

HUNTING

Doves scant in many South Zone areas

BY RALPH WININGHAM

The South Zone dove season opener was one of the worst-ever in northern parts of the region, but the Rio Grande Valley area picked up the slack.

Opening day was a success for 6-year-old Mason Johnson of Victoria, but it was fish and not fowl that brought a big smile to his face.

"We only saw two doves and my dad got one, but I caught a big catfish — bigger than my dad's," the youngster said.

The success of Mason and his father, George Johnson, who were attending the 15th annual Karnes City Lonesome Dove Fest, was typical of the opening day across much of the area.

Mourning and white-winged doves that had been seen by the thousands in the normally productive hunting areas just a few days before the Sept. 21 opener seemed to vanish into thin air.

The elder Johnston said his son had been practicing with a .410 shotgun, but never got a chance to shoot at a bird.

Similar reports were received from across the area.

"One group of hunters would come in and say they were able to get a limit with no problem, and

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SLIM PICKINGS: David Sweet shows a dove taken in the South Zone. The opener was one of the worst on record for hunters in the northern part of the zone, but was excellent in the Rio Grande Valley.



MEASURING EDUCATION: Students study hunter education and safety as part of the "Deer School" at Childress High School. Photo by Russell Graves.

Deer on course with education

Whitetail becomes centerpiece of class

BY MARY HELEN AGUIRRE

The course? You could call it "Whitetail Deer: 101."

The teaching tools: Two bucks, four does, 88 acres of land that's been reverted to its native state and one very savvy teacher.

"I've always had a passion for the outdoors and I want to share that passion with my students," said Russell Graves, an agricultural science instructor at Childress High School.

Graves has taught in this southeast Texas Panhandle town for 15 years. This school year, he kicked off what he calls "Deer School."

The 30 students enrolled in three courses (Intro to Wildlife Management, Range Management and Advanced Wildlife

Management) will study such topics as food plot plantings, soil management, plant identification, forage management, hunter education and safety, plus, of course, deer biology.

Although Graves has taught these same subjects in the past, this is the first year he's made the whitetail the centerpiece of his classes.

"Now, we can gear everything toward the whitetail," he said. "This gives it more context. We can see firsthand how these management issues of habitat affect the whitetail deer."

Graves, a three times Texas Agriscience Teacher of the Year recipient, explained the choice of the whitetail deer as his focus: "It's the most zealously hunted and economically important species of wildlife in our county and state."

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CALL OF THE NORTH

Bird hunters head to Canada for early start

BY CRAIG NYHUS

Each September, Texas goose and duck hunters looking to get a jump on the season head for Saskatchewan, Canada, and several top guides start their season in the northland. Liberal limits and large flocks not accustomed to decoy spreads draw the hunters, and the shoots, while not guaranteed, are often nothing short of incredible.

South Texas guides and champion callers Chris Swift and Ward McGee operate Frontline Waterfowl, and headed north early for some pleasure hunting with

friends James Prince of Port O'Connor and Derek Spitzer of Hockley.

Spitzer, who also has guided in the past, made his first trip north. "I don't know how to describe it if you haven't been up there," he said. "It was all dry-field hunting in wheat or pea fields from layout blinds with full-bodied Greenhead Gear goose and duck decoys. The geese were mostly resident Canadas — big ones — as the migration hadn't started yet, and the ducks were everywhere."

"The season opened on Saturday, Sept. 1, but there's no hunting there on Sunday, so we started on Sept.

3," Prince said. "We took limits of mallards (8 each), Canada geese (8 each), and we shot a few Ross' geese."

The champion callers often didn't need their skills. "Not a whole lot of calling was necessary," Spitzer said. "But with these guys, I kept my call in my pocket."

The birds came right in," said Prince, a champion specklebelly caller. "Except for the specks. They are usually the easiest geese to call in. We had three champion callers hollering at them, and they just ignored us."

Swift couldn't believe it. "They

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CANADA: Derek Spitzer of Hockley shows four Canada geese taken in September in Saskatchewan. Photo by James Prince.

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Canada

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didn't even react," he said. Hunters headed north need to be ready for anything, from different types of hunts to all types of weather.

"It changes from day to day," Swift said. "One day, you'll need to focus on dark geese. The next, ducks. The great days are when you can get both."

The snow geese hadn't started their migration in early September, but after a few cold fronts and one snow, they were moving. "We aren't seeing a lot of young snows," Swift said. "Snow goose hunting has been fair at best so far, but the ducks are saving the hunts, and the dark goose numbers are still good."

While several outfitters operate in the area, most hunting a few hours north of Saskatoon, hunters also can head up on their own. "The people there are amazing, the friendliest people you would ever meet," Prince said. "Some prefer to allow hunters without guides or not affiliated with an outfitter on their property. But you better allow time to sit down for coffee."

Michael Holman operates Saskatoon

Waterfowl Outfitters, and headed north after dove season's opening weekend in Texas. "It's been different this year," he said. We had a light snow two weeks ago, then it was in the 80s for a week, and now it's in the 50s."

Swift also felt the heat wave. "It was so darn hot, then the wet cold front came, and the migration was on," he said.

Hunting for Holman's groups throughout the month has been outstanding as well. "There are plenty of birds. We had a good push of sandhills, and lots of mallards. The birds are migrating every night; we saw at least 10,000 pintails today."

Most of the Canada geese taken have been the local larger birds, but the lesser are starting to show. "We're still waiting on the big push of Canadas, but they should be here soon."

Most hunters come home with sore shoulders and trip-of-a-lifetime memories.

INFO:

Saskatoon Waterfowl Outfitters
(877) HUNT-SWO
(979) 218-4833

Frontline Waterfowl
(281) 204-7834
(281) 642-6596

School

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His teaching campus is 80-plus acres of land that the school purchased in 2003 with grant money. Earlier in February, Graves received six whitetail that were removed from the 1,200-acre Southwest Research Institute in San Antonio.

The school's six deer, the maximum number permitted by Texas Parks and Wildlife to be enclosed in the limited area, are penned in 22-acres. Sixty-plus additional acres are home to free-ranging whitetail and mule deer that the students also can study.

In addition to classroom work, the school has game cameras so students can monitor the whitetail from afar. But, Graves advocates the close-up and personal approach, too.

Only three weeks into the program, student Jennifer Early has gotten some hands-on experience.

"So far, I've gotten to drive a tractor, feed and water wild hogs, and measure food plots for the deer on the land," said Early, who

turned 18 last month.

The senior said she has already learned that wild animals can sometimes be gentle. "Hopefully, later on in the year I will learn more."

As the year progresses, students will be able to chart antler growth and reproductive rates.

Long-term, Graves wants his students to tackle such questions as:

- 1) Will free-range deer go as readily to supplemental protein as penned deer?
- 2) What effect do age and nutrition have on antler growth?
- 3) What are the effects of Boone & Crockett score on reproductive success?

"The variety of research projects we'll be able to carry out in the name of whitetail and wildlife management is phenomenal," Graves said.

An avid hunter, Graves wants his students to appreciate the role of hunting in wildlife conservation. As they move into adulthood, he'd like for them to be good advocates for sound and scientific wildlife management practices.

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