

The Hunt is On

It's for real, folks. Hunting is now a major economic force in rural America.

by *Eric Grant*



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As a third-generation Texas rancher, Richard Nunley knows the value of raising quality Angus, Santa Gertrudis and Hereford cattle. But he's also come to realize the importance of managing his ranch more holistically, and he understands that preserving and protecting wildlife habitat is not only good for his cows, but it is also good for his bottom line.

The bulk of Nunley Brothers Ranches, which is owned and managed by Richard and his brother Bob, is located in the Texas brush country about 60 miles west of San

Antonio. It's known for trophy whitetail bucks, quail and wild hogs, which make his property highly coveted by hunters.

Nunley's grandfather first saw the economic value in leasing these lands for hunting several decades ago, and the family has slowly built on his success since that time.

Nunley estimates hunting revenue represents about 50% of the income for his business today; he charges about \$11 per acre on average, per year.

"It's become very important to us," he

says. "Hunting income has really been on a steady increase for the last 20 to 25 years. Cattle prices go up and down, but the hunting is a very solid reliable source of income for us."

The family's hunting enterprise is structured so the Nunleys don't have to spend much time with the hunters themselves. Instead of providing guided hunts, they simply lease out specific pastures to interested parties, and the hunters take it from there.

Responsibilities come with the lease, however.

The lessees must adhere to the lease's wildlife management plans, developed each year by the Nunleys with the help of a biologist from the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.

The plans not only help improve wildlife habitat and population, they also ensure the lessees take ownership in the land's management and health of wildlife populations.

"We've found that multiyear leases work best, because the hunters are more likely to invest in improvements if they know they're going to be there for awhile," Nunley says. "They know they can invest in time and money, because they'll have the opportunity to harvest from their work down the road."

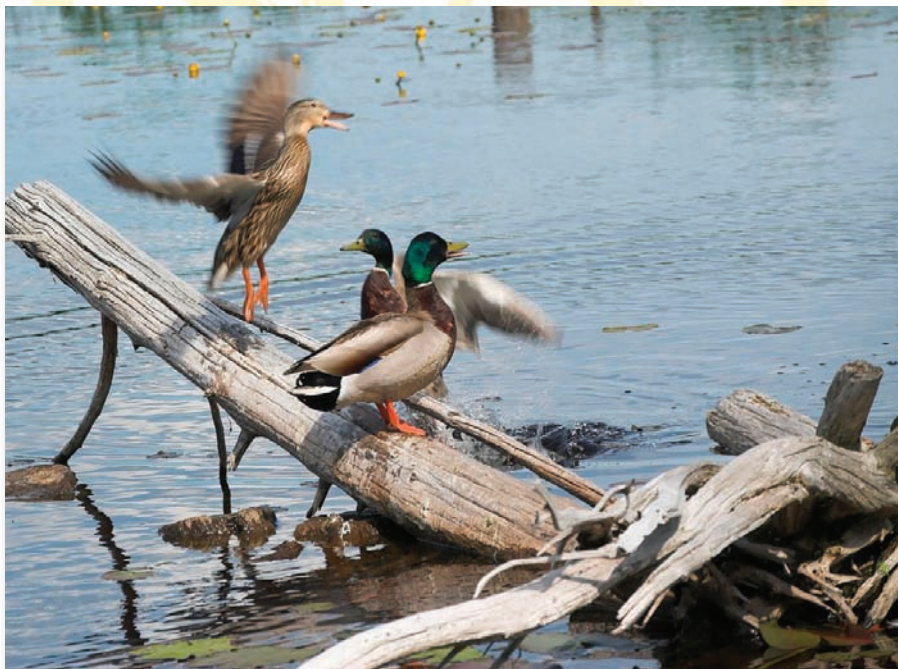
Most of the hunters pay for their own stands, provide their own lodging, and invest in the installation of feeders and blinds.

"The toys are half the fun for a lot of these guys," Nunley says.

