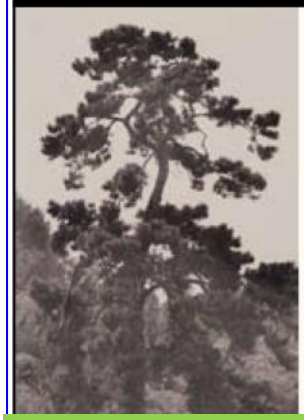
TEXAS PARKS AND WILDLIFE



PINEYWOODS POST

A publication of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department for landowners and outdoor enthusiasts of the Pineywoods.

Spring 2014

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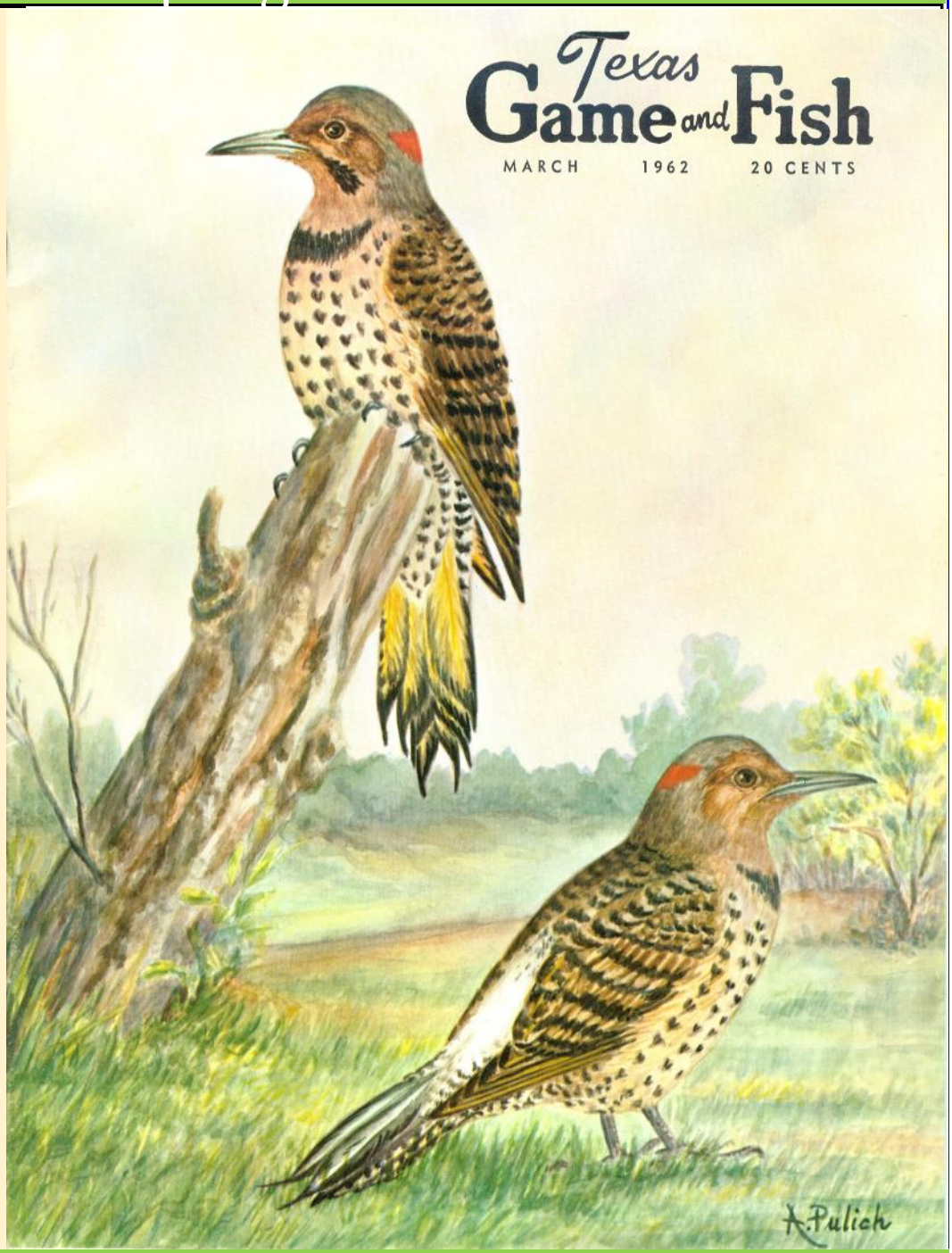

