

# Learn About Whitetails

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Updated and revised 1992

From Texas Parks and Wildlife Magazine, October 1975

\* Reproduced from PWD-LF-W7000-0007-2/93.



Exploration and settlement of the American frontier would have been extremely difficult without the white-tailed deer. Early colonists and explorers utilized the meat and skins of these animals extensively, and deer hides later served as a medium of exchange between trappers, frontier scouts, Indians and traders.

Deer were even more important to the American Indians prior to settlement of the nation, providing clothing and food. Deer were also an important factor in the folklore and religion of native tribesmen.

Indiscriminate slaughter by commercial meat and hide hunters and ignorance of the deer's habitat requirements almost caused its extermination near the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was reported, for example, that an early Texas trader operating in Indian country at Trading House Creek (near present site of Waco) shipped approximately 75,000 deer skins from 1844 through 1853.

Public concern for survival of the species brought about a series of protective measures by the Texas Legislature near the turn of the century. A five-month closed season during which deer could not be hunted was enacted in 1881. The bag limit was established at six bucks per season in 1903 and was reduced to three bucks per season in 1907.

The first hunting licenses were sold in Texas in 1909. In 1919, six game wardens were hired to patrol the entire state.

Additional interest and protection by landowners, sportsmen and law enforcement personnel helped deer populations increase steadily during the 1930s and 1940s. Statewide trapping and restocking programs established deer herds in previously uninhabited areas. Sales of hunting licenses increased dramatically – 382,249 in 1955, 571,058 in 1964 and over one million in 1972.

The white-tailed deer is now the most numerous big game animal in Texas and in the United States. Aesthetically and emotionally, the whitetail holds a place of distinction in the hearts and minds of many Texans.

Research and management projects concerning the whitetail and its habitat requirements are conducted by wildlife biologists of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, federal agencies, many universities and several private research establishments in Texas.

Research activities by the wildlife biologists of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department are 75 percent funded from federal excise taxes on firearms and ammunition. Deer are of primary importance on several of the wildlife management areas and public lands operated by this department. Research activities also are conducted on National Wildlife Refuges, National Forests and Department of Defense lands. The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department game warden field force now numbers some 460 officers. These highly skilled and trained officers provide law enforcement services essential to continued survival of the whitetail.

The whitetail is one of the most researched, observed, sought after, cussed and discussed of all wildlife species in Texas. Few of us, however, are aware of the basic principles which rule this majestic animal's life. Following are some of the most frequently asked questions about white-tailed deer in Texas.

### **How many kinds of deer are there in Texas?**

The Texas white-tailed deer, *Odocoileus virginianus texana*, occurs almost statewide. There were several subspecies of whitetail in the state years ago. However, due to expanding-overlapping ranges and restocking efforts in recent times, the subtle differences between subspecies have been lost except for the isolated population of Carmen Mountain white-tailed deer, *Odocoileus virginianus carminus*, in the Big Bend National Park area. Although found almost statewide in brushy or wooded areas, the heaviest deer populations are located in the central one-third of the state. The mule deer, *Odocoileus hemionus*, is a different species which occurs primarily west of the Pecos River and in parts of the High Plains of the Texas Panhandle.

### **How many deer are there in Texas?**

Texas has more white-tailed deer than any other state. Population estimates in recent year range from three to four million. Population estimates vary from year to year, depending upon reproduction, survival and losses due to malnutrition and disease.

### **How many white-tailed deer are legally harvested by sportsmen in Texas each year?**

It varies of course, however, an estimated 430,000-500,000 whitetails are harvested by sportsmen in Texas annually – more than any other state.

### **Isn't that too many?**

No. Current harvest rates account for only about 15 percent of the herd annually. Research indicates that about 20 percent of most populations should be removed annually by sportsmen. Biologically sound harvest rates and habitat management programs are necessary in Texas to prevent waste due to overpopulation, to achieve maximum utilization of this valuable natural resource and to insure the whitetail's continued survival. For example, since the initiation of the program in 1953, more than two million antlerless or doe deer have been harvested from the established deer herds in the state. White-tailed deer in Texas must be harvested to protect the habitat which will not only support the deer and other game species but also is critical to many non-game and threatened species.

