

Coyote Creek Ranch – A Success Story

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I was amazed at what we were able to accomplish. In the Post Oak Belt, I don't know what the upper limit is," commented J.W. Smith who owns 275 acres in Robertson County just south of Hearne on Hwy. 6. J.W.'s Coyote Creek Ranch is about 50% woods and 50% open upland habitat which at first glance looks like any other ranch in the Post Oak Savannah. How did he increase the estimated deer population on his place from an estimated 9-10 in 1976 to a high of 80 in 1983, and which has averaged about 30 deer the past four years? Virtually everywhere else in this part of the State, this same amount of sandy post oak/yaupon acreage still produces only about 9-10 deer. This is J.W.'s success story:

"When we purchased this place in 1976, I had the idea of growing big bucks. I contacted Jim Yantis, wildlife biologist with Texas Parks and Wildlife Department who lives near Hearne. Jim said there wasn't enough land here to grow big bucks. Our adjoining landowners hunted heavily and we were not willing to put up an expensive deer proof fence. Jim did think we could manage for maximum production." So, with Jim's help and a lot of experimenting over the years, they were successful in improving the habitat and being content with usually harvesting 1½ year old bucks and enough does to keep the herd in balance. "Our rule of thumb is to harvest about the same number of adult deer as we have fawns produced each summer. Since 1981, we've had about 100% fawn crop every year. Jim says most of this post oak country averages only about 30%."

All open land on the ranch is coastal Bermuda grass with scattered areas of invasive Bahia grass. The pastures are cross fenced for rotational grazing and seasonal confinement. The wooded areas are post oak and blackjack overstory with yaupon, American beautyberry (French mulberry), and farkleberry understory. A spring fed creek bisects part of the acreage. "The general goal of our management is to integrate cattle and deer management in such a manner as to increase production of both groups."

Winter prescribed burn on small area.



Approximately, 50-55 animal units of livestock (cattle) are supported annually, depending upon rainfall. Coastal hay harvest ranges from 100-200 tons per year and any excess hay is sold. Cattle are generally fed only hay during the winter period (mid-November through February, about 105 days). Calving period is 90 days beginning February 1 each year. During normal rainfall years (39 inches), cattle begin grazing rye grass and yuchi clover (overseeded into the bermuda pasture) around March 1 which increases calf weaning weights and increases rebreeding percentage. Salt, trace mineral and calcium-phosphorus (1:1) are provided free choice. Brahman and Brahman cross cows are bred to Simmental bulls. Calf crop averages 90% plus. Weaning weights for steers sold in early October



1988 were 596 pounds, 610 pounds for 1989 (both drought years), and 621 pounds in 1990. Heifers are culled with the best animals being kept for replacements. "The goal of the cattle operation is to maximize net pounds of beef produced per acre and maintain a healthy herd."

"Although all wildlife species are considered during ranch management, white-tailed deer are our target species." Cattle are excluded from some wooded acres to reduce competition between cattle and deer, especially during the stress periods of late summer and late winter, and to provide the deer with undisturbed refuges. From my experience, cows eat everything that deer do, but not quite as much acorns. When the beautyberry berries ripen and the acorns begin falling, take cattle out of the woods."

"About five acres are planted annually to food plots for deer use during stress periods and to increase hunter success. Chinese Red forage cowpeas are planted in May or early June for late summer use. During the early 80's we planted a 30-acre field to cowpeas and that was when we really saw an increase in fawn production and survival. For economic reasons in the late 80's, we planted most of this field to coastal bermuda to increase cattle production. In October, we plant oats, elbon rye, and yuchi arrowleaf cover for late winter use."

"The major wooded area is divided into five compartments (about 20 acres each) by disked fire lanes for rotational burning in late winter to increase habitat diversity, forage availability, digestibility, and palatability. We try to burn each compartment about every five years."

"In July and August, we provide free choice high protein (16%) deer pellets for deer using low to the

After burn (adjacent opening on same area).