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The Bear Numbers

Dave Holderman Region 3 Diversity Biologist

Black bear folklore and conservation are popular subjects in the Piney Woods even though it has been 100 years or more since a self-sustaining bear population roamed this region of Texas. No one knows with certainty when the last breath was drawn by the last native black bear in the Piney Woods; although, the 1940-1950s period is frequently mentioned as the marker of this event. Like their kin - the red wolf, jaguar, and mountain lion, black bears were on an inevitable collision course with Texas frontier culture that placed high value on freedom, open spaces, and everyday human survival. The result was the extirpation of all four large mammals. In East Texas, we may never again see wild populations of the red wolf and jaguar for reasons uniquely fitting to each species. But even without the active hand of man, mountain lions and black bears are presenting a different picture as they gradually reclaim parts of their former North American ranges.

Bringing the story back to bears, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department recognizes the potential for black bears to recolonize their former range in East Texas and has monitored bear sightings since the early 1990s by means of a voluntary public reporting system. The system assumes that free ranging bears moving on the landscape are highly likely to be encountered by a human observer, and that a black bear sighting is sufficiently news worthy that the information will eventually be reported to the Department. It is a simple, inexpensive, and effective approach to monitoring a rare but conspicuous animal. Reported bear sightings are investigated by a Department wildlife biologist according to a standard data collection protocol. After investigation, sightings are placed in one of three evaluation classes:

Class 1 = bear in possession (carcass from a road kill or other cause of mortality), or physical (track, claw mark, scat, etc.) or verifiable photographic evidence of a bear obtained

Class 2 = detailed description of a bear observation made by an experienced observer, but no physical or verifiable photographic evidence of a bear obtained

The Bear Numbers Cont.

Class 3 = reported sighting vague and/or account of the animal seen not consistent with the image or behavior of a bear, or the investigation reveals falsification of essential facts

Criteria for documenting Class 1 black bear sightings have been intentionally set at a high scientific standard, similar to those used to document the sighting of a rare bird, to ensure the accuracy and authenticity of the information collected. Class 1 and Class 2 sighting data are stored in the Department's Texas Natural Diversity Database in Austin and are available for public review. Admittedly comprising a small dataset, Class 1 sightings form the basis of what is factually known about black bears in East Texas, and hence they represent a crucial source of information for black bear research, management, and conservation planning.

It is useful to ask what conservation value, if any, is revealed by Class 1 sighting dataset, so let's take a look at it. The most notable statistic is that only 33 bear sightings (which very likely includes duplicate sightings of the same bear) have been documented since 1993 when active record keeping began. Second, when sightings are mapped, it is clear that a majority were reported from the northeastern-most Texas counties touching Oklahoma and Arkansas where established bear populations are known to occur. The average time between successive bear sightings in the dataset is 203 days (approximately 6.5 months) over a 17 year period. The dataset includes two time-space clusters (Lamar County 1998 and Red River County 2009) suggesting that within each data cluster there were repeated sightings of the same bear. The only sow with cubs was sighted in 1993 in Shelby County. The most recent Class 1 sighting occurred in September 2011 in Red River County (approximately 28 months ago). The conclusions we can draw from the dataset are few, but, nonetheless, important: (1) black bears are extremely rare in East Texas; (2) transient in nature; and (3) probably originate from population sources in nearby Oklahoma or Arkansas.

Photo Credit: Louisiana department of Wildlife and Fisheries

BIOLOGIST BIO

Laura Speight, TPWD Wildlife Biologist Uncertain, TX.

PW Post: What is your job title and what are your main job duties?

My job title is Natural Resource Specialist III and my counties of duty include; Marion, Harrison, Upshur, Camp and Gregg counties. I conduct survey work on several species of wildlife which helps TPWD set regulations on bag limits and also gives us an idea of the trends in wildlife populations. I help landowners with their habitat management goals and conduct educational outreach programs for both youth and adults. I am also the Chair of the NE TX Conservation Delivery Network which is a multi-conservation agency effort to coordinate on-the-ground delivery of ecoregional/landscape level projects.

