

SPRING CREEK OUTDOORS

Summer Newsletter

Important Dates

MLDP Enrollment Dates:

Harvest Option

September 1st, 2022

Conservation Option

June 15th, 2022

Dove Season:

-North: Sept. 1- Nov. 12
Dec. 18-Jan. 3

-Central: Sept. 1-Nov. 1
Dec. 18-Jan. 14

-South: Sept. 14-Nov. 1
Dec. 18-Jan. 23

SCO Survey Scheduling:

Spotlight Surveys:

-Conducted August/September

*NEED TO SCHEDULE BY JULY

Helicopter Surveys:

-Conducted September-April

*NEED TO SCHEDULE 3
MONTHS AHEAD

Timing

Timing is important. Timing is everything.

When working with wild processes and wild animals in wild places, you must have good timing to be successful. When thinking about timing, think decisions. Think about making the right decision BEFORE it is needed, before it is mandatory and before there is a crisis.

When do I need to plow my fields for my food plots? When is the best time to feed protein to my deer? When do I need to schedule fall surveys? When do I harvest surplus does? When is it time to file my property tax wildlife conversion paperwork? Timing is important. Timing is everything.

Breeding cycles, nutritional demands, hunting season, plant growing seasons all have predetermined times to start and stop. Those exact times are not carved in stone, but the timeframes sure are. For example, if you want to hunt doves over mature sunflower fields in September, you





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WILDLIFE BIOLOGY

June 2022

better know the time it takes for the plants to grow and mature in order to produce seeds. You also need to anticipate the tractor being operational and ready, the disk and planter ready to work, the seed ordered and if to use fertilizer or not. Are you watching the weather to plant prior to a rain or just planting and crossing your fingers? If you intend to use rattling antlers to attract a buck, you better know and understand when the breeding period begins in your area. Rattle too early and it won't work or if you rattle too late, it won't work either. Timing is important. Timing is everything.

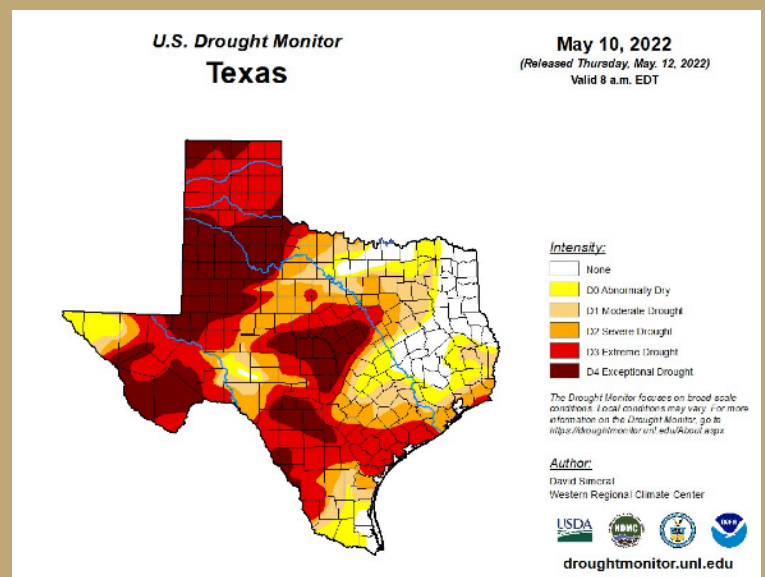
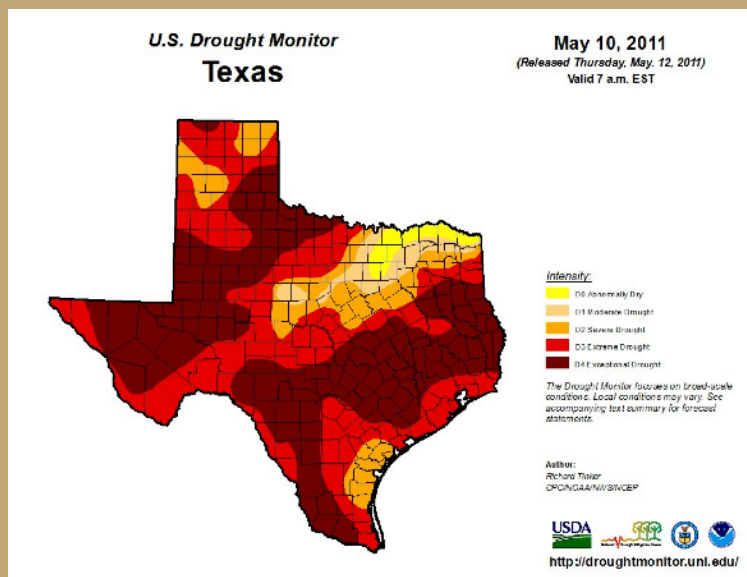
This fall's mature bucks were born back in 2015 and 2016. Do you know what the fawn production rates were back then? Do you know how many of those bucks have been harvested each subsequent year since and about how many should be left? Are there enough surplus for harvest? If so, have you booked the hunters? If not, why and what could you do differently to produce more fawns? Did you destock your livestock this year in time to save enough grass for this years' fawn production or will you again be out of mature bucks in six more years? Did you reduce or remove the cattle before the grass disappeared or after? If after, do you plan to cancel the quail hunts this winter or have the hunters arrive only to be disappointed? Timing is important. Timing is everything.

