

Valgene Lehmann – Early Pioneer in Wildlife Management

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The cover photo shows Valgene Lehmann (left) and Robert Welder releasing scaled quail on the Welder Ranch in San Patricio County, Texas

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by
Christina Tewes*

“Texan Val Lehmann has probably made a greater contribution to the future of conservation and wildlife than any man since Noah filled the Ark.”

– Southern Outdoors Magazine, 1968

Val Lehmann was a pioneer in wildlife management. The above quote reflects the influential role Lehmann played in the early years of wildlife conservation in North America. Lehmann was also one of the first full-time wildlife biologists hired by a privately-owned ranch in the United States.

Lehmann is known for his adaptability as a field biologist and his extensive knowledge of the history and ecology of the Rio Grande Plain and Coastal Prairies. In Texas Parade (1970), L. A. Wilke describes Val Lehmann as “a wiry man of medium build, his face tanned by the hot South Texas sun...in some ways he looks like a modern cowboy...and speaks Spanish as fluently as his native English.”

Lehmann was an expert on the ecology of flora and fauna in South Texas. The late Dr. James Teer (1926–2012), the third Director of the Welder Wildlife Foundation wrote, “He is an interesting man. What a great experience it is to sit with him in a quiet place when he talks of the ecology of the Brush Country. He has no peers in his understanding and interpretation of the natural world in that area...”

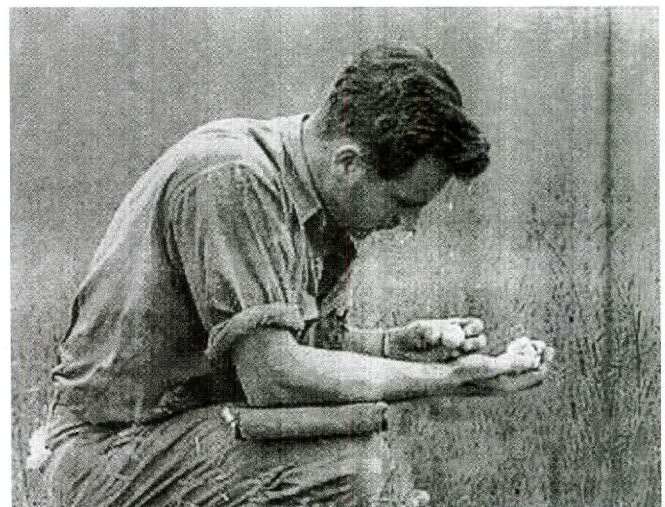
From his observations, Lehmann created original concepts and tools that biologists and ranchers use today. A keen observer of nature, Lehmann established high standards for data collection on quail, turkey, and Attwater’s prairie-chickens. He created record-keeping protocols that have been passed through the years.

THE EARLY YEARS, 1934–1945

Val Lehmann was one of the few active biologists in the formative years of wildlife management during

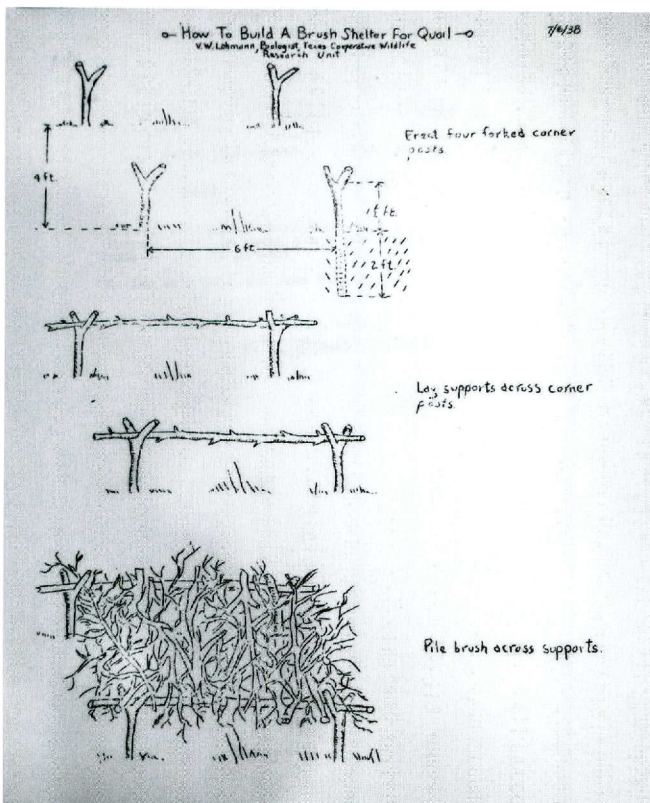
the 1930s. This period coincided with the publication of Game Management in 1933 by Aldo Leopold, the “Father of Wildlife Management,” and the inception of the scientific Journal of Wildlife Management in 1937. Even earlier, Lehmann had been observing quail during his youth along the Brazos River tributaries in Washington County near his Brenham home in Central Texas. This period of Lehmann’s work occurred years before the seminal book “A Sand County Almanac” was published by Leopold in 1949.