PW Post: How many years did you spend in college and what are your degrees in?

I have an Associate's degree in Veterinary Technology which I received at the University of Nebraska in 1978. In 2002 I went back to school at West Texas A&M University in Canyon, TX where I received my Bachelors degree of Applied Arts and Sciences in 2004 and completed a Master's degree in Wildlife Biology in 2006.

PW Post: Can you tell our readers a little bit about your background and how you became interested in being a wildlife biologist?

I was born and raised in Lincoln, Nebraska and grew up "Outdoors". We fished in ponds and lakes and every fall and winter I hunted quail and pheasant with my dad. As a little girl I kept toads and gerbils as pets and a host of other critters I found that had been injured. In junior high I bought a horse so a lot of my time was spent exploring the fields and woods on horseback. After graduating from Vet Tech school I lived on several large ranches in Wyoming, Montana and western Nebraska which really fed into my love of wildlife and the outdoors. I moved to the panhandle of Texas and lived there for the 17 years preceding my move to the Pineywoods in 2007. After raising my two kids, I decided it was time to follow my dream and become a wildlife biologist.

PW Post: How long have you been a biologist? When and how did you start with TPWD?

I began my career as a Wildlife Biologist in 2006 and started with TPWD in 2007.

PW Post: What is your philosophy as a wildlife biologist?

My philosophy as a wildlife biologist is best described by the words of Robert B Detting, "We must strive to touch the land gently and care for it as true stewards that those who follow us may see our mark on the land was one of respect and love…"

PW Post: What do you enjoy the most about your job?

Helping landowners reach the goals they have set to improve their property for wildlife. The relationships that are built along the way are important to me and it is very rewarding to see the benefit their planning and hard work has had on the habitat and the wildlife that lives there.

PW Post: What do you find the most challenging?

Keeping up with all the paperwork and finding enough time in a day to get everything done that I have scheduled.

PW Post: What is the most amazing (or scary) experience you've had while working with wildlife?

While attending school at WTAMU I did my thesis work on waterfowl and shorebird use of playas in the Texas Panhandle. There was one playa that I surveyed that was for whatever reason highly favored by birds and my counts easily averaged over 10,000 birds. I was always in awe of how loud the sound was of all those birds together and loved to sit quietly and listen and pick out their individual calls. Either I or something else would eventually spook them and watching all those birds flush off the water at once was an incredible experience and one I hope future generations will experience as well.

PW Post: Do you have any advice for students who want to be professional wildlife biologists?

My best advice is for students to take every opportunity they can find to get field experience in the world of wildlife biology. This includes competing for internships, and volunteering as mentors at youth hunting or fishing events. Get in touch with your local wildlife biologist and ask about volunteer opportunities. Not only will your experiences make your resume more attractive, it also helps you decide what type of wildlife work you like best.

PW Post: What are your personal interests?

I have always been a "dog lover" and have competed in several different venues with them, including retriever hunt tests, scent work, agility, obedience and most recently herding dog trials with my border collie.

