

time visiting feeders. A well-traveled game trail may be more productive than hunting at the deer feeder.

Dry conditions in 2011 resulted in a significant decline in fawn production, down to 29 percent for the statewide estimate, a 24 percent departure from the long term average. Fawn crops bounced back in 2012 at 47 percent and Cain anticipates survey results will show a higher fawn crop this year. In fact, Cain is hearing reports from landowners as well as TPWD biologists of fawn production in the 60 to 80 percent range in the Hill Country and similar reports of good fawn production in other areas of the state.

For hunters fawn crops may not be as meaningful since harvest is generally focused on older age class deer, but remember those fawns this year translate into your adult deer several years into the future.

Another aspect of typical hunting season forecast is the prediction of antler quality and how many big bucks are out there across the landscape.

“As far as antler quality goes, rainfall plays a key role by influencing the native habitat and forage, ultimately affecting the quality of nutrition a buck receives in order to grow antlers,” Cain explains. “In dry years we typically see a decline in overall antler quality and increases in wet years much related to nutrition.”

Some managers provide supplemental feed to buffer against nutritional impact resulting from drought. However, research in South Texas has shown that native habitat is crucial to deer nutrition even when supplemental feed is provided. So maintaining quality native habitat on your property is important.

Judging from the phone calls and emails Cain has received from landowners around the state, bucks look to be in good body condition, antlers are in great shape and they are expecting a much better season than the last two years.”

Cain predicts antler quality to be above average for those areas receiving good spring rains and average for those that were a little drier this spring and summer. The good news is that drought or no drought, Texas still produces some whopper bucks each year.

According to an article published by Boone and Crockett several years back Texas ranks fifth all time for entries into B&C record books. Based on 40-plus years of data collected by TPWD biologists each season the average B&C score for a 5 year old buck is 124, with 9.1 points, and a 15.8 inch inside spread. Even the younger bucks at 3 years of age average a 13.5 inch inside spread and 8 points.

While areas like South Texas are known for producing exceptional bucks, most anywhere in the state is capable of producing good bucks every year. In fact in 2012, two archery hunters were lucky enough to connect on a couple of large non-typical bucks scoring about 250 Boone and Crockett. Both bucks were wild, free-ranging deer taken on low-fenced properties, one in North Texas and the other in Southeast Texas. Hopefully, that trend will continue in 2013.

“Another positive trend we have observed in the last few years is that the proportion of young bucks in the harvest has declined across the state, and most noticeably in the eastern third of the state where bucks had a hard time surviving to 3 years of age,” Cain points out. “In 2012, bucks 3 years old and older comprised 65 percent of bucks checked during TPWD surveys which are a reflection of the deer harvested each season.”

Digging a little deeper into



This massive buck was taken by Mark Culotta of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, while being guided by Mark Wright at Wildcat Mountain Ranch near Robert Lee, Texas.

the data Cain explains that in percent of bucks checked or older, a dramatic improve-
antler-restriction counties, 59 during TPWD surveys were 3 (Continued on page 15)

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