



Prior to the formation of the lease or club, establish whether hunting blinds should be shared or private.

SO, YOU WANT TO RUN A HUNTING LEASE?

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When I first moved to Texas in the early 1980s, I was shocked that I could not walk freely onto private land and just hunt. But, I learned quickly that restricted access to private land was actually good, especially on the well-managed properties, as the quality of the hunting was unsurpassed. What I originally looked upon as a handicap to my hunting obsession quickly turned into the realization that everyone wins from hunting leases in Texas; wildlife prospers from private monies and matching government funds to enhance habitat; landowners realize a good source of revenue and enrichment of wildlife on their property; and, hunters experience some of the best hunting found anywhere in the country.

WHAT ARE YOUR EXPECTATIONS?

I personally have managed the Thunderbird Hunting Club with my partner for close to 30 years. Outsiders look in with envy, but those who are closer to me see the daily challenges, frustrations and efforts that go into making our club run smoothly. I like to tell everyone that for every hour I spend in a blind, I spend 1,000 hours (many in front of a computer) getting ready. In talking with other managers of properties and landowners, the same applies to other leases in Texas; whether they are for deer, quail or dove hunting. Quite simply, it takes substantial effort to run a lease or a club and to find a good lease. It is a labor of love.



THE MANAGEMENT OF EXPECTATIONS

The single most important thing in managing a hunting lease is the expectations – on both sides. Expectations can only be handled by clear communications, both verbally and in writing. The landowner or lease manager needs to disclose up front what he expects from his hunting tenants or members; and, at the same time, the landowner or lease manager needs to paint a realistic image of what to expect in the quality of the hunting and the lease management plans down the road. The process should be carefully thought through as any items not addressed are subject to interpretation and subsequent contention in the future. According to Greg Simons, owner of Wildlife Systems, Inc. and president of Texas Wildlife Association, poor communication is the single biggest factor in the failure of any hunting lease.

THE MANAGEMENT OF WILDLIFE

Five conditions will determine the success of a hunting lease or club, regardless of the species pursued. They are food, water, cover, rest areas and gunning pressure. Game animals are somewhat predictable, and with sound management, good habitat creation and controlled hunting pressure, the results can be world-class. But, if a property is overhunted and the game is disturbed too much, the wildlife adapt accordingly. No animal likes to be shot at; this is an obvious statement but a hard concept to understand for the untrained or novice hunter. Too much hunting pressure can cause big bucks to become nocturnal and waterfowl and doves to disappear. I always tell people that we have a product that can fly away at Thunderbird; keeping birds on the properties



Antler size and establishing judgment criteria may be one of the biggest challenges for a deer lease manger. What is a cull buck?

attracts other birds. The famous quote, “Birds of a feather flock together,” is factual.

MANAGEMENT OF HUNTERS AND LEASE RULES

I have heard countless times from managers of hunting leases, “The management of game is easy, even somewhat predictable. Managing people on the other hand is quite difficult, at times arduous.” Why? Each and every person has different needs, opinions and thoughts on how to do it best – animals, of course, do not. As a manager of a hunting operation, you balance the needs of the members, the wildlife resources and the landowner. Rob Grainger, who has run numerous large deer hunting operations and owns Grainger Ranch Recruiting, LLC, feels that your job as a lease or club manager is to be, in part, an educator. You have to share your wealth of knowledge with others, whether they are owners, hunters or guests, and demonstrate that your ideas are in their own best interest.

Who will run the show? Will it be a benevolent dictatorship or a full vote by the membership? Getting a membership to agree on everything is almost impossible at best and very time consuming. The larger the group, the more opinions there will be. Electing one person in charge is often the easiest way to go, but not in every case.

When it comes to rules, I can tell you from experience that you will never be able to cover all the situations that will arise, but you still need to try. In formatting the rules, remember to keep the whole of the group in mind rather than the needs of



Work among lease members should be equally shared forming camaraderie in the process among its members.





Controlling hunting pressure on waterfowl is key to providing consistent and quality hunting. Nothing attracts waterfowl to a property like other waterfowl.

one or two assertive members. You will go plumb crazy trying to keep everyone happy, so aim for the group as a whole. In interviewing numerous managers and landowners, here are some of the more common rule issues they face in managing a lease or club.