Chronic Wasting Disease- What, When, and Where In Texas

Ryan Schoeneberg, Texas Parks and Wildlife Dept.-
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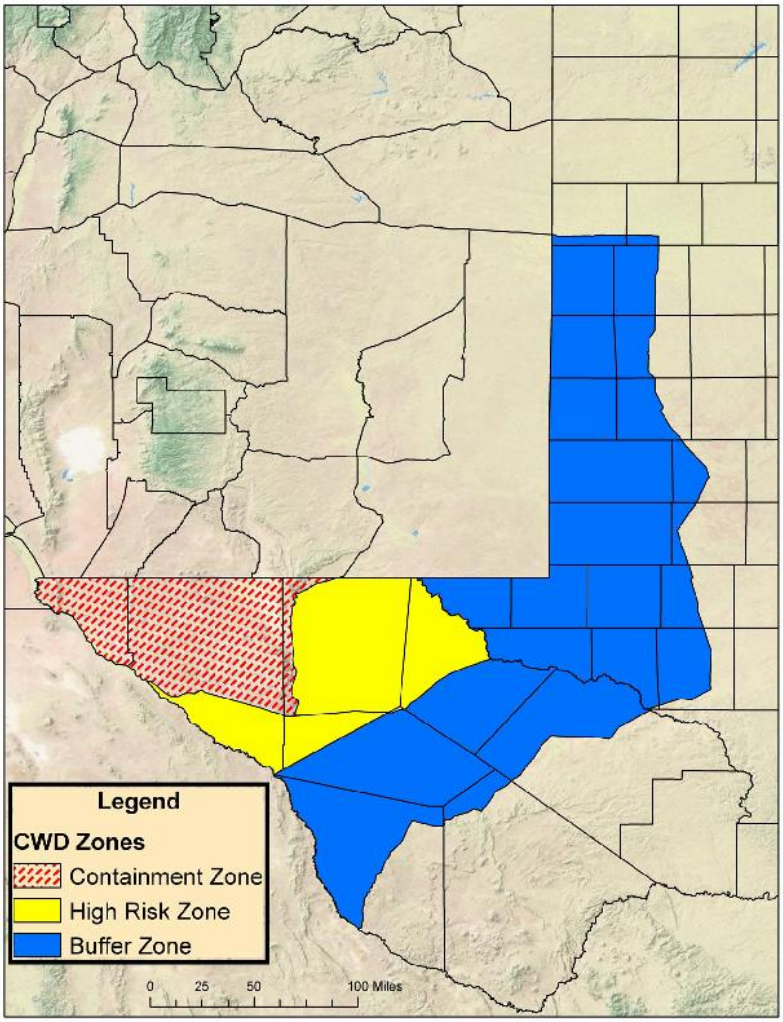
In 1967, Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) was first recognized as a clinical disease in captive mule deer by the Colorado Division of Wildlife at Foothills Wildlife Research Facility in Fort Collins, Colorado. Since then, CWD has been documented in captive and/or free-ranging deer across 22 states and 2 Canadian provinces, including neighboring New Mexico. On July 10th 2012, CWD was found in Texas for the first time in El Paso and Hudspeth counties near the city of El Paso. The management unit in New Mexico that shares its border with Texas has been known to have CWD positive cervids for some time, so to have it walk across the border into Texas is not surprising.

CWD is a member of the group of diseases called transmissible spongiform encephalopathies (TSEs). Other diseases in this group include scrapie in sheep, bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE or mad cow disease) in cattle, and Cruetzfeldt-Jakob disease in humans. CWD among cervids is a progressive, fatal disease that commonly results in altered behavior as a result of microscopic changes in the brain of the affected animals. An animal may carry the disease for years without outward indication, but in the latter stages, signs may include listlessness, lowering of the head, weight loss, repetitive walking in set patterns, and a lack of responsiveness. However, these symptoms are not unique to CWD, as most neurological problems manifest with similar symptoms.

The agent that causes CWD is referred to as a prion, which is an abnormal form of cellular protein that is most commonly found in the central nervous system and in lymphoid tissue. The prion "infects" the host animal by promoting conversion of normal cellular protein to an abnormal form. Prions are smaller than most viral particles and do not evoke any detectable immune response or inflammatory reaction in the host animal. The CWD infectious agent is assumed to be resistant to enzymes and chemicals that would normally break down proteins, as well as resistant to heat and normal disinfecting procedures. A protein does not need to be in the host to survive; therefore, it can reside in the environment. This particular protein is even more resistant than most proteins, which indicates that it is harder to denature or neutralize. Because of this resilience, once CWD is in the environment, it is nearly impossible to eradicate.



Currently, there is no evidence that CWD poses a risk for humans; however, public health officials recommend that human exposure to the CWD infectious agent be

Chronic Wasting Disease- What, When, and Where In Texas

Ryan Schoeneberg, Texas Parks and Wildlife Dept.-
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avoided as they continue to evaluate any potential health risk. The World Health Organization and the Center for Disease Control have both conducted extensive studies to look at the potential for the disease to jump the species barrier into humans. So far, all information indicates that it cannot. However, it is still recommended to take precautions, such as always use gloves when processing an animal, never eat an animal that doesn't look healthy, and never eat anything that is associated with the lymphatic or neurologic system of the animal.