When managing wild animals in wild spaces and dealing with wild natural processes, you have to look far ahead and prepare for anything to happen. Without management, wildlife populations ebb and flow over time because they react after changes, they don't anticipate them. Management, on the other hand, prepares for and react BEFORE it is too late in order to minimize those ebbs and flows. Timing is important. Timing is everything and consistency pays the bills.

Give us a call if you need more consistency in your ranch and wildlife management programs.

One For the Books

The drought of 2011 set all sorts of records and continues to scar the landscape today. Old timers around here used to talk about the 1950's drought but now talk about 2011 as the new standard. Stands of bare-limbed cedar skeletons and broken-down hackberry trees still line the creeks and rocky hillsides throughout much of central and west Texas. But now, move over 2011, we have another record setting benchmark to add to that illustrious list.



As I write this piece today (5-24-2022) from my office in northern San Saba County, the skies are dark, and the clouds hang low, heavy with moisture. Two days ago, it was 100 degrees and dry as a bone.

It has been basically dry as a bone since last fall, November to be exact. In fact, the current drought conditions are now WORSE than the historic 2011 drought, according to both the habitat and local Hickory Underground Water Conservation District records:

Reflecting back on last year, we had strong and timely rains through the early spring and summer months. Grass was being mowed often, ponds were full, wildlife flourished, parts of Texas experienced one of their best bobwhite quail hatches ever and deer were fat and healthy with above average antler growth and fawn production. But then the faucet turned off in November. The winter months were below average dry, and the winds were relentless. December was recorded as one of the driest on record. Almost nothing fell in January and February arrived with more ice, more winds and practically no moisture, just more ice damage. Our earthen ponds began to stress as water levels dropped and our smaller rivers, creeks and bayous stopped flowing. By springtime, it was obvious we were in trouble and very few wildflowers proved it. The only bluebonnets to be found in central Texas were immediately against the paved roads where what little moisture did fall, was deposited within the narrow band of greenery. As spring failed to green up, the wildlife began to show signs of stress, vehicle collisions increased with each passing day as they literally risked their lives for something to eat. According to my travels, many wildlife species—deer, feral hogs, raccoon, porcupines, rabbits and skunks lost their lives nightly as they were forced to compete with vehicles as they foraged on the long green strip of greenery along the road edges. Bucks with soft velvet antlers just protruding from their head, heavy bred does and even entire sounders of feral hogs were laid out along the major and minor highways every morning as I drive to work throughout Texas.

Auto accidents with wildlife are obviously an inconvenience for people, however, to my biologist brain they prove signs of distress for wildlife. Wildlife have designated home ranges—a general area they prefer to live each day that meets their daily requirements of food, water and shelter.

