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July 2005

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## Chicken Snakes *By Jim Dillard, Wildlife Biologist*

Gathering eggs from my grandmother's musty old chicken house was a chore I dreaded. Just getting to the chicken house without squishing 'chicken stuff' between my barefoot toes was a challenge in itself. Running my hand up under a hen on a nest to check for eggs always made me cringe. The expectation of being severely pecked or wing-slapped by a feisty Rhode Island Red was a real test of my 10 year old courage or lack thereof. That was nothing compared to the time I reached for a couple of fresh eggs and came face to face with a hissing chicken snake curled up on a nest. After grandma dispatched the serpent with her trusty eye-hoe (my screams had sent her scurrying from the house to my rescue), she coaxed me down from the top rail of the chicken pen fence. I never went back in that chicken house without the eye-hoe.

The Texas Rat Snake, *Elaphe obsoleta lindheimeri*, (a.k.a. chicken snake) is one of the longest of all Texas snakes and may reach 7 feet in length. Most average 4-6 feet. They're found here in the Cross Timbers and throughout the eastern half of Texas in brushy and wooded areas and along watercourses where tall trees occur. Other habitats where they're likely to be found include rocky hillsides, grasslands, croplands, and wetlands.

They're also one of our most aggressive non-venomous snakes and have a nasty disposition when agitated. Rat snakes don't back down and will raise their forebody at an angle and in an s-shape posture to defend themselves. They'll try to stare you down with their mouth wide-

open until you give them their space. Their strike usually falls short of the mark as if they'd rather scare you off than bite you. Although the 'hiss' is worse than the bite, their small sharp needle-like teeth can inflict numerous shallow puncture wounds. They tend to hang on rather than continue to strike – ouch! Other defensive measures include vibrating their tail against leaves or other hard objects and emitting a foul-smelling fecal spray you won't wash off easily or soon forget.

Most Texas rat snakes have a pattern of dark-brown to purplish blotches on a yellowish, dark gray or reddish background, although there is considerable variation among individuals. All Texas rat snakes have reddish pigment between the body scales and on scale edges. The top of their head is gray and their lip scales, lower jaw and throat are white. Young rat snakes are more boldly patterned with dark-brown blotches on a light gray background. The Great Plains Rat Snake (*Elaphe guttata emoryi*) also occurs here in the Cross Timbers but are absent from the High Plains of west Texas and less common in east Texas. They're more slender, pale-gray to grayish-brown with boldly contrasting dark-gray, olive or grayish blotches. They have a characteristic spear-shaped marking on the top of their head.

Texas rat snakes are agile climbers and can literally scale a straight wall. Their 'flat belly' (in cross section they're shaped like a loaf of bread) gives them added traction, enabling them to easily

## Chicken Snakes *Continued from page one*

inch their way up tall trees or other elevated places. They spend considerable time hunting in trees for squirrels, birds and bird eggs. Natural tree cavities are used for den sites and for hibernation. Cavity nesting bird species are particularly vulnerable to predation by rat snakes. On the ground, they prey on rabbits, rats and mice. Larger prey are constricted by coiled loops and swallowed. Rat snakes are also attracted to barns and outbuildings where they prey primarily on rodents and yes, eggs of poultry, until they get chopped up by grandmas with eye-hoes. Large eggs are swallowed whole and then crushed internally by muscular contractions. Egg shells are then either digested or regurgitated. Texas rat snakes have been known to swallow glass or wooden eggs placed in chicken nests to encourage egg-laying. Such items are usually regurgitated but occasionally some become lodged and cause death.

Texas rat snakes mate during April and May and lay 5-20 smooth-shelled white eggs, usually in old rotting logs, stumps, natural tree cavities, manure piles, under rocks or in decaying vegetation. The 1 $\frac{5}{8}$ -2 $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch eggs hatch in August or September with 10-16 inch young. Baby Texas rat snakes have a lead-gray head with solid chocolate colored lines that join to form markings on their head resembling a forward-facing spear point.

Texas rat snakes often invade artificial bird houses put up to provide nesting sites for cavity nesting songbirds.

I recently checked a bluebird nest box at my daughter's house over near Canton and saw through the entrance hole what I thought was a wasp nest. When I poked it with a stick, it moved - not a good sign! With further probing using a much longer stick, I discovered a large Texas rat snake had taken up residence and was reluctant to be dislodged from his lair. I finally was able to fish the 5 foot serpent out following considerable hissing and striking (by the snake) and relocated him to slither elsewhere. He was probably the culprit responsible for the missing clutch of bluebird eggs that were in the box.