### **How are deer counted?**

Several methods of estimating deer numbers are used in Texas:

1. The walking deer cruise line. During the fall months, wildlife biologists walk census lines which have been placed in representative deer habitat and count the deer observed. This method is used extensively in Texas, and there are several hundred such deer census lines in the state.

2. Counts from fixed-winged aircraft. This method is used in areas of the South Texas brush country. Observers count deer seen on strips of deer habitat of known width and length.
3. Track count method. Counting deer tracks on selected sites during late summer is a method frequently used in heavily wooded areas of East Texas.
4. Spotlight counts. Counting deer at night with the use of spotlights along pasture roads or lightly traveled public roads is a method biologists have recently put into use. It is an excellent census method in areas with low deer populations.

**Caution:** Biologists always notify all landowners along their spotlight census routes. They drive vehicles clearly marked “Texas Parks and Wildlife Department” and “Deer Census”. Any other spotlighters should be reported to the local game warden.

5. Several other deer census methods are used by Parks and Wildlife Department personnel. Counts from helicopters and late evening counts from vehicles are good deer census techniques.

It is important to understand that these “counts” or “censuses” are population trend indicators, no one knows exactly how many deer are present in Texas.

### **What do deer eat?**

Deer eat mostly browse (leaves, twigs, young shoots of woody plants and vines) and forbs (weeds and other broad-leafed flowering plants). They eat some grass, but only when it is green and succulent. Sheep, goats and foreign big game species compete directly with the whitetail for preferred deer foods. Deer food shortages usually occur during late summer and winter months. Adequate forage is usually available during spring and fall seasons. A variety of foods and habitat types is essential to good deer production and survival.

The following plants are examples of some good native deer foods in Texas which are readily taken by deer when and where they are available.

*Browse:* oak leaves and acorns, yaupon, greenbriar, prickly pear and fruit, hackberry, mulberry, rattan, or supplejack, sumac, mesquite beans and dried leaves, hawthorns, poison oak, American beautyberry, wild cherry and plum, wild grape, honeysuckle, dogwood, elm, blackberry and dewberry, gum elastic (chittum), acacias (catclaw), ephedra, walnut, guayacan, wild chinaberry, kidneywood, Brasil and other condalias.

*Grasses:* rescue grass, Texas wintergrass, Ozarkgrass, fall witchgrass, panic grasses, sedges, and rushes.

*Forbs:* bundle flower, euphorbia(s), whorled nodviolet, bayflower, oxalis, wooleywhite, tickclovers, filaree, clover, verbena, arrowleaf sida, wild lettuce, wild onions, old man’s beard, wildbean, snoutbean, lespedezas, spiderwort, vetches (milkvetch, etc.), lamb’s quarters, plantain, groundcherry, pigweed or carelessweed and partridge peas.

### **How long do deer live?**

Deer in controlled situations have been known to live 15 to 20 years. It is unusual, however, for a deer in the wild to live more than 10 years, because its teeth usually wear out during the eighth or ninth year.

### **How can the age of a deer be determined? Is the number of antler points one method?**

Deer age is determined by tooth replacement and tooth wear of the premolars and molars (back teeth) of the lower jaw. Unlike sheep, deer cannot be aged by their front teeth, and age cannot be determined by antler characteristics.

### **Does a buck deer keep the same set of antlers each year?**

No. A buck grows a new set of antlers (not horns) each summer. The size of the antlers depends primarily upon the quality and quantity of food the buck eats and his age. The more nutritious the food and the more there is of it during the antler-growing season, the better his antlers will be. With favorable conditions, antler size and spread will increase with deer age. After the sixth year, however, antlers usually decline in size due to the deer's inability to properly chew and digest food.

### **What happens to the antlers each year?**

Buck deer shed their antlers following the mating season each year. Antler shedding is triggered by the cessation of production of a hormone which also terminates the breeding season. Most bucks in Texas shed their antlers during late January and February. Shed antlers quickly deteriorate or are eaten by rodents and other animals for their calcium content. New antlers start growing and become noticeable "in velvet" during May and June. Good nutrition during this period is critical for good antler growth.