Lehmann’s early correspondence with other pioneers of the wildlife profession was also noteworthy. In a letter (June 15, 1934) to Lehmann from Paul Errington, Assistant Professor at Iowa State College, the soon-to-be famous Errington discusses potential problems using “dummy nests” to study depredation by predators on quail eggs. A few months later (October 5, 1934), Herbert Stoddard wrote to Lehmann about the use of quail crops to reveal the food habits of this important game bird (see letter on page 7). These individuals, Errington and Stoddard, gained reputations as intellectual giants in the founding of modern wildlife management.



Val Lehmann examining eggs of the endangered Attwater’s prairie-chicken on the Bernard Prairie, Colorado County, Texas, Spring 1938 (Photo by E. P. Haddon).

* Christina Tewes is affiliated with Wild Cat Conservation, Inc., a not-for-profit organization supporting management, conservation, and education/outreach for wild cats.



Directions to build a brush shelter for quail, sketched by Val Lehmann, July 6, 1938.

Lehmann began his education at the University of Texas, graduating with a degree in Business Administration in 1934. He was also a lab instructor who taught "Advanced Comparative Anatomy." While in Austin, Lehmann served as a field assistant working on the nine-banded armadillo with the Texas Game, Fish and Oyster Commission, which later became Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. He also studied armadillo and bobwhite quail with the U.S. Biological Survey, predecessor of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. This experience provided the basis for his future work with both agencies by establishing an early network with other biologists.

In 1940, Lehmann graduated from Texas A&M University with a M.S. degree in Fish and Game. He was one of the first students to earn a wildlife graduate degree in Texas with his thesis "Population Studies of the Bobwhite in Colorado County, Texas." His major advisor, Dr. Walter P. Taylor, signed and approved his thesis. Taylor had moved to Texas A&M to create the second Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit in the United States, a program sponsored by the U.S. Biological Survey to foster graduate research in wildlife management.

Between degrees in 1935, Lehmann spent a brief period at Bear River Refuge near Brigham City, Utah as Junior Biologist for the U.S. Department of the Interior. In this role, he inventoried and banded migrating waterfowl, and supervised work by the Civilian Conservation Corp. Prior to graduating from Texas A&M, Lehmann returned to Texas as a field biologist for the Cooperative Unit studying bobwhites, scaled quail, and Attwater's prairie-chickens.

Lehmann greatly expanded his influence on wildlife conservation from 1939 to 1943 when he became Manager of Region III for the Texas Game, Fish and Oyster Commission. Lehmann directed wildlife research and management on numerous private ranches distributed across 42 counties of the Coastal Prairies and the Rio Grande Plain. Although his research and management mostly focused on deer, turkey, quail, and pronghorn, his interaction with many important landowners yielded immense wildlife benefits still being realized today.

In 1944, Lehmann who was of German descent, struggled under restrictive background checks, but was eventually permitted to enlist in the military during World War II. Once in the U.S. Navy, Lehmann served his country as a Gunnery Officer in both the Atlantic and Pacific Theaters.

THE KING RANCH YEARS, 1945–1972

"[The King Ranch] blazed a trail for other ranchers, many of whom now consider a wildlife manager as essential as a livestock foreman."