Containment of CWD is the primary objective in Texas. In conjunction with Texas Animal Health Commission (TAHC), Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) has enacted processes for preventing the spread of CWD within the state and defining the disease's geographic distribution and prevalence. Since 2002, over 26,000 samples have been collected and tested for CWD in Texas. Based on a decade's worth of surveillance, there is no evidence supporting the existence of CWD in Texas beyond El Paso and Hudspeth counties. Texas borders are closed to the importation of live deer, which helps keep diseases, such as CWD, from coming in from other states. In West Texas, hunter check stations provide CWD testing for hunter-harvested deer, targeting the area where the disease is known to exist. Another strategy established is the use of geographic zones to designate the level of restriction that needs to be employed. The area immediately surrounding where CWD has been found in Texas is the "Containment Zone." The area surrounding the Containment Zone is the "High Risk Zone," and the area surrounding that is the "Buffer Zone." Each zone has a level of restriction that helps to provide confidence that human facilitated transmission of CWD is mitigated. When hunting within a CWD Containment Zone or High Risk Zone, it is recommended that harvested deer be quartered, the head is detached in the field, and all other carcass parts be left at the site of harvest if it is not possible to dispose of inedible carcass parts in a landfill or to bury them. These recommendations help keep the risk of accidental spread to a minimum. There is no vaccine or known cure for CWD, so precautions must be taken to minimize the risk of the disease spreading from beyond the area where it currently exists.

Chronic Wasting Disease is increasing in prevalence nationwide, as well as increasing significantly in the populations where it already exists. For example, the Wyoming- South Converse Unit has CWD prevalence rates exceeding 50%. In the same time period, that area has seen an approximate 50% decline in mule deer populations. Is this merely coincidence? Cases such as this are the reason that the number one goal for CWD management in Texas is to keep the disease out!

The management of CWD is hotly debated, largely because it is not the doomsday disease that it was originally touted to be when it was first recognized. However, the significant population level impacts the disease can cause over time gives reason to be proactive and prevent the disease from spreading throughout our state. In the case of CWD, an ounce of prevention is worth an infinite amount of cure!

For more information regarding CWD, please visit the below links:

http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/huntwild/wild/diseases/cwd/

http://www.cwd-info.org/index.php

Chupacabras or Just Ordinary Mange?

Sean Willis District 6 Wildlife Biologist

Several times a year there will be a sighting of some mysterious creature, or there will be a news story about a strange animal that was found or killed somewhere in the country. Stories of chupacabras, the legendary "goat sucker" of folk lore, and other similar tales will follow. These media stories usually include an interview with a wildlife professional that will explain that the aforementioned creature was simply a coyote or fox with mange. But the story will often be spun in such a way as to leave the public wondering. The existence of this mythical creature persists as some people will tend to believe the most unlikely of possibilities when it comes to chupacabras.

Mange, specifically sarcoptic mange, caused by the burrowing mite Sarcoptic scabiei is a very commonly occurring condition in coyotes and red fox and can infect other species including bobcats, raccoons, domestic dogs and cats. The symptoms of mange include hair loss, intense itching, and crusting of the skin that can quickly become infected. Skin damage is often caused as result of scratching and biting in response to the intense itching. In advanced stages, animals are often in poor condition due to starvation, exposure, and a lowered immune system. The symptoms of mange, particularly in advanced stages, are generally what lead to the reports and stories of these mysterious creatures.

Each year I receive calls from the public concerning such sightings or encounters, and have myself encountered and killed a few coyotes with this condition. This past season I killed a coyote while deer hunting in late winter that was essentially hairless, emaciated from starvation and exposure, and with a bluish crusty skin that distorted his features. This coyote was destined to die a slow painful death due to starvation and the elements, and is pictured here.

Chupacabras or Just Ordinary Mange?

In October 2013 a mysterious catlike creature was reported to me by an Angelina County resident who lived just outside of Lufkin. After taking a few pictures and repeated sightings, the animal was mercifully killed. It turned out to be a bobcat that was in terrible shape just as the coyote, and was unrecognizable to them. (Picture Bobcat: Theta Finley) This was the first case I had seen of advanced mange in a bobcat, but several instances of severe mange in raccoons have also been documented.