### **Shouldn't spike bucks be protected since they are young and will be the breeding bucks of the future?**

The harvest of spike-antlered bucks is another important aspect of a management program. Spike-antlered bucks are the result of inadequate nutrition, age and genetics, or combination of these factors. Spikes are generally found in combination of these factors. Spikes are generally found in the yearling of 1-½ year old age class; however, yearling bucks can produce 4 to 8 points if nutrition is adequate. For nutrition to be adequate, deer numbers must be in balance with the habitat, competition with livestock must be minimal, and rainfall adequate. Additionally, research has shown that on the average, spike-antlered yearling bucks will remain inferior to fork-antlered yearling bucks when these two groups reach maturity. Consequently, spike-antlered bucks may be considered as part of the buck harvest quota. This permits the removal of poor quality bucks at an early age and it reduces hunting pressure on the more desirable bucks. The recommended spike buck harvest may comprise up to one-half of the buck harvest quota depending on how much the manager wants to reduce hunting pressure on better quality bucks and reduce numbers of spike bucks. An unlimited harvest of spike-antlered bucks is practical only under very intensive management. Importantly, the manager must remember that a high incidence of spike-antlered bucks is a symptom of rangeland overpopulated with

deer and/or overstocked with domestic animals. These factors which limit deer quality must be corrected before the selective harvest of spike bucks is beneficial to the program.

**When is the breeding season?**

The breeding season for white-tailed deer in Texas ranges through the fall and winter months from about the first of September through mid-January. The peak breeding activity occurs in mid-November in Central Texas and late December in South Texas.

**What is a good buck-doe ratio?**

The buck-doe ratio in most of Texas is about one buck per three to five does (adult deer) which is satisfactory for good production and hunting. This ratio is not a major problem in Texas deer herd management at this time. An adequate harvest of antlerless deer would help maintain a good ratio of both sexes. It is recommended that game managers and landowners strive for a ratio of about 2.0 to 2.5 does per buck.

**Won't the deer become smaller due to inbreeding if we don't bring some new blood lines?**

No. The deer of Texas are direct descendants of isolated deer herds of many years ago. Inbreeding may occur in the wild, but it apparently is no problem. New blood lines are quickly absorbed into established genetic pools and no improvement in quality is noticed. Inferior quality or small deer result from poor range conditions or insufficient preferred forage and will not be improved by bringing in new bucks.

**Does the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department restock deer?**

Yes, but only in approved areas judged as potentially good deer habitat which presently have few or no deer. The deer trapping and restocking program was initiated in 1938 by the Game, Fish and Oyster Commission, predecessor of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. Since that time, more than 30,000 deer have been released in 160 Texas counties.

**How many fawns will a doe have?**

Normally, a doe deer in Texas will have her first fawn, which is usually a single, when she is two years old. Thereafter, if food conditions are adequate, the doe should normally have twin fawns almost every year until her sixth or seventh year, when the reproductive rate will begin to decline. Triplet fawns are uncommon, but do occur. Quadruplets have been reported.

The gestation period for deer is seven months.

According to reproductive studies, "old barren does," or does that have never produced fawns are uncommon and are no problem to deer herd management. The key to maximum production is an adequate supply of nutritious natural food.

**Are more female fawns born than male fawns?**

No. Male and female fawns are born in approximately equal numbers.

**What are the most serious threats to deer herds in Texas?**

1. Habitat destruction such as land clearing, root plowing, improved grass pastures, subdivisions, new lakes, expanding cities, etc.
2. Poor range or inadequate food supplies due to overgrazing by domestic livestock and overpopulations of deer, resulting in large-scale deer die-offs.

### **What are some of the most important limiting factors affecting white-tailed deer?**

Rainfall is an important limiting factor. Extended periods of severe drought during the late summer and fall are especially harmful to fawns, yearlings and very old deer. Coyotes are a limiting factor in South Texas and in portions of Southeast-Central Texas. However, natural predators, such as coyotes, bobcats or eagles presently pose no serious threats to established deer herds of Texas. Efforts to control these predators are usually expensive and ineffective with regard to white-tailed deer. Good habitat and quality forage are the key to the survival of white-tailed deer in Texas.

### **What about hunting?**

Legal hunting can be a limiting factor but is not currently a threat to deer populations. In fact, regulated hunting is the best way to crop the deer herd annually, much like a farmer-rancher would crop his herds of domestic livestock. Properly controlled and regulated, hunting is the most reasonable and humane method of maintaining and utilizing the extensive deer populations of Texas.