– Val Lehmann

(<http://www.king-ranch.com/stewardship-education/wildlife/>)

Val Lehmann became the model for success as a wildlife manager. His earlier wildlife work had caught the attention of Caesar Kleberg and Bob Kleberg, Jr. who hired Lehmann to work on the historic King Ranch in 1945. Lehmann held the position until his retirement at the end of 1971. Caesar Kleberg and other ranch family members had already developed many management techniques and hunting regulations for wildlife on the ranch. Lehmann further refined techniques in habitat and population management, advanced hunter regulations,

and implemented extensive predator control methods to promote game populations.

Lehmann had the dream job of a wildlife biologist with his lab being nearly one million acres of the Rio Grande Plain—a biotic community that was among the most diverse wildlife regions in the United States. The King Ranch provided Lehmann with the opportunity and financial support to experiment with a variety of ideas and to achieve many successes. Among these achievements were two published books and over 50 articles.

When Lehmann arrived at the King Ranch, the habitat appeared to have an abundance of predators. This problem consisted mostly of coyotes, although rattlesnakes and other small predators received attention. One challenge was to control the coyote population in a systematic manner—a goal that is difficult even today. Lehmann created a full-time predator control team to trap and poison coyotes in the immense pastures of the King Ranch divisions. He also instructed that any species of poisonous snakes should be killed immediately; however, the non-poisonous rat-eaters were spared.

Known for applying innovative ideas, Lehmann used pricklypear cactus as a “living fence” in place of barbed wire. These spiny fences controlled livestock by restricting their access to certain areas, and provided a natural defense against poachers. Periodic range fires burned the wooden posts used in barbed wire fences, which represented a significant operational cost. In contrast, cacti survived fire and returned naturally. Lastly, many species of wildlife relished the cactus fruits called “tunas,” especially in drought years.

Lehmann continuously tested different innovations for improving wildlife populations. For bobwhites, he experimented with many different cover structures, food plots, and intensive predator control. Lehmann built fences to exclude cattle from small habitat tracts near water to provide nesting cover. He developed some of the earliest versions of deer feeders, precursors to feeders currently widespread in Texas, thereby representing another example of Lehmann’s broad impact.

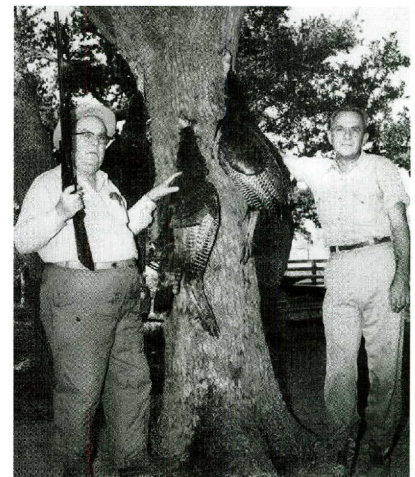
In the early 1900s, several game species had nearly been hunted to near extinction in many places in Texas. Large areas of Texas lacked viable and huntable populations of deer, turkey, white-winged dove, and quail, which

was often the result of unregulated take and overharvest. Another major impact by Lehmann and King Ranch was the game restoration program where captured deer, turkey, and quail were sent to areas authorized for restocking by Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. Lehmann and the King Ranch provided over 10,000 deer and turkey for reintroduction projects in Texas, other states, and even overseas. Lehmann stated that “Just about every county in Texas that can provide the range has gotten either deer or turkey from the ranch.”

Another example of Lehmann’s contributions extending beyond Texas was the white-winged dove. This game bird was limited to South Texas, primarily in the Rio Grande Valley. Lehmann successfully worked with Senator Lloyd Bentsen and the government of Mexico to enact hunting limits on white-winged doves in Mexico. Today, white-winged doves have flourished and expanded to many parts of Texas.

The conservation vision of Val Lehmann and his implementation of diverse management practices on the King Ranch became a paragon for wildlife management on private lands. Ranchers admired and copied the innovations provided by the King Ranch throughout its history. It has served as an outdoor classroom and field laboratory for students, biologists, and scientists to further their knowledge of the ecology and management of the sand sheet, thornshrub, grasslands, and oak forests of South Texas.