Deer

- Antlers and their management will probably be a fireside topic to eternity. Talk to any deer manager of a lease or club, and they will tell you that there always seems to be debate regarding the judgment of antlers and difference in the criteria, especially for culls. Establishing a clear set of parameters for how the deer herd will be harvested is a must on the front end of any lease or club; without one there will be a huge “point of contention,” says Simons.
- Will a draw establish where everyone hunts? Or, will it be a private stand? Grainger believes that a draw is best as it leads to more cooperation between the members.

Birds

- Migratory birds, whether ducks, geese or doves will only tolerate so much gunning pressure. If you allow hunters to freely roam at will for seven days a week, then you probably will not have many birds left on the property. Tempering hunting pressure is a key component to providing quality bird hunting, and rules must be designed accordingly.
- Will a draw establish where everyone hunts in the morning? Or, will there be assigned private blinds? Having personally tried three different methods of assigning duck blinds to hunters: private, draw and arbitrary assignment, the draw system is hands-down the fairest way to go.

Guests

- Here is how guests are viewed: Everyone wants to bring them, and everyone wants everyone else to leave their guests at home. True? Guests are a very big problem in running a lease or club; and, in the opinion of Simons,

it is the second most problematic issue on a lease or club. Per Simon, “You must be precise and detailed when it comes to the guest policy, and put it in writing so that it is crystal clear.” Will guests be allowed at all? Will there be a daily quota? Will there be a guest fee? How many times can the same guest come? Will children be allowed? What type of game may the guest shoot?” In one study on hunting clubs, the failure to address guests was the single largest factor in member discord and the subsequent failure of the club.

Shared Work

- Running leases requires a lot of labor, especially on the front end, getting the camp setup, placing or fixing blinds, filling feeders, etc. A clear understanding on what is expected from each member is a must. For those who do not show up to help, there should be fines or assessments to cover their fair share of the work.



LEASE CONTRACTS

Dr. Billy Higginbotham, Professor and Wildlife Specialist with Texas A&M AgriLife Extension, is vehement that all interests utilizing the land should be incorporated into the rules; these include landowners, neighbors of landowners, ranchers, farmers, other groups hunting different game, oil companies and even wind farms. Under no circumstance should any lease or club be without written agreements between the lessor and the lessee, the club and its members. The contract written between parties serves as a legal document spelling out the exact terms, privileges and conditions of the lease in consideration of a payment or dues.

LEASE BUDGET

One of the worst things a lessor or lessee can do when it comes to a hunting lease or club is not to establish a written budget and perhaps even a long-term business plan for the hunting property. Regardless of the lease, you will be able to only take so many game animals or apply so much hunting pressure before you have a negative

impact on the wildlife and subsequently the hunting. Professor Higginbotham feels that a budget balanced with a harvest strategy will establish a benchmark for the number of hunters and their lease costs or dues.

LEASE LIABILITY

Hunters and their recreational guests should have insurance that covers them while on the property. In addition, the landowner must be designated as an additional insured under the policy. Without such, the landowner may be sued by the insurance company after it pays for any injuries sustained by the hunters or guests.

Parties entering into a hunting agreement should also consider an Assumption-of-the-Risk Agreement and a Liability Waiver for everyone entering the leased land. A document covering these agreements along with their associated ramifications can be read in more detail at The Texas Deer Lease, written by Attorney Judon Fambrough, at www.texas-wildlife.org/files/publications/the_texas_deer_lease.pdf. Spending a few dollars on legal

counsel in setting up a lease agreement, along with its associated documents, is just sound business.

REWARDS

As briefly touched in this article, there are a lot of considerations in putting together a lease or a club. An excellent document written by Tiffany Dowell at Texas A&M AgriLife Extension, called Texas Hunting Lease Checklist can be accessed at www.agrilifebookstore.org/Hunting-Lease-Checklist-p/eag-008.htm. It covers in detail many aspects of a lease or club that need to be addressed. Although very taxing on the manager, running a lease or club has rewards that are unique and exclusive: spending time with the wildlife, creating habitat, seeing wild creatures that few get to witness and producing smiling faces on both the young and old is just “priceless.” Hunting in Texas is just getting better and better with the proper management of leases and clubs preserving hunting for generations to come. 🌟



Guest policies should be clear and precise, eliminating any ambiguity within the membership on the lease.