There have also been a few reported cases of "hairless raccoons" that have garnered media attention as well. The exact cause of the hair loss is not known, but does not appear to be mange. The example pictured here was from Wise County. (Picture: hairless raccoon)

Mange is very common within wildlife populations, and in some studies has been found to infect as much as 70 percent of the coyote population in some areas in some years. Mange can also have a drastic influence on red fox, and was credited with wiping out 95% of the population in Bristol, England in 1994. (Picture: red fox) Only the most severe cases of mange seem to garner the attention since they are the ones that drastically alter the appearance of the animal.

So the next time you think you have seen the "missing link", consider it very likely that you have just encountered something described here and not a chupacabra or some other mythical creature.

Texas Youth Hunting Program

The Texas Youth Hunting Program produces confident, self reliant leaders for the future. TYHP educates and engages youth in shared activities that are rewarding and enjoyable, involves mentorship, has a basis in biology and science and is affordable.

Since its inception in 1997, TYHP has involved over 50,000 Texas Youth and their adult parent or guardian in 3-day, safety-oriented mentored hunts on private properties throughout the state. On average the program runs 140 hunts per year facilitated by it's over 1,400 trained volunteers. Each event is insured up to 2 million dollars in liability insurance coverage.

Each participant must have completed the Texas Hunter Education Program to participate. Each hunt builds on the, safety, ethics, wildlife conservation and management principles introduced in hunter education and go even further with hands-on application of the concepts presented in hunter education. Each youth hunter is accompanied by a parent or guardian at all times during the hunt. When youth are not hunting they are getting an education in a variety of natural resource sciences and biology topics. For example, in the Houston ISD TYHP program Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) curriculum standards are met for Agriculture 381 and they are seeing improved test scores by TYHP participants in two dual credit courses, Animal Science and Vet Tech. Houston ISD students are also receiving College credit from these two classes due to the curriculum taught in class and on TYHP field trips.

TYHP trains all volunteers and completes background checks on volunteer Huntmasters. Huntmasters complete over 40 hours of training and are mentored by a trained and certified senior Huntmaster before they are considered qualified to lead their own hunts. You do not have to be a Huntmaster to volunteer. Each hunt has a need for guides, educators, cooks, people with firearms knowledge, camping knowledge, wildlife knowledge and so on.

J. Dreilbelbis

Thirteen trainees join the ranks as new Huntmasters at a recent training held in Jasper, TX. These new Huntmasters will primarily fill a much needed role as ambassadors for the program primarily in East Texas as well as other volunteer opportunities around the state.

Landowners throughout the state donate their time and their property to support the program and Texas youth have access to private property from Brownsville to Amarillo and El Paso to Texarkana. The hunts help landowners meet their wildlife management needs. You do not have to have hundreds of acres either. Wildlife Management Associations can band together and offer a hunt or perhaps smaller properties can be used to train volunteers or teach youth Hunter Education.

If you want to help we will find a way to include you and your property.

Texas Youth Hunting Program

We do need at least 30 days to post a hunt. Less than that and the population of potential hunters are very small especially after the general deer season. We do not just hunt deer either. All legal species can be pursued and the landowner determines what is available for harvest and what is not.

Youth who want to participate apply for hunts via our website at WWW.TYHP.ORG. Youth are selected with preference to those who have not participated in a TYHP hunt. Youth may apply for as many hunts as they wish, but be prepared to attend what you apply for especially if you are new to TYHP. New TYHP members have priority; you will get selected for a hunt. Some hunts are more popular than others so competition for limited spaces can be tight.

There is a fee for hunts, primarily to limit no shows, but we provide scholarships to those who cannot afford the fee. Similarly we can provide scholarships for attendance at Huntmaster training. We do not want money to get in the way of someone volunteering if the need is there.

TYHP Huntmasters have a very structured schedule that engages young people in safe, exciting, educational and family oriented outdoor activities that cost less than 2 one-day tickets to a Texas theme park. We cannot provide this valuable opportunity without the generous donations of landowners, sponsors and volunteers.

TYHPP is growing tomorrow's leaders today!

Huntmasters participating in a "Fireside Chat" Training exercise.

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