Lehmann was dedicated and driven about his work. His daughter, Nancy Lehmann-Carsow, shared a story that exemplifies this passion. A television program



L. A. Wilke (1897–1984) (L) and Val Lehmann (R) on a South Texas turkey hunt in the 1960s. Wilke wrote hunting and fishing articles in the early 1920s and 1930s and was Editor of Texas Parks and Wildlife Magazine from 1957–1962. Wilke helped organize the Texas Outdoor Writer’s Association (TOWA) and the L. A. Wilke Award is TOWA’s highest honor given to a Texas outdoor writer.

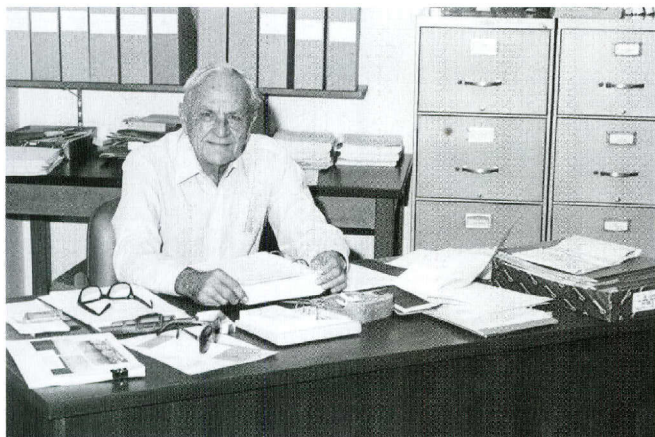
showed President Lyndon Johnson driving around his Central Texas ranch honking his horn and scaring the deer. Lehmann had previously restocked the deer for President Johnson, and was unhappy about this antic. Lehmann drove to President Johnson's ranch in the Hill Country and demanded, with the Secret Service present, that President Johnson return the deer if he continued to chase them with his car.

Through his position, Lehmann frequently met dignitaries and high-level government officials who visited the King Ranch. Nancy said that Walt Disney would send a Christmas card to the Lehmann family every year after his visit.

Perhaps one of the most noteworthy visits to the King Ranch was by Aldo Leopold. Following a meeting of the North American Wildlife Conference in San Antonio during 1947, Leopold visited the King Ranch. In a letter (March 12, 1947) to Lehmann, Leopold wrote, "...the big thing is that the King Ranch is one of the best jobs of wildlife restoration on the continent, and has almost unparalleled opportunities for both management and research" (see letter on page 8).

When Lehmann suffered five heart attacks over a ten year period, King Ranch personnel were concerned and assigned an assistant to accompany him around the ranch to assist with arduous tasks and to open gates. Bill Kiel, a young biologist at the time, was hired by the King Ranch to cover the demanding duties required by the position so that Lehmann could have more time to work on his book.

In a letter (November 4, 1971) to Texas Governor Dolph Briscoe, Lehmann wrote, "It is not easy to end a



Val Lehmann during the early 1980s, while finishing his career at the Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute, Texas A&M University-Kingsville.

career of long duration abruptly, and I do not plan to do so. After a full two weeks vacation—a first experience for me—priority will be given to the completion of a book on...quail."

CAESAR KLEBERG WILDLIFE RESEARCH INSTITUTE, 1981–1984

After retiring from the King Ranch in 1971, Lehmann shared his expertise by serving as a consultant to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Texas Land Office, World Wildlife Fund, and numerous individuals. However, he suspended his retirement in 1981 and joined the newly established Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute in Kingsville, Texas as a Distinguished Research Scientist until 1984, when he completed "Bobwhites in the Rio Grande Plain of Texas." This book received the Outstanding Publication Award from the Texas Chapter of The Wildlife Society in 1986.

The Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute dedicated the Lehmann Gamebird Research Laboratory in recognition of Lehmann's lifelong commitment to wildlife management. This laboratory was established in the Howe Agricultural Building at Texas A&M University-Kingsville to honor his major contributions in wildlife conservation. In 1986, Val Lehmann donated his research data, field notes, and manuscripts to the Barker Texas History Center (now the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History) at the University of Texas in Austin.