Payment for the leases is normally handled incrementally throughout the year, with down payment at the beginning of the year to demonstrate a seriousness of intent, and a final payment by the time the hunting season starts. Many of the leases extend for as long as five years.

Key to making this work, adds Nunley, is ensuring the hunters adhere to the conditions set forth in the contract.

"Like any other business, you have to be firm," he says. "You can't allow them to fudge the rules. There're dangers involved with firearms and groups of people, so you have to be cautious about who you work with. Most of the individuals who are leasing from us today are much more interested in the quality of the animals. They want a good experience, they want good animals to hunt, and they want a long-term commitment."



Profound effects

Research conducted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service indicates 13 million people 16 years and older enjoy hunting each year in the United States.

Those 13 million hunters spent 228 days afield, took 200 million hunting trips and spent \$20.6 billion pursuing their passion.

- ▶ 11 million people hunted big game, such as deer or elk.
- ▶ 5.4 million hunted small game, such as rabbits or squirrels.
- ▶ 3 million hunted migratory birds, such as doves or waterfowl.
- ▶ 1 million hunted other animals, such as woodchucks and raccoons.

Hunters also contribute \$30 billion to the U.S. economy each year, supporting more than 986,000 jobs. They not only purchase hunting gear, trucks and boats, they also fill their gas tanks, and food and beverage coolers. They stay at motels and resorts. They buy hunting apparel, etc. On average, each hunter spends \$1,896 per year on hunting.

The emphasis on hunting is having a profound effect on agricultural land values, adds Dale Rollins, Extension wildlife specialist for Texas A&M University.

"A realtor tells me, 'we don't sell ranches to ranchers anymore,'" he says. "The basis for land values is no longer dictated by ag production value," he says. "Now it's about how much wildlife can it produce."



Guided hunting opportunities

Like Nunley, Greg Shearer and his family have found a reliable revenue stream through their hunting enterprise. Their ranch rests among the breaks of the Cheyenne River, and it's prime habitat for mule deer and other wild game.

Shearer, who is a purebred Angus breeder from Wall, S.D., provides guided and semi-guided hunts for his clients. They pay him for his expertise, lodging and meals — and for access to his lands. The family devotes considerable time and energy to ensuring their clients have a satisfactory recreational experience — and that can equate to conflicts with cows.

During the spring turkey hunt, for instance, Shearer has to bring in extra help to assist with calving.

All told, the ranch brings in about 50 guests each year. Most of them are archery hunters who come seeking trophy mule deer bucks. Others come to hunt antelope, turkey, sharp-tailed grouse, ducks, geese and doves.

"We run into all kinds of people," Shearer says. "Some of them are avid, lifelong hunters. Others have never hunted before, and this is their first time."

Since they started the hunting business more than 30 years ago, Shearer estimates

hunting income represents about 25% of his business's income. That's helped his family weather the effects of fluctuating cattle markets, and it has provided them with a better revenue stream.

"We do very little advertising, so we have a high number of repeat customers," he says. "A lot of the new customers that we pick up are from word of mouth. Most of them come from out of state."

Why do it?

"Basically, there are two motivations for managing wildlife on your property. One is for personal recreation. Either you enjoy seeing or viewing wildlife; enjoy having them on your place; or you, your family or guests intend to hunt them," says Dale Rollins, Extension wildlife specialist for Texas A&M University. "The other is a commercial situation, where you are charging someone for the trespass rights to enjoy deer, quail, turkey or other wildlife.

"A grazing lease worth \$4 to \$5 per acre may well be worth that much or more as a quail or deer lease," Rollins adds.

This additional revenue can be particularly beneficial for cattle producers during periods of poor cattle prices, and can ensure a steady revenue stream during

periods of drought.

"Hunting is relatively drought-resistant," Rollins says. "I know a rancher whose hunting revenues account for 30% of his gross profit during good years — and 65% in bad years."

Key to understanding the hunting business is realizing it's not going away anytime soon — and recreational demands on rural landscapes will continue to increase.