### **Will deer move great distances?**

Not normally. A deer chased by dogs may run several miles, but will often circle and end up close to home. During the breeding season, some bucks will trail female deer out of their normal home range but will later return. Movement studies and radio-tracking research in Texas indicated that most deer spend their lives within about 1.5 miles of their birthplace.

### **What can I do to help the deer, increase deer numbers or improve the quality of deer?**

1. Learn about the habitat requirements of deer. Become familiar with preferred deer foods in your area or the area where you vacation or hunt. Support practices which create good wildlife habitat and prevent destruction of existing habitat.
2. Landowners and operators should make every effort to provide adequate habitat and forage for deer and other wildlife. Competition by domestic sheep and goats should be reduced in some cases. Both sexes of deer should be reasonably, but adequately, harvested each year from well-established herds.
3. Sportsmen should obey state laws and those rules established by landowners. Sportsmen should not abuse the land on which they hunt, trespass where they do not have permission, take "sound shots" or misuse a firearm.
4. Everyone should cooperate with law enforcement officers responsible for protection of our wildlife. Violations should be reported immediately to the nearest game warden of the Parks and Wildlife Department, or to Operation Game Thief at 1-800-792-GAME.

5. Landowners and hunters can provide a significant service to the game management programs of Texas by completely and accurately providing harvest data. Whether it is solicited by mail questionnaire or in person by biologists in the field, at check stations or cold storage facilities, valid harvest information is vital to the formulation of effective hunting regulations. These regulations will allow the maximum harvest of surplus animals without endangering the broodstock necessary to replenish those populations.

### **Would it help to feed the deer some supplemental feed?**

If deer take large quantities of supplemental feed (corn, etc.) there probably is a shortage of their natural preferred foods. The best solution to the problem is to improve availability of natural foods. Obviously, this cannot be achieved quickly and will result only from proper range management practices (grazing moderately, rotation grazing systems, etc.) If artificial feeding is necessary, deer should be supplied high-quality (14 to 16 percent protein) 3/16" pellets instead of corn, which is about eight percent protein. Marked improvement in body size and antler development should not be expected from artificial or supplemental feeding.

*Researchers in Texas and other states have worked many years to obtain answers to some of the many questions concerning the white-tailed deer, its requirements and management. Continued research will reveal additional necessary information about this and other wildlife species. The well-being and continued survival of the whitetail in Texas, however, is dependent primarily upon the interest and concern of sportsmen, landowners and the conservation-minded public of our state.*

### **How to Age Deer**

Age of a deer is determined by tooth replacement and wear on molars and premolars of the lower jaw. As a deer grows older, certain portions of its teeth are worn enough to show definite differences from the teeth of other age classes.

A deer has only six jaw teeth, although they appear to have many more. The teeth are broken into two distinct categories: the premolars, which are numbered 1, 2, and 3, and the molars, which are numbered 4, 5, and 6.

Deer are aged in fractions because they are born around July and are killed during the hunting season.

**1 ½ year old:** (long yearling): The long yearling deer is the most easily recognized of all age classes. The first three jaw teeth are milk teeth, which will be replaced around two years of age. These are worn smooth as a long yearling while the last three teeth remain sharp. The number 3 tooth has three cusps in the milk tooth stage, but only two cusps appear on the replaced tooth. Fawns in their first season will show little evidence of wear on their milk teeth.

**2 ½ year old:** The first three jaw teeth have been replaced by permanent teeth and all molars are sharp. The dentine of the first molar (tooth 4) is not as wide as the enamel which surrounds it.

**3 ½ year old:** The dentine in the first molar (tooth 4) is now as wide or wider than the enamel which surrounds it, and this is not true of the second molar or tooth 5.

**4 ½ year old:** The dentine of the first and second molars (teeth 4 and 5) is as wide or wider on both teeth, but not in tooth 6.

