



## Deer Associates eNews

News from the Deer Research Program at the Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute

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### Don't Harvest Does Until Thanksgiving in South Texas

By Charlie DeYoung

Managers have long worried about the effects on fawns when their mother is harvested. Do they survive and grow as well as unorphaned fawns? In Texas, the Managed Lands Deer Permit (MLDP) allows for significant doe harvest beginning around the first of October. Whether this early season has an effect on fawns depends on the timing of the rut and subsequent average date of fawn births. The fawn drop may be as early as April-May on the middle coast or July or later in south Texas. Thus fawns in October vary greatly in age depending on where you are in the state.

Before he came to Texas, Henry Short conducted a study in Michigan where he dissected the four stomachs (the rumen is the first large chamber) of fawns of different ages. Short stated: "White-tailed deer are functional ruminants by ½ month, essentially dependent on ruminant digestive processes by 5 weeks, and nutritionally self-sufficient by 4 months." In other words, they do not have to rely on doe milk after 123-125 days according to Short. A Virginia study suggested 135 days for nutritional independence. In south Texas, which is likely to be the main region of concern for early fawn orphaning, a good average fawn birth date is July 15. Adding 124-135 days puts nutritional self sufficiency at November 16-26. Thus if you harvest does before this time in south Texas, you may be orphaning fawns too early.

In a study in the Kerr Wildlife Management Area pens, John Williams and Donnie Harmel artificially weaned fawns at 60 and 90 days of age and found no ill effects on physical measurements at 180 days versus unorphaned fawns. Steve Demarias and Bob Zaiglin have conducted some excellent studies on orphaning wild fawns in south Texas. In an initial study, removal of fawns during 15 October-8 November during an exceptional rainfall year (40 inches) did not affect physical development to age 1.5 years. However, in a subsequent study, fawns orphaned in early November had smaller home ranges and poorer survival versus unorphaned fawns. They stated: "Our results suggest early season female harvest may negatively affect fawns, potentially reducing recruitment."

Managers and hunters are often in a hurry to get doe harvest done early if they are under a MLDP. When cautioned about early orphaning in south Texas, they are commonly reluctant to change plans. There is an "out-of-sight, out-of-mind mentality" at

work here. Managers and hunters cannot “see” the effects, if any, of early orphaning so they ignore the possibility. However, many ranches and hunting leases spend large sums on deer management, including feeding, habitat improvement, food plots, helicopter surveys, high fences, and the ranch land itself. With this level of investment, why take a risk on detrimental effects of early orphaning?

A question that frequently arises is: “Okay, what if we just shoot barren does early?” (In most herds, few does are really barren. Does without fawns in the fall have likely lost them shortly after birth.) Again, my answer is why take the risk that a “barren doe” actually has an unseen fawn?

The Thanksgiving holidays are very popular for deer hunting in Texas. Thus a convenient rule is: “Don’t harvest does until Thanksgiving in south Texas.”

*About the Author:* Charlie DeYoung is Professor Emeritus and Research Scientist at the Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute at Texas A&M University-Kingsville. He has been researching white-tailed deer in south Texas for over 30 years.