MAJOR IMPACTS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

Perhaps one of the most significant contributions by Val Lehmann is the information about wildlife management he provided to numerous landowners in coastal and southern Texas. Lehmann was a key wildlife advisor to two influential ranchers, Mr. Rob Welder and Mr. Caesar Kleberg. Mr. Welder established the Rob and Bessie Welder Wildlife Foundation, whereas Mr. Kleberg created the Caesar Kleberg Foundation for Wildlife Conservation. Both foundations have provided a major lasting legacy for wildlife research and conservation in Texas.

Each foundation has provided the financial support for training hundreds of graduate students who filled wildlife-related positions and have had an immense impact on wildlife conservation in the United States and around the world. The Caesar Kleberg Foundation established the Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute. The Foundation continues to provide critical support to the Institute and other programs.

Lehmann believed his advisory role influenced Mr. Welder and Mr. Kleberg, inspiring the development of their foundations. In a letter (June 13, 1954) to Welder Foundation trustee, Harvey Weil, Lehmann wrote that "...mine is something of a personal interest in the Welder Foundation. It is a source of real pride, for example, to recall that I was the only wildlife biologist with whom Mr. Welder worked actively during his lifetime; I choose to feel that my own feeble efforts might have been one of the factors influencing him to make possible the present opportunities."

After the Welder Foundation was established, the trustees continued to rely heavily on the guidance of Lehmann in the selection of their first foundation director, Dr. Clarence Cottam. Cottam was a nationally renowned scientist and conservationist. The role of Lehmann is revealed in his letter (June 11, 1954) to Cottam stating, "My recommendation to [the Welder Foundation] were that you were by all odds the most qualified person available...the trustees were, of course, most impressed by you as I knew they would be..." Cottam was hired as the first Director on July 1, 1955.

Lehmann was also a highly-sought expert on the Attwater's prairie-chicken and bobwhite quail. His publication of "Attwater's Prairie Chicken: Its Life History and Management" provided important information based on extensive research by Lehmann. His work focused attention toward saving the relict population of Attwater's prairie-chickens, and galvanized public interest and nonprofit conservation groups to support the creation of the Attwater's Prairie Chicken National Wildlife Refuge near Eagle Lake, Texas.

Lehmann was a member of several professional organizations such as The Wildlife Society, Texas Chapter of The Wildlife Society, Society for Range Management, New York Academy of Science, San Antonio Zoological

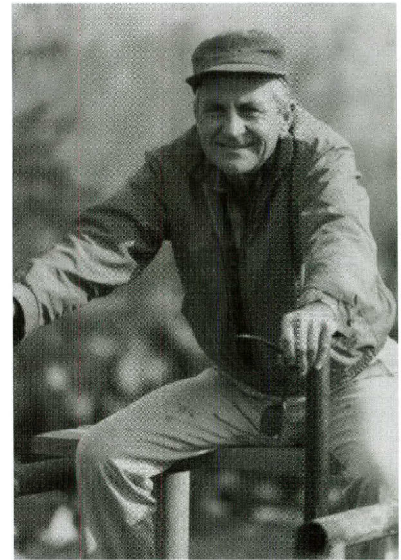
Society (where he served as a Director), Game Conservation International, Texas Nature Conservancy, and various agricultural and sportsmen's groups.

Dr. James Teer wrote that Lehmann "is one who takes a stand or position and unflinchingly pursues it. His committee work in professional organizations and citizen's groups has had important effects in conservation and management of wildlife and rangeland habitats. He is an organizer of thought and an enthusiastic and persistent activist in selling pragmatic ideas and ideals."

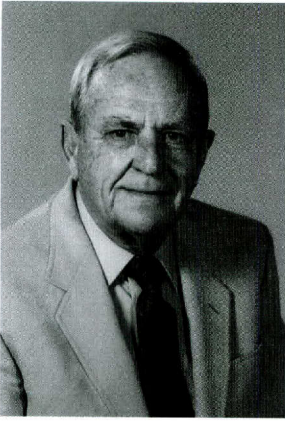
Val Lehmann received many accolades over his career. These recognitions included the Distinguished Service Award for his service as Chairman for the International White-winged Dove Committee, the first-ever Texas Land Steward's Society Award from the Nature Conservancy, and was the fourth person to receive the Conservation Service Award, which is the highest award given by the U.S. Department of the Interior. He also received awards from organizations such as American Motors Corporation, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, South Texas Chamber of Commerce, and the Governor's Texas Conservation Foundation.

