grandparents — Smokey Denmark sausage company founders Albert "Smokey" and Eloise Denmark — showed reverence and enthusiasm for making food. Moberg and his family carry on that tradition today on their land south of Smithville where they raise animals and hunt deer.

The Mobergs are among hundreds of thousands of Texans who will hunt white-tailed deer this season. Many of them will be up before the crack of dawn in early November for the start of the general hunting season for white-tailed deer in the Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative service area. Nov. 2 is the first day of the hunting season for adults in the North Texas hunting zone, which includes the Bluebonnet area. That season ends Jan. 5, 2020.

Deer hunting is big in Texas and so is the deer population. "Texas boasts a robust white-tailed deer population of about 5.4 million deer, which should contribute to hunter success this season," according to a statement from the Texas Parks & Wildlife Department.

Even though much of Texas experienced triple digit heat over the late summer, "hunters should expect an excellent deer season with above average antler quality and fawn recruitment," said Alan Cain, the department's white-tailed deer program leader. Early rain in the fall of 2018 resulted in an excellent crop of winter weeds that lasted well into the spring, he said, and that provided the nutrition for white-tailed bucks to grow larger antlers.

In May 2006, Moberg said, he and his wife, Shana, bought property about seven miles south of Smithville when their daughter Dakota was 3 and son Mason was just 6 months old. The 33 acres are surrounded mostly by cow pastures, and a wet-weather creek runs through it. The family calls the low-lying land Swampy Acres.

Dakota and Mason are now 17 and 14, and they help their parents tend to the acreage. Both grew up sitting in the deer stand, sometimes quietly playing games on their phones. Shana hunts but would rather let the kids go. When Dakota was young, she would shoot while sitting on her dad's lap. There are not a lot of rules in the Moberg family deer stand, a 4-by-8 foot box about 12 feet high and accessible by ladder. No perfume. No cologne. No smoking. Be really, really quiet. Once, all it took for Dakota to spook a deer was to accidentally tap the muzzle of her rifle

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The Mobergs — from left, Victor, daughter Dakota, mom Shana and son Mason — have made it a family tradition to hunt deer on their 33 acres near Smithville. Dakota and Mason learned early by sitting quietly in the deer stand. (Photo by Sarah Beal)



Image courtesy Texas Parks & Wildlife

by the
NUMBERS

Estimated number of white-tailed deer in Texas **5.4 million**

1 Bucks a hunter can take per season with a maximum 13" "inside spread" of its antlers (or a buck with two branched antlers).

252

Counties in Texas with a white-tailed deer hunting season (in other words, all but 2)

91%

Deer in Texas killed with a rifle

Amount of water a mature white-tail deer drinks daily

4 to 6 quarts**1%**

Deer in Texas killed by muzzleloader

8%

Deer in Texas killed by bowhunting

18%

Texas archers that successfully kill; Texas ranks low among all states

Below, Tyler Goerig, left, and David Padgett load deer feed into the back of a truck at Carmine Feed & Fertilizer. During hunting season, they sometimes load up more than 100 trucks a day. At right, Dakota Moberg, with dad Victor by her side, takes aim from the family's deer blind during hunting season 2018. Below right, a white-tailed doe is seen through the scope of a Winchester .243. (Photos by Sarah Beal)



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very lightly against the roof.

Hunting for deer and working the land has left its mark on the Moberg children. Dakota graduated early and is now studying wildlife management at Texas A&M University-Kingsville. Mason is thinking about becoming a game warden.

Wildlife and hunting were not the priority when the Mobergs moved to their property. They simply wanted their food to be as organic as possible. But the family got into wildlife management in a big way — preparing food plots, feeding hundreds of animals all year long, improving the area, plowing and planting.

“During the 2011 drought I realized it was about helping the wildlife,” Victor Moberg said. “We have good water wells. We irrigate a chunk of it. It’s hard work when it’s 100-plus degrees out. It becomes kind of an obsession.”

As for hunting, “it’s not about the kill. It’s about being out there and appreciating everything Mother Nature has to offer,” he said.