Although they're not welcome in chicken houses, Texas rat snakes are a friend of the farmer for all the rats and mice they put the squeeze on. In the natural world, they're both predator and prey. I've seen more than one chicken snake dangling from the talons of a hungry chicken hawk. A chicken snake encounter 'of the first kind' will make a lasting impression on you. Catch and relocate them if at all possible, but keep an eye-hoe handy and only use it as a last resort. Until next time, I'll see you down the road and **God Bless America!**

Jim Dillard is a Technical Guidance Biologist for Texas Parks and Wildlife Department in Mineral Wells. Jim writes articles like this each month on a different species of wildlife that he calls the *Cross Timbers Wildlife News*.

## Cost Sharing for Food Plots

The directors of the LCWMA want to encourage members to keep planting wildlife food plots. So they voted to continue the food plot cost sharing program this fall.

The LCWMA will provide up to \$25 in matching funds (you spend a dollar, we spend a dollar) for the purchase of seed to plant wildlife food plots in Lee County. Funds will be available until \$1,250 has been spent (not all the money was spent last fall). To take advantage of this offer please bring a copy of your receipt to The Lee County Extension Office.



Purchase wildlife food plot seed from any Lee County feed store and we will reimburse you for half of the cost up to \$25. You must spend at least \$50 on seed to receive the full \$25 reimbursement. This offer is only good for current seed purchases to be planted in Lee County this year and for current paid members. The deadline for turning in receipts will be December 1st. Seed that is eligible include oats, wheat, peas, clovers, food plot mixes, and soybeans and peanuts if they are planted.

*Getting a soil test is always money well spent. Most food plot failures can be avoided by having the correct pH and adding fertilizer if needed.*

## Collecting Herd Composition Data

**Please help with this effort, even if you only record a few deer. With nearly 500 members it all adds up.** Herd composition data may be the most valuable data collected on a deer herd. When properly collected, herd composition data can reflect the overall health of a herd and help guide the manager in making proper harvest recommendations.

**Herd composition data should be collected during August, during the day and using binoculars.**

Herd composition data should be collected during August. The fawns have become a part of the herd by this time, yet they are small enough to be easily distinguished from adult deer. Observations outside this period may result in inaccurate data. Observations may be collected any time during the day. However, the first and last hours of daylight are often the most productive for deer seen per hour of effort. Observations should not be collected at night because it is too difficult to correctly identify sex and size.

All deer recorded must be viewed through binoculars or a spotting scope. Small antlers are easily overlooked without optical aids. Fawns whose spots have started to fade are also hard to distinguish when they are observed alone. Be sure to look at the hips of deer that you think could possibly be fawns because the hips are the last place to lose spots.

When observing deer in herds, it is important that each deer be identified. If a herd of six deer is seen but only four are positively identified, do not record any of the deer. If there are two bucks, three does, and one fawn in a herd, you may easily identify the bucks but may not be sure of the other four unless they are all individually identified. When a herd is seen, quickly get a total head count, then go back and positively identify bucks first because they are easiest, then identify fawns, and finally identify the does making sure not to miss small-antlered bucks.

Observations can be made during routine ranch operations or as a special effort. Observing the same deer recorded on a previous count is not a concern. If a conscientious effort is made to record accurate data, a small amount of duplicate recording should not affect the ratio. All deer should be recorded as a buck, doe or fawn. Recording bucks according to number of antler points is also beneficial. The occurrence of spikes versus multi-point animals is a good indication of the nutrition available.


Please return the completed form, included in this newsletter, by September 12th to Greg Pleasant, TPWD biologist.

**NO ONE WILL KNOW WHAT'S ON YOUR PROPERTY**  
Only total numbers of deer by region are made public

### Did You Know...

- Producing a productive and healthy white-tailed deer population is dependent upon the quantity, quality and variety of food plants produced by the habitat or range?
- Habitat determines deer carrying capacity?
- White-tailed deer cannot digest mature grasses?
- Antler development is dependent upon three factors: nutrition, age, and genetics?
- Forbs are generally high in protein and important to deer size, antler development and fawn production?
- Maximum antler development of buck deer is attained at 5 to 6 years of age. Allowing bucks to reach older ages through selective harvest will allow them to attain their potential antler growth?

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