This is no different than with humans, we have similar requirements too, except we have thumbs and tools to create something we need while wildlife have to find it, compete for it and defend it. As drought causes food and water to become scarce, wildlife must adapt to the changes in order to survive and that means they must move more often. They must search out new sources of food and water with less regard for shelter. So they jump many more fences, walk many more miles, cross many more roadways in search of meeting their daily requirements simply to survive. And with a historic drought such as 1950, 2011 or 2022, they inevitably end up closer to humans and elevated danger.



We may not be able to control the weather and we are reminded often that Mother Nature is indeed in charge but there are a few things we CAN do to help your local wildlife to better cope with dry conditions. The first is not as simple as it sounds but this is what we at Spring Creek Outdoors do for a living—observe, record, prepare and act. We knew it was dry back in November and hunting season was open. We encouraged every one of our clients to increase harvest of the deer while they could. We increased our harvest recommendations simply because the production rates were higher from last springs' wet cycle and we knew we were already staring at a potential drought, so we encouraged our clients to be aggressive and not let the deer population grow. We did the same for feral hogs and predators—apply pressure now while we have the opportunity so we can be prepared for the future. Next, water distribution. I did not say abundance, but distribution and there is a huge difference. Water can be distributed cheaply, with some labor no doubt, but it does not take much water to be effective. If you have not seen the video on how to create your own wildlife waterer, check it out here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oY_9VnSSR4A

The video is old but still valid today and this investment works for years to come. We recommend placing the water pan inside a feeder pen if possible but if not fenced, make sure to protect the float from being damaged. If you don't want to haul the water, then construct a rainwater catchment system to capture and store it. This requires a bit more work but it too also lasts for many years. If you need assistance with rainwater catchment or manually-filled water trough construction, give us a call and we will be happy to assist you.

Next, improve your habitat to help keep your animals "at home." Again, as biologists, this is what we do. Let us review your interior property fences, your livestock rotational grazing system, see if the habitat can be improved upon and enhanced to produce more wildlife-friendly forage opportunities. You will be shocked what can happen with improved habitat and forage production from a wildlife movement perspective. So just these few items will help to keep the wildlife on your property and keep them safe and offer optimum production.



Ponds Getting Low

Lack of rainfall causes struggles for all forms of animals on a ranch, not just those that walk and fly. Fish in lakes and ponds obviously need water to survive, but there is much more to it than just having water. When ponds get low, fish get concentrated into smaller areas. For example, when you take 5 acres of water and draw it down to 1 acre, you now brought your stocking rate up 500%. If it was just baitfish density that went up, you'd probably be in a pretty good spot, but running predator numbers up that high is a train wreck that is very difficult to stop. Largemouth bass are visual predators, and they're damn good ones. Concentrating 5 acres of bass into a 1 acre area is going to allow them to feed at an extremely high rate, for a short amount of time anyhow. The higher density of predators will quickly lead to depleted baitfish populations and long term will lead to stressed and growth stunted bass.

The only baitfish that will survive this event are the few that are exceptionally good at hiding, and the largest in the pond that are too big to be consumed. Large mature bluegill perch can produce 25,000

eggs or more per spawn, over 5 times a summer if pond and weather conditions allow. The catch here is that the young they produce are easy targets for an established predator population, everything wants to eat a baby bluegill. The largest bass have to expend tons of effort to get full on 1.5" bluegill. For a bass to gain 1 pound of body weight it needs to consume approximately 10 pounds of baitfish, and even more than that to maintain that weight. It takes on average 550 of those 1.5" bluegill to weight 1 pound, and it takes a lot of time to catch that many. If might feel productive at the time, but it would be like you trying to gain weight by eating nothing but plain lettuce.



When water gets low, stress levels also go up. Water holds oxygen at much lower rates in shallow hot water than in deep cold water. Most fish species can handle extreme cold surprisingly well, but very few can handle the heat. A pond with 3' deep water in it can be a death sentence for fish, either from

starvation, oxygen depletion, or stress from all these factors combined. If you can add water to a pond from a well, this is obviously ideal, but if not you should consider getting these fish out in one way or another. Moving fish to another pond seems like the first option, but you need to consider what is going on in that pond from a population perspective as well. Moving bass to another pond might save those fish initially, but might doom them or the ones already in there down the road.