When Victor Moberg was growing up in the Webberville area in eastern Travis County, he never saw deer. But after buying the Bastrop County property, he has seen plenty of deer thanks to a suggestion he received after moving to the land.

“I invited my brother-in-law to come out and he said, ‘This looks like a deer highway. Let’s put up a game camera.’ It was an instant hook,” Moberg said. “The photos were phenomenal — bobcats, coyotes, hogs, bucks, does. We’ve seen some unbelievable things that you don’t see when you’re sitting on a sofa or have your nose in your phone.”

It’s impossible to say how much land in Texas is used for deer hunting because it’s rarely if ever used for that exclusively. But it’s a lot. The King Ranch alone has more than 800,000 acres and some of the biggest white-tailed deer in Texas.

And the sport’s popularity is holding steady.

“Deer hunting is just as popular as it’s been over the last several decades,” said Cain, the white-tailed deer expert at Texas Parks & Wildlife. “Our numbers have grown but so has the population. Other states have seen declines, but Texas has done pretty well. We’re stable. That’s a good thing.”

Cain said his department doesn’t track much demographic data on who hunts, but anecdotally he sees businesses more aggressively marketing to women and young hunters.

“That’s your next generation,” he said. “It’s important to educate youngsters about conservation and how hunting plays a role in it.”

And, Cain said, families like the Mobergs aren’t alone in their near-obsessive stewardship of the land and accumulation of data — everything from measuring antlers on bucks to lactation in does.

The Texas Deer Association puts the economic impact of breeding and hunting



at about \$1.6 billion annually. That includes payments on leases, lodging, ranch hunts and trophy fees. Like so many pastimes, hunting isn’t a question of how much it costs but how much someone is willing to pay. A hunting license costs \$25 for Texas residents (or \$7 for seniors). Out-of-state residents pay \$315. A lifetime hunting license is \$1,000. A 40-pound sack of deer corn is generally under \$10 and available anywhere from the neighborhood feed store, Buc-ee’s and — of course — Amazon. Feeders start at under \$100 but can cost as much as \$1,000.

As for rifles, deer hunters gravitate to bolt- or lever-action and the sky’s the limit on price. Some guided hunts with fancy lodging and meals can cost \$15,000 or more. Is hunting cost-effective? Almost certainly not, especially when factoring the cost of travel, land and processing. But hunters can’t put a price on the social aspect that goes with all the trouble and expense.

“Like Christmas only comes once a year, (the start of deer season) was traditionally a big social thing for people,” said Mike Leggett of Burnet, a Texas writer who has specialized in hunting and the outdoors for decades.

“On the first Saturday of deer season every year on the land we hunted, we’d have a gigantic dinner with hundreds of people and barbecue and pies and cakes and all kinds of vegetables. You’d hunt during the day and have this gigantic dinner at night. The high school kids would be sneaking off in the dark and the little kids would be playing hide and seek. That got ingrained in me, to enjoy that as a family activity.”

These days Leggett bow hunts for deer, meaning he’s likely to get one only every three or four years.

“I’m just looking,” he said. “Every time — and I mean every time (I hunt with a bow) — I see something I’ve never seen before. It may be a bird, a fox chasing a rabbit, a coyote, you just don’t know. I tell my grandkids, ‘Look at what this animal does.’ And there’s a link between them, me, my father and grandfather. That’s the biggest part of it.”

Talk the talk

Like many a pastime, deer hunting has its own thicket of special terms. Here are just a few:

White flag: Something a hunter never wants to see. When a

white-tailed deer senses a predator, it raises its tail and heads for the hills. Which means that’s the last thing you’ll see of it.

Blowing: The loud snorting sound a deer makes to alert other deer when a threat is near. That usually happens just before that white flag.

Glassing: Using a scope or binoculars to keep eyes on the prize.

Still hunting: Rather than sitting in a stand, this is when a hunter walks slowly and quietly through the woods to spot prey.

Rub: A buck’s spring antlers come in with a velvet-like material that

it scrapes off on tree bark. That’s also a way to mark its territory and exercise neck muscles.

Grunt tube: A call that hunters blow to mimic the sound of a buck grunting, which it does during breeding season to signal aggression to other bucks.