Ecological Restoration Brief

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A View from the Field:
Hill Country Land Owner Sets His Sights on Exotics

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I'm Roy Leslie, and my perspective might be of interest. I'm not a botanist or a biologist, or a scientist at all.

I am a Hill Country land owner, a Master Naturalist, co-winner of the 2014 Lone Star Land Steward Award, Realtor, hunting guide and guide trainer, member of the Trinity University Biology Department's Animal Resource Committee, and sworn enemy of exotics and invasives. I've spent over 60 years outdoors.

Our place is part of the original Hillingdon Ranch in NW Kendall County, TX. It's been in the family since 1887. You might say we're in it for the long haul. The ranch has continually been grazed since then. It's "A" class habitat. Not by accident.

Axis Deer (*Axis axis*). Credit: All About Exotics

Obviously, livestock management and grazing flexibility is critical. But there are pieces of the puzzle that some plant people and managers overlook; deer, native and exotic.

Deer presented no problems for us, or anyone in Texas before the early 1960's. Market and railroad hunters out for meat, hide, and feathers all but eradicated deer, turkeys, game birds, and many non-game species by the 1920's. Until funded by a group of landowners and hunters, before 1919 there were no game wardens to enforce what laws and hunting restrictions were on the books. Exotics were introduced to Texas in the late 20's and early 30's by Hill

Country landowners. They were contained behind high fences, until the first high water event. Escape was inevitable, but expansion in numbers and acreage was slow. Mainly because of the screwworm.

Before the late 1950's, the southern part of the U.S, Mexico, and points south suffered from a most grotesque predator. A grisly creature, the screwworm is a maggot that feeds on live, not dead flesh.

It is a deadly and unselective killer that coldly and efficiently kept wildlife numbers in check while causing hundreds of millions in losses for agricultural industries. Screwworms were a fact of life, and death. Through the efforts of Drs. Edward Knipling and Raymond Bushland at the USDA laboratory in Menard and later in Kerrville, experiments in sterilization of screwworm flies led to their successful control by the early '60's, just after the record drought of the '50's broke.

Native whitetail deer populations skyrocketed. Habitat, suffering a seven year drought, had barely recovered. Deer populations quintupled. We were not ready, as range managers and hunters, to assume the role of this most efficient predator when populations of the natural native predators were highly depressed. It was ten years before state and private biologists and landowners ramped up to the deer management levels required to protect our native habitat.

It took a sea change in attitude and "hunter ethics" for us to assume the primary predator role. No one would think of taking a female deer. It wasn't legal before, and generations that grew up trying to increase deer numbers could not bring themselves to wade in and kill significant numbers of their "fawn factories". Yes, it takes killing.

Axis deer out-competing white-tailed deer at feeder on Hill Country property. Credit: Roy Leslie, Stealthcam

My great grandfather's generation never adapted. Only after deer numbers increased to the point of major habitat destruction did the next generation truly adapt. It's still not easy for most of us.

Today, another critical threat is largely ignored. Exotic wildlife. Specifically, the axis deer. Many landowners are tolerant of axis numbers that are visibly destroying their little piece of heaven. It is *The Bambi Syndrome*. The axis deer's Disney spots and long lashes turn hard-nosed habitat managers to mush. As a result, we have passed the bottom curve of the hockey stick, and populations are on a steep upward curve.

Beyond their obvious good looks, there are physiological factors behind the rapid expansion of axis deer. Their digestive system is not the same as that of the whitetail deer. Whitetails simply cannot digest grass. Axis can. As a result, an axis never has a bad year, and never suffers a low fawn survival rate. Years when whitetail deer struggle, axis thrive. When mast, forbes, and browse are depleted, our whitetail deer relocate or die. Axis do fine on

last season's dried patches of little bluestem. With the range expansion of axis, your restoration efforts can be upended. Grade A habitat cannot withstand the pressure. All wildlife suffers.

It's my job to counter this trend. And yours too. If not, most of south Texas will suffer, as does the Guadalupe River watershed from Hunt to Highway 281. Hard won habitat improvements are degraded, and then disappear when axis numbers reach an unsustainable level. You are left with a universal browse line, and a pasture that more closely resembles a rocky parking lot.

Damage from Axis Deer in background. Green area fenced off. Credit: Roy Leslie

What to do? Convince all whose land you care about that exotics are a threat that will only get worse, and buy a hunting license, a rifle, and call me.

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