"When a rancher goes out of business, is that property bought by another rancher?" Rollins asks. "No. It's usually someone from Atlanta, San Francisco or somewhere else who wants to use it for recreation. This is a very strong trend in land ownership patterns."

Because of this trend, Rollins says, ranchers have two choices: "Either you can learn with them or we can learn to work for them," he says.

Rollins says ranchers should be encouraged, not discouraged, by the trend toward hunting and recreational use of ranchland. He advises them to see it as a way of capturing an additional revenue stream for their businesses.

The place to start is knowing what you have to sell.

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“You’ve got to know what wildlife you have on your ranch,” Rollins says. “You’ve got to know their habitats. And you’ve got to know what recreational experiences you have to offer.”

Rollins advises that ranchers talk to wildlife experts as a way of inventorying species on their ranches — and determining which course of action should be taken.

Next, ranchers should look at the available habitat for wildlife on their properties. If

there’s no brush, water or grass because your cows have pounded it, there’s probably not too much wildlife on your land.

“Every landowner or land manager should carry a camera, and use it to build a scrapbook of the vegetation on their place,” he adds.

“Habitat is the foundation of your land management plan. There are a number of resources available to landowners who want to improve their wildlife and land management, but don’t know where to get started.

“Without habitat, you cannot have healthy populations of deer, elk or gamebirds,” he continues. “Then you adapt your cattle management practices to ensure you’re improving habitat for those species.

Shearer adds, “Conservation plays a key part in this. You do have to have good conservation skills, so that you have adequate habitat for the wildlife. You can’t let your cows tromp everything into the ground.”

Being an effective habitat manager also requires you understand the species you’re trying to protect. That means you need to learn how to properly identify specific species, determine their age and health, and understand the effects of nutrition on their overall health. They should also know how to conduct habitat assessment, identify beneficial plant species and predators, conduct brush control, and control grazing practices to improve vegetation.

In essence, you need to wear a camouflage cowboy hat that balances the needs of your cattle operation with the needs of your hunting enterprise.

“You must appreciate the tradeoffs between the livestock enterprise and the wildlife enterprise,” Rollins says. “You cannot maximize revenue from livestock and wildlife simultaneously, so you need to recognize there are tradeoffs. You have to keep these things in balance.”

Finally, it’s a good idea to know what kind of person you are, and to what level you enjoy — or dislike — working with others.

Shearer says one of the challenges of running a hunting operation is dealing with all the different personalities of hunters who come there. Some like close, personal attention. Others prefer to be left alone. Occasionally, there can be real problems, too.

“Everyone is different,” Shearer says. “Everyone has different expectations. You just need to learn to get along with them.”

“It’s always best if you walk before you run,” Rollins advises. “And once you begin bringing in hunters or recreationists onto your property, use a written lease so that everyone knows what the expectations are. From there, you continuously improve your management — evaluate and adjust your practices based on what you’ve learned.”

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Editor’s Note: Dale Rollins was a speaker at the recent International Livestock Congress, which was in Denver, Colo., during National Western Stock Show (NWSS) activities.



Tips for hunting leases

A good hunting lease describes the agreements between landowner and hunter to prevent any misunderstandings about the privileges being purchased. It should include the following elements:

1. Limit the agreement to the person and lands involved.
2. State the price and the kind of animals the lessee may hunt.
3. Describe the land to be leased.
4. Prevent the lessee(s) from subleasing the property.
5. State clearly which rights are included in the lease, such as hunting, camping, picnicking, etc.
6. State the lessee(s) is responsible for posting sign on the land at his expense.
7. Protect timber, structures and fences from damage caused by signs.
8. Comment on trespassing and wildfire by having the lessee agree to help protect the land from trespassing and fire.
9. Require that the lessee(s) observe wildlife laws.
10. Include a clause to limit your liability for accidents.
11. Include a clause to prevent littering.
12. Reserve the right to cancel the lease.
13. Include a clause to state the dates covered by the lease.
14. Have all parties sign the lease.

Source: Warnell School of Forestry and Natural Resources, University of Georgia.