Ranch ponds that aren't intensively managed rarely have a shortage of bass, but they almost

always have a baitfish number problem. Ideally we want to see a minimum of 10:1 baitfish-predator ratio, and nearly double that for ponds growing trophy bass. The common mindset with bass in ponds is similar to the old mindset with whitetail does, if we take them out there won't be any more in the future. While that was true at one time, ponds tend to quickly pass up that threshold for bass population sustainability. Sometime the best thing you can do is take out some of the predators and fire up the grease.

Fences and Fawns

When you look at ranching in Texas, cattle and deer operations do not always get along. From a cattle rancher's perspective, deer have quite often been an afterthought. From a hunter's eyes, cattle can be seen as a nuisance and a headache during hunting season. These two viewpoints could not be further from the truth. Leasing a property for deer hunting or selling a few hunts every year can significantly relieve the financial burden on a rancher when the cattle market is down or when the rains failed to produce much grass as we are seeing this year. While this logic has gained acceptance with many landowners, hunters are not always as easily convinced. Cattle can be a great asset to a hunting ranch, but there is a fine line that needs to be walked, and that line is literally a fence.

Deer have a certain need for cover, but heavy brush that is too thick or too abundant can be detrimental. Bedding areas of thicker brush are essential to escape the elements, predators, raise fawns, and the list goes on. Deer like edges, meaning where the brush meets open area. As time goes, the natural progression of the habitat in Texas is to a climax community of thick brush. Historically, wildfires prevented this from occurring, but in modern times these fires are not left to clear the landscape unchecked. When cattle are present on a ranch, they open up trails through thick brush that deer will use for travel in and out of areas that might have been less accessible before the cattle went there. Cattle graze down tall grass and open up bare ground to allow sunlight to reach the small forbs that deer consume in the springtime. The hoof action from a 600-pound steer aerates the soil which increases germination of seeds. All of the above-mentioned things are great for wildlife. However, too much of a good thing can be a bad thing.



Grass cover is essential for fawn survival. This might not seem like a huge concern, after all hunters are after big mature bucks, not fawns. But keep in mind that every 160" 10-point buck started out as a 4 pound fawn. When summer temperatures rise over 100 degrees, ground temperature of the bare dirt we see in many parts of the state this year can easily climb over 130 degrees and this is a death sentence for an exposed fawn. Under tall shaded grass the temperature can easily be 30+ degrees less than the bare ground temperature. And even if they survive the heat, sitting out in the wide open for the first

few weeks of their life also greatly increases the likelihood that a predator will find them. By temporarily rotating cattle to another pasture (or off the property entirely) when you see the grass height lowering, you can help prevent many of these problems. Fawns all over the state are hitting the ground now so try to keep the grass tall until mid-July when possible and your deer hunters and fawns will be grateful!

Predators

Even during a perfectly normal year predator control is of the utmost importance for wildlife management. All hunters and wildlife managers are- at their core- devoted to raising baby animals. Every trophy buck began life as a helpless 4-pound fawn, and every turkey or quail started off as a tiny bumbling ball of fluff. The biggest obstacle to the growth of these new additions is predators, and the impact of predators is exacerbated during droughts such as the one we are currently in.

The biggest determining factor in fawn survival is ground cover, because a newborn fawn must stay hidden if it is to survive. For the first four weeks of a fawn's life, it is hidden by its mother while she forages for food, and she returns several times throughout the day to nurse. This strategy keeps the fawn mostly out of sight while it is not yet capable of out-running threats. If there is not adequate ground cover, this strategy does not work because helpless fawns are left exposed to both the elements and hunting predators. Without cover, a fawn is susceptible to predation by the usual predators such as coyotes, bobcats, and feral hogs, but additionally foxes, hawks, vultures, raccoons, and dogs. Quail and turkeys are also prey for all of these and smaller meso-predators such as skunks, opossums, feral house cats, and even snakes.

During dry seasons, ground cover is reduced due to decreased grass growth and increased browsing or grazing pressure. During a drought, whatever foliage that stays standing through the winter may be the only available cover for fawning season. It is very important to preserve whatever natural ground cover may be present by not shredding or performing brush control until July, and deferring cattle grazing wherever possible. But most importantly, pressure must be increased on predators. Trapping, snaring, and calling must be practiced as much as possible to reduce the number of predators and give your newborn wildlife a fighting chance.