Dr. Teer further stated that "Lehmann demonstrated on a grand scale the compatibility of livestock production and wildlife harvest. The King Ranch provided an excellent example of how proper range management is essential to both cattle and wildlife. His publications on range-wildlife management and the uses of fire in wildlife habitat manipulation are contributions that have had a large influence on the ranching industry locally and internationally."

Largely 'forgotten' but no less important was his award-winning 1969 book "Forgotten Legions: Sheep



Val Lehmann working cattle at his family ranch in Carrizo Springs (early 1980s).



in the Rio Grande Plain of Texas.” While cattle have always been viewed as ‘king’ in South Texas, Lehmann pointed out that with over 3 million sheep, “there was one cow for every three sheep in 1882.” Although sheep began a drastic decline by 1895, he viewed their grazing impact as helping to

change the plant life for decades.

Perhaps the essence of Val Lehman’s career was captured in the dust jacket covering his quail book: “His major professional interest is the development of superior resource husbandry in southwestern rangelands.” Although succinct, it does not fully reveal the remarkable pioneer biologist who provided important contributions that spanned over half a century.

PERSONAL

Valgene William Lehmann (1913–1987) was born in Brenham, Texas and died in Kingsville, Texas. In 1936, at the age of 23, he married his wife Ella Mae Zajicek (whom he nicknamed “Lightning”). They were married for 51 years until Val’s death. During this time, they moved within Texas from College Station to Victoria, Hebbronville, and Kingsville. They owned several ranches, including one near his home of Kingsville, another in Duval County, and two large ranches in Webb County. Lehmann’s last ranch was located on the Nueces River in Dimmit County.

Val and Ella Mae also raised two children: Valgene Lehmann, Jr. (1941–2001) and Nancy Lehmann-Carsow (b. 1949). Val Jr. attended Texas A&I University in Kingsville before leaving to join the U.S. Army. Nancy attended the University of Texas at Austin. Nancy and her husband Ben were long-time teachers in Austin.

Val Jr. and his wife Karen moved to Carrizo Springs where he worked and managed the family ranch located along the Nueces River. They had one daughter, Valerie, in 1975. It was Valerie’s phone call in the spring of 2012

to Dr. Fred Bryant, Executive Director of the Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute, that stimulated sharing Val’s biography with the world. It is fitting that we found a quote in one of his letters to a friend. Val Lehmann, Sr. wrote that “being a grandparent is the best thing in the world.”

RELEVANCE OF THE LETTERS FROM STODDARD AND LEOPOLD

Internet and email did not exist in the formative years of wildlife management. Correspondence played a critical role in the sharing of information and ideas. The Dolph Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas yielded numerous intellectual exchanges between Val Lehmann and other key founders of wildlife management such as Paul Errington (1902–1962), Herbert Stoddard (1889–1970), and Aldo Leopold (1887–1948).

These three individuals, Errington, Stoddard, and Leopold, were friends and colleagues who shared correspondence with Lehmann during the early years. They played key roles in the creation of The Wildlife Society in 1936–1937, the professional organization responsible for wildlife management.

Errington established and directed the first Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit in the United States. His entire career was spent as a zoology professor at Iowa State University writing over 200 scientific articles. *Life* magazine selected Errington as one of the top ten outstanding naturalists in 1961. In a letter (June 15, 1934), Errington writes to Lehmann about the use of “dummy nests” in population studies of bobwhite quail.

Two letters reproduced herein show Lehmann’s exchanges with Stoddard and Leopold. In 1931, Stoddard published “The Bobwhite Quail: Its Habits, Preservation, and Increase.” This book represented one of the “foundational texts” for the new discipline of wildlife science. In his letter (October 5, 1934), Stoddard suggests the best methods to analyze foods used by bobwhites.

