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# Texas drought grinding away at wildlife populations

Mike Leggett, Commentary



Brett Coomer /HOUSTON CHRONICLE

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This fawn was rescued from wildfire conditions in Grimes County recently. Officials are seeing a greater number of deer, especially fawns, suffering from the effects of the state's drought.

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An epic Texas drought that's leaving ponds dry and cracked and forcing cattle owners to market thousands of animals they can't feed is grinding away at increasingly fragile wildlife populations.

Songbirds, denied the seeds and grains and insects that sustain them, are forced to rely on food provided by people. Rabbits, squirrels and other small mammals can't feed spring young, and that's having an ultimate effect on populations of predators such as foxes, bobcats and coyotes.

White-tailed deer, Texas' signature animal, are hurting too, just when spring fawns are at their most vulnerable. Does instinctively know that the fawns are a drag on their bodies, and they will abandon their young to keep themselves alive.

"The fawns are not doing real good right now," says Dale Schmidt, a Texas Parks and Wildlife biologist in Llano. "I'm getting quite a few calls on fawns down, and it's probably not over yet." People are finding fawns either abandoned by their mothers or just struggling to survive on very sparse habitat, and they're calling biologists hoping to get some help.

No help is coming, except from the sky.

The lack of natural food due to the drought is forcing more animals into road right-of-ways, urban green zones and backyards. There's increasing contact between humans and animals, raising the risk of diseases such as rabies.

Trey Carpenter, TPWD biologist in Burnet County, is hearing from worried people, as well. "The deer are eating their emergency foods now, the stuff they normally would be eating in the fall and winter, but they don't have anything else to eat," he says.

Dry fall and winter forbs — weeds and grasses that grow in the summer — help keep deer going until spring but the lack of rain has retarded their growth substantially. Wildlife is forced to turn to less nutritional leftovers even earlier due to a lack of new green growth. Deer need spring green plant matter to help them absorb calcium, which in turn helps them grow larger and denser antlers. Without the green and without spring protein sources from native plants, antler growth likely will be affected.

TPWD's district leader at Possum Kingdom, Kevin Mote, says the bony fingers of drought have begun to affect his area as well. "Lakes are extremely low and river flows are low on both the Brazos and Colorado," Mote says. "I have heard talk this last week of ranchers around my hometown (May) beginning to haul water for livestock."

Mote said the worst long-term effects of the drought will manifest themselves in degraded habitat. "We are seeing some woody vegetation mortality — live oak, Spanish oak. If you add high browsing pressure to drought stress, you end up with long-term habitat degradation," he says.

Oak trees in Central Texas are important to wildlife populations because they generate acorn crops that provide important carbohydrates for deer, turkeys and other birds, and wild hogs.

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Without that acorn crop, which looks questionable so far, all the animals that depend on the nuts will be forced onto less palatable, less desirable food sources. Deer will turn to cactus, cedar and woody brush that doesn't do much but keep them alive. And barely.

Schmidt sees more problems than just dead and dying deer. "I'm seeing quite a number of foxes and skunks during the day, out feeding and moving around," Schmidt says. "That's not good."

When nocturnal animals are out in daylight, it means they are having to range farther and feed longer just to survive. It also means disease issues could be just around the corner. Foxes and skunks are known rabies carriers and already this spring there have been numerous calls about infected animals. More stress will just mean more disease problems, Schmidt says.

"In far West Texas things are drying up in a hurry," says Ruben Cantu, TPWD's regional director of wildlife in San Angelo. "Many browse plants have not even begun to green up. What we have is standing vegetation from last year. There's virtually zero annual forb production in the Trans-Pecos."

Mule deer and pronghorn populations went into 2011 struggling to hang on, and the lingering drought is just making life more difficult.

But deer are just the most visible victims of the lack of rainfall. At my feeders here in Burnet County, painted buntings, lesser goldfinches and white-winged doves are basically waiting in a welfare line. There's really nothing else for them to eat if they miss a day at our feeders.

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