When the Grass Doesn't Grow

What really happens on a ranch when the grass doesn't grow? First, some real basic background about soils. Soils are supported and improved by the growth and death of microbes—those single celled organisms that are found literally everywhere. Microbes in the soil help build soil organic matter that help hold nutrients and water. Microbial activity helps to decompose dead plant tissue and releases plant-available nutrients and fix nitrogen back into the soil, release carbon dioxide and transforms nutrients into mineral forms that plants can better utilize. Microorganisms create favorable conditions for germination of seeds and growth of the root systems required to ensure the plant's survival. So, the soil

is “alive” because of the microorganisms that reside there and this symbiotic system is self-supporting. But there is a problem here.... The microorganisms feed upon dead plant material and dead material comes from alive plants over time. Microorganisms are just like us, they too need food and protection so soil must be covered at all time for a healthy microorganism community to exist!

What happens when the grass disappears? First, the bare ground heats up by direct sunlight to a point that the microorganisms either die or fail to reproduce because of inactivity. The direct sunlight and elevated temperatures can also kill molds and bacteria and they too are critical in creating a healthy soil ecosystem. Molds are the foundation of all life and bacteria help to convert soil organic matter into useful forms of food for the rest of the organisms found within the complex soil food web. So as the microorganisms, molds and bacteria become damaged or dead, the soil productivity begins to decline over time.

Bare ground obviously is more subject to wind and water erosion. Hoof action from livestock and wildlife can cause damage, or by heavy vehicle traffic or even feral hog rooting that loosens the particles that can be carried away stuck to a wet nose or become even more prone to loss in high winds. Bare ground, over time and repeated trampling, can become compacted and hardened. This process is referred to as “hard pan” and creates even more problems. Hard pan soils are denser, compacted hard layers of clay particles that create a crust of sorts along the surface on the ground, or immediately below the surface. This hard layer then becomes almost impenetrable for rainwater droplets, standing water or even plant roots to penetrate. At this point, mechanical disturbance is required to destroy the hard pan and planting new seeds and fertilizing may be required to once again jumpstart the microorganism, mold and bacteria building process from scratch.

Soil health is critical. Your ranch is only as productive as its soil health will support. So, if you want to keep healthy soils and produce as much quantity and quality forage plants as you possibly can, give us a call today and we can help your ranch reach its full habitat potential.

Fire Implications for Wildlife

Fire and the habitat of Texas have a long history, stretching back to long before Columbus’ discovery of the new world. Prior to the settlement of Texas, the prairies burned regularly and this maintained the grass-dominant habitat that fed buffalo herds, Elk, and Pronghorn alike. With the settling of the West came the suppression of fire, and this allowed woody species to encroach and produced the habitat of Texas that we have today. Even with these changes to the ecosystem, fire still holds many benefits for the wildlife of Texas.

Habitat is a living organism, always changing and adapting to pressures and opportunities. Fire serves as a self-clean function at times, or a reset button in the most drastic cases. In stale and overgrown pastureland, a low, moderately hot fire can remove the dead thatch cover and return nutrients to the soil, stimulating new growth



of grass and forbs while leaving brush and trees unharmed. Even in the worst cases such as we've seen this summer, the secondary benefits of fire are usually rejuvenation of habitat, control of invasive species, and an influx of animals that take advantage of fresh growth.

Fire is sometimes demonized as a force of destruction, and yes to livestock ranches it can be catastrophic, but it is rarely an actual threat to wildlife. Even in large fires, wildlife mortality is typically very low, and when present is due to manmade obstacles preventing them from seeking shelter. Wild animals have an instinctive response to fire and have clever ways of coping with it. Plowed or otherwise inflammable food plots are a common place to find deer seeking shelter from fires, and they will simply watch it go past from these refuges. In any case, the benefits of fire typically far outweigh any initial costs from a wildlife perspective. The initial burn scar and ash can be disheartening, but it will bounce back healthier and more vibrant than before.