**5 ½ year old:** The dentine of all molars (teeth 4, 5, and 6) is now as wide or wider than the enamel surrounding it.

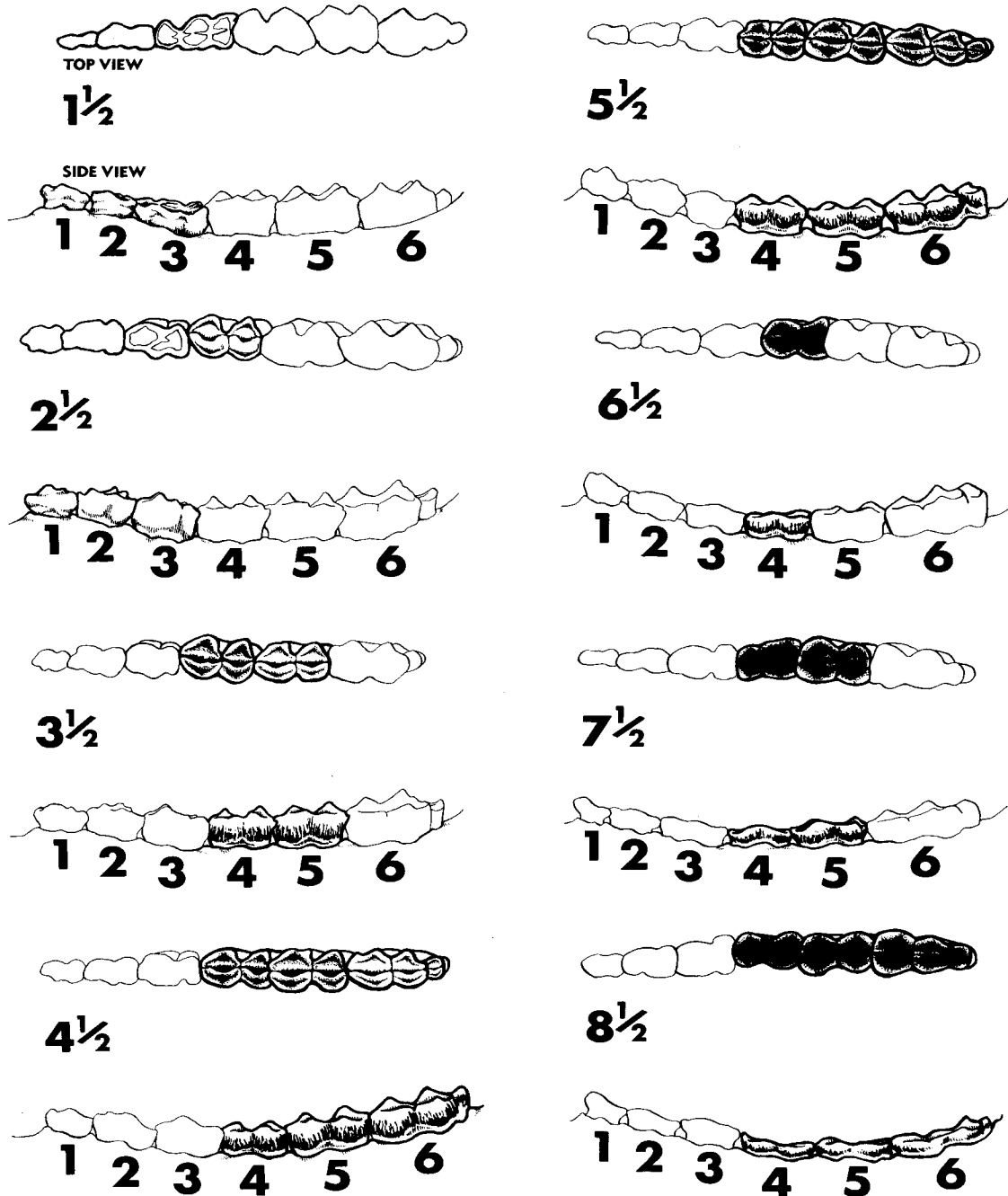
**6 ½ year old:** The first molar (tooth 4) is worn smooth, but teeth 5 and 6 are not smooth.

**7 ½ year old:** The first and second molars (teeth 4 and 5) are worn smooth, or tooth 5 may still have a small ridge left.

