

story by **BILL COOPER**

RECORD DROUGHT IMPACTS TEXAS WHITETAILS



Circling vultures in the clear skies over Texas have become a symbol of the effects of what some say is the worst drought in Texas history. And it's not over yet.

The state's farmers and ranchers have already lost an estimated five billion dollars in crops and livestock. No one seems to have a handle on the estimated damage to wildlife populations, especially whitetail deer, which account for hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue each year for the state's deer breeders, outfitters and service providers to the horde of hunters that seek Texas whitetails.

At the end of August, 94% of the state was under "extreme" or "exceptional" drought conditions, according to U.S. government officials. Climate data from the U.S. Drought Monitor clearly shows that Texas is suffering from its driest 10 months ever in a century of data.

According to Joseph Capesins, chief of the Austin field unit for the U.S. Geological Survey, seven reservoirs are essentially dry, and half of the state's rivers and streams are below normal, many of which are at their lowest levels ever.



Vultures feeding on white-tailed deer carcasses have become a common sight as the worst drought in Texas history takes its toll on deer, especially fawns.

Cities, like Houston, are drawing from their emergency water reserves.

Adjoining states received some relief from the drought near the end of August with slight rains. However, Texas remains the epicenter of the continuing drought. Water wars are beginning to erupt as the supply of the precious resource shrinks.

Alan Cain, the whitetail project leader for the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department indicated that it has been tough to win in regards to Texas weather. "We have seen the extreme ends of the scale with weather, from heavy rains to extreme drought. Un-

ing on less available food. The consequences are degradation of habitat and deer in poor shape.

Mike Krueger, the Edwards plateau district leader for TPWD, said that going into the summer habitat did not look good. "Deer were utilizing a lot of woody browse plants at the beginning of summer when herbaceous plants and forbs are normally available. The woody browse is nutritious, but it is a food source for late summer and deer began feeding on it early because other foods were not available."

Digging into the savings account is not good. And that is what Texas deer

have been doing all summer. And as food supplies dwindle, the prognosis for reproduction does not look good. Milk producing forbs are in short supply for does. Available cover is sparse as well, leaving fawns more susceptible to predation by coyotes.

"This year's crop of fawns could be very low because of poor conditions," Krueger said. "Too, last year's crop, approaching their first birthday, may not be out of the woods, either. They are developing muscle and bone while experiencing stressful conditions. It is conceivable that we could lose two back to back fawn crops."

"We have seen the extreme ends of the scale with weather, from heavy rains to extreme drought. Unfortunately, again, much of the state has received minimal rainfall since last September and is facing tough drought conditions."

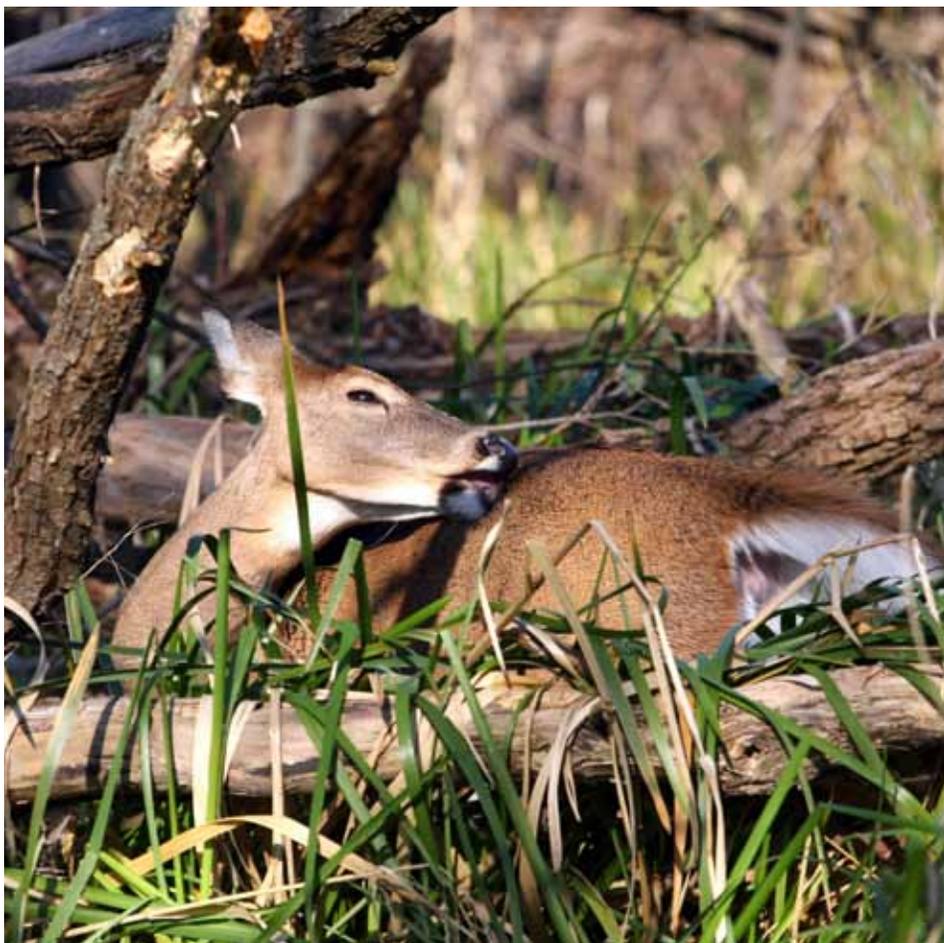
fortunately, again, much of the state has received minimal rainfall since last September and is facing tough drought conditions."

