

**...Mule Deer Revival**

*(Continued from page 3)*

A 2019 bulletin provided by Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) biologist Dana Wright backs up the thesis: "...TPWD data for the past 14 years indicate annual, intensive mule deer buck harvest has created a skewed sex ratio and an age structure inordinately weighted towards young deer in the buck segment of the population."

**The Mule Deer**

Do not misunderstand. Hunters and hunting pressure are just one component of the complex puzzle that is the Texas Desert Mule Deer subspecies. As far as Texas deer, the desert mule deer is the less common cousin of the whitetail, Texas' most prominent deer.

Because its range is found in the least populated regions of Texas, many aren't as familiar with the deer that roams chiefly in the Texas Panhandle and the mountains and basins of the Trans-Pecos. The mule deer is a laid-back cousin to the more manic whitetail, and that's part of the biological problem that makes the species arguably easier to hunt than its whitetail cousin.

In addition, the mule deer as a species isn't as adaptable as the whitetail, doesn't breed as quickly or as often as a whitetail, has a narrow range of acceptable habitats, and doesn't feed or breed as aggressively as the

whitetail and therefore, is more easily extirpated and negatively impacted by over-harvesting.

Historically, mule deer resided in nearly every Texas county west of the 100th meridian. By the middle part of the 20th century, over-hunting and habitat mismanagement reduced their range substantially and pushed them into the desert mountains of western Texas and tiny pockets in the Panhandle. Currently, due to a trap and translocate program that ended in 1988 and stricter adherence to sound habitat and population management philosophies, their numbers and range have expanded from the low point of the 20th century. By 2010, mule deer numbers in the region reached an all-time high.

In body size, mule deer are slightly larger than whitetails, and the first thing you'll probably notice are its large namesake ears that resemble those of a mule. A main physical characteristic that makes mule deer easy to spot is the white rump with a black tipped tail. While whitetails generally prefer wetter and vegetatively dense habitats found in the eastern two-thirds of Texas, mule deer prefer dry, open country and range over as much as 10 times more area than whitetails. Their diets vary as well.

Combine hunting pressure with habitat changes and the biological nuances of the mule

deer and a picture begins to form that explains why the mule deer is the only big game species in decline in North America.

**The Solution**

With stakeholders voicing their concerns about the antler quality of mule deer, the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department decided to implement a practice that's been used with success in improving age structure, sex-ratio and ultimately antler quality in whitetail deer. Starting in 2018, experimental antler restrictions were implemented in six Rolling Plains counties including Briscoe, Childress, Cottle, Floyd, Hall and Motley counties. After three years, harvest data will be assessed and at the end of four hunting seasons, the department will propose either to extend the experiment, modify the antler restriction or permanently terminate the experiment.

"We received lots of comments concerning the skewed buck to doe ratio that landowners and hunters were seeing on their properties," said TPWD biologist Dana Wright whose work territory encompasses the counties affected by the newly implemented antler restrictions. "Our surveys for the area indicated that it was as high as one buck for every 6.6 does."

According to the department, their data suggest that for the past 14 years, intensive mule deer buck harvest, "...has created a skewed sex ratio and an age



structure inordinately weighted towards young deer in the buck segment of the population."

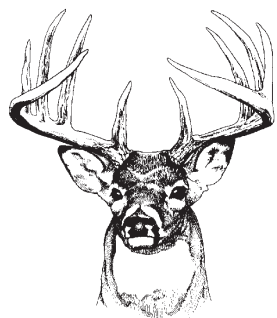
The restrictions are pretty straightforward: the harvest of any buck with an outside spread under 20 inches is prohibited. In other words, a buck must have antlers wider than his outstretched ears. By doing so,

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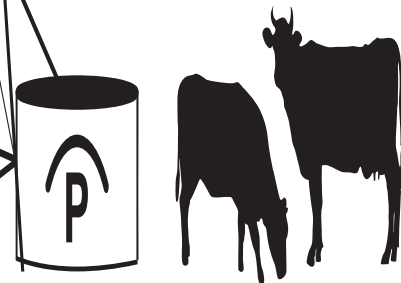
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