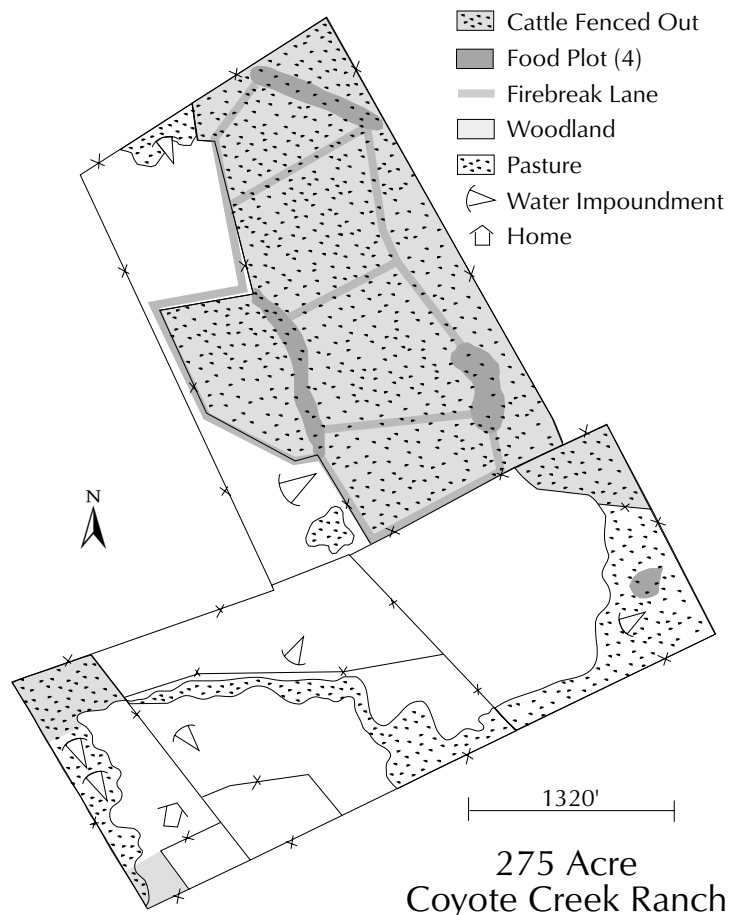
ground covered creep feeders that are fenced off from cattle. We fence off an area about 50 feet in diameter to give the deer plenty of room and not crowd them. Fawns use these feeders more than the adults, and we've learned to build them so fawns can easily feed from them. We have three feeders strategically located on the ranch, so none of the deer have to travel far to use them. We've been feeding 1,000 to 2,000 pounds each year at a cost of \$200 a ton."

"Our number one hunt rule is – do not disturb the deer! We place our stands and go directly to and from them, paying attention to wind direction. All of our work is directed to keeping deer on our property. We provide food, cover, and protection for them so they want to stay here. Our hunters are family and friends. They all come out and work. They pay for management costs, which amounts to \$50-\$90 per harvested animal. I'm convinced that the more we are willing to pay for management, the more animals we can produce for harvest. During the last three years, we've experienced drought in this area and our deer population and harvest has suffered accordingly, but not near as much as it has in most of this post oak country. We harvested 8 bucks and one doe last year. One of these bucks was only a fawn, but field-dressed 60 pounds. During some of our best years in the middle 80's, we harvested a high of 26 deer, 13 bucks and 13 does."

"The number of deer on our 275 acres is determined by spotlight counts in August and late February that cover all of the open areas. We count total number of deer. During bow season everyone keeps a record of the does and fawns they see. We determine fawn production and herd increment from this."

"Quite a few people say we've just been killing our neighbor's deer that have been attracted to our food plots and improved habitat. Not so. Most of our neighbors have said they are seeing more deer also. In fact, one of our neighbors raises watermelons, and we had a lot of trouble for a while with him shooting deer out of season, although the deer were not really hurting his watermelon crop. We finally got that straightened out with the game wardens' help."

"Our controlled burning program has increased the diversity of vegetation in the woods. Before we burned, we never saw any swamp rabbits in this upland area which contains no bottomland, but now they are common. Bobcats have increased, probably because of increased numbers of rabbits and mice on which to feed. We also have coyotes, but I've never found any deer killed by coyotes or bobcats



275 Acre
Coyote Creek Ranch

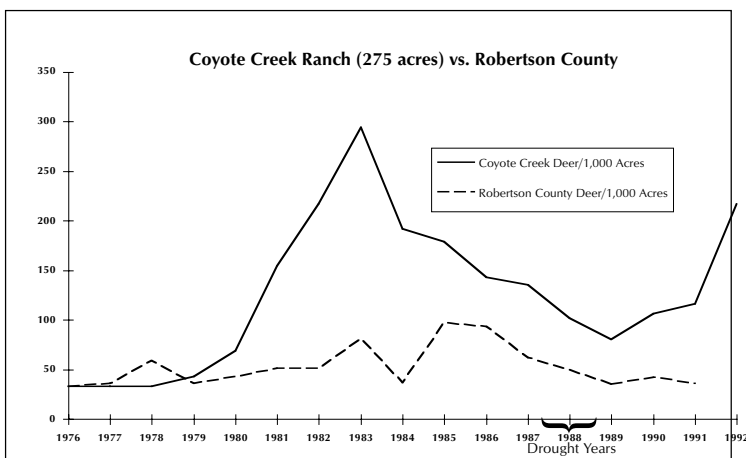
since we began providing supplemental summer food plots and protein deer pellets."

"We try to keep herbicide use to a minimum. The only spraying is in late June, and it's spot spraying to control croton (an excellent quail and dove food), using a low rate of one pint per acre of 2-4-D. It doesn't hurt clover like a lot of the newer herbicides and it's cheaper."

"From our experience, the four most important management techniques for deer and other wildlife in this part of the country are:

1. Fencing out cattle from the woods and rotational grazing.
2. Controlled burning.
3. Winter and summer supplemental food plots and overseeding bermuda pastures with yuchi arrowleaf clover and ryegrass.
4. Providing free choice high protein supplemental feed (deer pellets) in July and August."

"More and more people need to get involved and help improve our habitat. The SCS is always talking about how soil conservation is our heritage. Wildlife is also our heritage. You have responsibility along with a legacy of landownership. Landowners are only tenants. We should leave the land in better condition for the next person. Your neighbors certainly affect your management strategies and results, but even on a relatively small acreage, you definitely can make a positive difference. We've proved that."



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