Aldo Leopold, the iconic Father of Wildlife Management, visited the King Ranch in 1947. In the following letter, Leopold writes to Lehmann (March 12, 1947) “...that the King Ranch is one of the best jobs of wildlife restoration on the continent, and has almost unparalleled opportunities for both management and research. Still more important: it is a gem among natural areas, and must be kept intact. Any time I can help toward preserving and realizing these values, I am yours to command.”

Through his correspondence, and his extensive work as a biologist, it becomes clear that Val Lehmann played a major role as a pioneer shaping wildlife management.

Sherwood Plantation,
Thomasville, Ga.,
October 5, 1934

Mr. Valgene Lehmann,
2616 Speedway Street,
Austin, Texas.

CAESAR KLEBERG
WILDLIFE FOUNDATION

Dear Mr. Lehmann;

I was glad to get your letter of September 30th, and to know that you are going ahead with your quail studies this winter, in spite of your other work.

As to your crop analysis of quail. I would by all means advise that you adopt as standard the U.S. Biological Survey methods. I presume that you are thoroughly familiar with their system through your many contacts with Kalmbach's work. If carried on by these highly developed methods results from different parts of the country are strictly comparable. If you will write to Div. of Food Habits Research, U.S. Biological Survey they can probably send you printed instructions for this work.

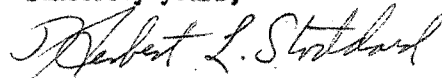
The outline of information the wardens are to furnish you is probably as detailed as you can expect from this source. But if possible, I would have a statement accompanying each bird as to type of locality. Whether woodland (pine or deciduous), cultivated or fallow field and so forth. In this way you will probably get a rough idea of what each bird had available, hence some idea of preference. This after all, is the most important from a game management standpoint.

I note that you mention the examination of crops. Were we to carry on another study similar to the original Quail Investigations, I believe we would base it on crop contents only, rather than on crop and gizzard together, as there seems some tendency for very hard objects to remain in the gizzard longer than softer food. If the hard objects accumulate in the gizzard to any extent they assume an undue importance as food. Then so much less time and greater accuracy results from use of crops only.

I presume that you have a copy of our "Bobwhite Quail" available, even though you have no personal copy. It gives a good sketch of how Handley conducted our own food investigations during the Quail Investigation. I have not seen a copy of Craig & Henderson's Economic Mammalogy as yet, but will purchase a copy. From whom may it be obtained and for how much? No, don't send me yours, as I should have it for reference here in our library. Many thanks for the offer however.

Will be greatly pleased to get a summary of your results after this year's study is completed. And let me know when I can be of any help.

Sincerely yours,



Herbert L. Stoddard.

THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN

COLLEGE OF  AGRICULTURE ♦ MADISON.

DEPARTMENT OF WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT

424 UNIVERSITY FARM PLACE

March 12, 1947

Mr. V. W. Lehmann
King Ranch
Kingsville, Texas

Dear Jean:

Thanks for correcting me on the goatweed vs. ragweed. I didn't see any dead ragweed, and that bothered me, but your letter clears this up.

I'm delighted that the remnant of lions is to be kept. I think you will not regret it.

As to hawks, I am only too well aware of how slowly progress comes. The main incongruity in my mind was the continuance of raptor control under topheavy densities in both quail and turkey. However I cannot speak too loudly on this, for I myself got high-pressured into assenting to a wolf bounty in Wisconsin on a range topheavy (and then some) with deer. Worse still the timber wolf is nearly extinct. I mention this only to show we are all in the same boat.

As to rodents, I did not assume you would get actual control from predators. I wish it were as simple as that. My assumption was that predators might help somewhat. I am much interested in your observation on what does control. The relation of jackrabbits to plant succession checks well with the Arizona studies.

Now to get our bearings: the above things are details; the big thing is that the King Ranch is one of the best jobs of wildlife restoration on the continent, and has almost unparalleled opportunities for both management and research. Still more important: it is a gem among natural areas, and must be kept intact. Any time I can help toward preserving and realizing these values, I am yours to command.

Best regards,

Aldo Leopold

ALDO LEOPOLD

AL:FM

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