**8 ½ year old:** All molar teeth are worn smooth (teeth 4, 5, and 6 may still have a small ridge left).

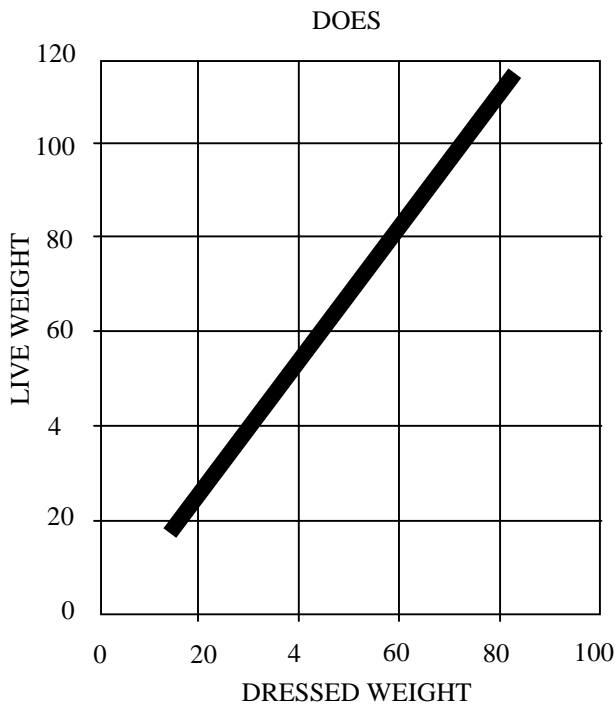
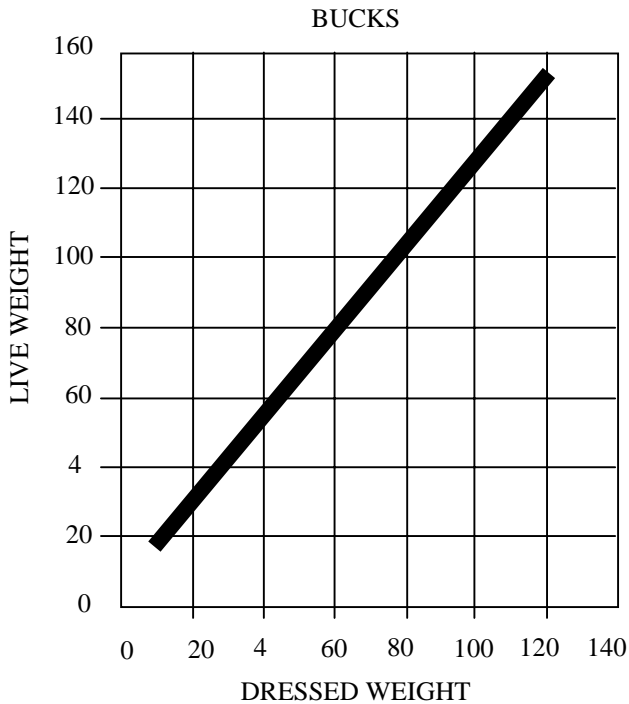
**Older than 8 ½ year old:** Unable to determine, because characteristic formations have all been worn smooth.

The primary factor governing antler formation is food supply. As deer grow older and their teeth wear flatter, food becomes harder and harder to chew. Body condition will drop and, simultaneously, so will antler development.





**The Way to Weigh**  
by: **Charles Ramsey & Melvin J. Anderegg**



A pickup with two hunters drove up to the deer check station on the Kerr Wildlife Management Area. Both hunters climbed out, and walked around to the back of the truck and began unloading a couple of deer.

The first deer, a small doe, was tossed upon the table in the check station. Area personnel field dressed the deer and recorded descriptive measurements and weights. Then the doe was loaded back into the truck.

The second deer, a large buck, was lifted onto the table and the process of measuring and recording was repeated. Since the buck was already field dressed, only a dressed weight was taken – 106 pounds field dressed. How big was that deer on the hoof?

This question has been repeated so many times at the check station that two graphs were prepared to help with the answer. These graphs represent the weights taken from approximately 200 deer in good body condition killed on the Kerr Wildlife Management Area. Since these deer were typical of the Edwards Plateau, the graphs will be applicable for deer taken within the Hill Country. Although not as accurate, they are also good guides for deer taken from other areas of the state.

Dressed weight means “field dressed” with head, hide, and feet left on the carcass.