Soaked or Scorched, There's a Disease For That

As the saying goes, no good deed goes unpunished, and ranchers south of I-10 west of Junction know that all too well. In the spring of 2019, this area was blessed with great spring rains, but the gifts were short lived. When this area gets abundant spring rain and the West Texas summer kicks in, anthrax spores are in full bloom. The 2019 anthrax outbreak was one of the worst on record and killed countless animals, including an estimated 50-70% of deer across five counties and more than two million acres, with an additional two million acres being impacted to a lesser degree.

For the most part, anthrax has been of little concern this year as we are in the middle of a drought that rivals that of 2011. With the blessing of rain in the past week, there is still a chance it can rear its ugly head, so we will wait and see what the weather brings. But just because anthrax isn't a clear, major concern this year does not mean that deer managers can take an easy breath. Anthrax remains rather geographically contained when you look at the full size of Texas, but EHD knows no bounds. EHD, or Epizootic Hemorrhagic Disease is spread by a midge, or biting gnat, that hatches from eggs laid in muddy or damp areas. When rains are common and water is plentiful, deer are more spread across the landscape and can worry less about when and where they have to drink water today. When we are in drought conditions, deer are extremely concentrated at whatever water sources are available. If you happen to have these midges around your muddy, drying-up ponds there's a good chance they are going to land on and bite your deer, and probably most of them that come to drink.

So what can be done to combat this little bug? EHD is not something we can currently vaccinate wild deer for, such is the same with anthrax (though a feed-delivered vaccine is in



the works for the latter). The only mitigation technique we can use is to supply deer with water, but not just by pumping into a pond. Spreading animals out across your property by distributing water troughs to areas without water can be a tremendous help. If deer do not have to congregate at a single watering location they are less likely to come in contact with these midges, and EHD is not spread deer to deer, only midge to deer. Troughs do not have to be large, 30 gallon or less size tubs work well and they are actually more efficient as they lose less water to evaporation than larger ones. Ideally you would be able to hook the trough up to a waterline, but if that's not possible and you aren't able to haul water to them every few days we recommend building a holding tank with a float valve attached to the trough. Additionally you can attach a roof structure to catch and collect rainwater when it does start raining again. If you have concerns that your deer herd might be at risk for this disease or would like some guidance on water distribution techniques, give us a shout and we'd be happy to help steer you in the right direction!

Special Permit Deadlines and Reminders

Deer Management Permit (DMP)-DMP capture deadlines vary depending on eco-region your ranch is located so make sure you are aware of those specific deadlines. It typically takes several weeks to process the application so be aware that only capture deadlines exist and that deer must be released from the pen, with food and water removed, 10.5 months after they are first placed in the pen.

Trap, Transport and Process Permit (TTP)- TTP applications must be submitted thirty (30) days prior to planned activities and capture may occur anytime between October 1 and March 31.

Trap, Transport, and Transplant Permit (TTT)- As of today, the TTT Permit is still unable to be used due to concerns about the spread of Chronic Wasting Disease. Until such time that the Texas Parks and Wildlife Leadership and landowners can come to an agreement as to how to administer the permit in a way that is deemed safe by Staff and acceptable to landowners, it will remain off the table as a habitat and population management tool for landowners. We will keep you updated on changes to this in future newsletters.

****NOTE****

As many of you that utilize the above permits are aware, there are deadlines beyond what is set by TPWD that must be adhered to for these captures to take place when they involve helicopters. We book helicopter surveys, DMP captures and other dates with helicopters up to 1 YEAR AHEAD OF TIME. If you have plans or need for a helicopter, please DO NOT wait until a month before to contact us for scheduling, the chances we and the helicopter companies both have open dates that fit your schedule are extremely low, and the odds get worse quickly after August 1st.

LET US HEAR FROM YOU!

As always, you can reach us through the contact form on our website, via our office phone number, (325) 623-5464, or at the cell phone numbers below. With 3 biologists on staff now, there is a better chance of catching us on the road.

Macy Ledbetter lives in San Saba and can be reached at (361) 449-6376

Matt Nuernberg lives in Poth and can be reached at (210) 324-8904

Wade Ledbetter lives in Mason and can be reached at (361) 449-6702