Deer production from 2010 bodes well according to Cain. A good fawn crop occurred across much of the state and the carry over on 1-1/2-year-old bucks and does appeared good. Cain attributes the good animal crops to good range conditions last fall, especially acorns and green vegetation. Deer harvest turned out average or a little below in most regions.

Cain is not as optimistic about the season for 2011 as the severe drought conditions persist across the state. "Regions of the state, like the Hill Country, had an average or above harvest last fall and hunters can expect plenty of deer this fall."

Cain expressed concern, however, about the impact the estimated 3.7 to 4.2 million deer in the state would have on range conditions this fall. "The extended drought has reduced the production of herbaceous plants and cool season forbs, which deer use heavily."

Poor plant production means that large numbers of deer will be feed-



Good range conditions insure that does will produce the rich milk which fawns need to survive early in their lives. Drought conditions have severely reduced fawn retention this year.



The extended drought in Texas is affecting everything from antler growth to fawn retention in the state's 4 million strong deer herd.

Let the rains come and the habitat will rebound. Deer reproduction will not be far behind.

“Long range weather forecasts suggest the drought will continue through the upcoming winter, Cain reported.

The extended drought continues to degrade the available habitat. While every component of native plant communities are important, the native woody plants, trees and shrubs are often considered the most reliable during times of drought providing the bulk of the green vegetation for deer to feed upon. Grasses have gone dormant during this high stress period and rain dependent weeds and wildflowers are in short supply.

Early browsing of woody plants by white-tailed deer, exotic deer and livestock can have tremendous impacts on native habitats and those negative impacts are magnified during times of drought, according to Cain. “Everything from antler quality and fawn

production, to general survival will be affected by the tough range conditions this year. Hunters can expect antler quality to be below average and much lower than last year.”

“Fawn production doesn't look promising this year,” Cain stated. “In many areas it is likely to be below 20% and in single digits for some of the most drought stricken regions of the state.”

Fawns are especially susceptible to heat stress and the prolonged drought is expected to greatly impact fawn survival. Young of the year can quickly become dehydrated when good milk production is not available from the does.

Cover for fawns is another factor affecting their survival. Soil surface temperatures can become unbearable without sufficient ground cover. Cain indicated that he had been on ranches

Deer are very adaptable and have survived drought on many occasions.

in South Texas where the soil surface temperature approached 140 degrees because of overgrazing and consequent lack of shady cover. Fawn survival is dismal under such conditions.

The worst areas for deer survival are those areas where deer populations were already exceeding the carrying capacity of the native range before the drought occurred. “As deer become stressed they are more susceptible to infections or other diseases,” Cain said. “The very old and very young often have more difficult times dealing with extreme weather events. Healthy deer are more likely to withstand stresses from drought and heat and that is why habitat management and deer population management are so important for maintaining healthy deer populations.”

Cain believes that this is the year for hunters to take advantage of their available tags and put some venison in the freezer. Does should be harvested

to bring populations in line with the available habitat. And removing deer from the herd early in the season will take animals out of the available range reducing stress on the available plant cover.

The upcoming deer season may look dismal to some, but Texas still has a strong deer population. Deer are very adaptable and have survived drought on many occasions. No doubt, the largest impact is on fawns. Under extended drought conditions, does may not breed or may not carry fawns to full term. And if they are dropped into harsh conditions, many will fall prey to starvation, disease and predators.

The good news, however, according to Cain, is that deer are very prolific. Let the rains come and the habitat will rebound. Deer reproduction will not be far behind. •