



Predator Association Helps Wildlife

**By Kylee Sutherland
Goldthwaite Eagle**

Hunting is a common pastime in Mills County. Deer leases are scattered throughout and men and women come from all over to hunt on these pieces of land. It's the earliest some have ever woken up, but they do it gladly for the pleasure of hunting the bountiful number of whitetails in this area. Even the residents are excited when deer season rolls around.

Fathers can't wait to take their sons and the boys are just as excited. Most of the women and girls are itching for the adventure, too. One thing everyone can't wait for is the deer meat. Deer jerky, deer burgers - enough deer meat to last a lifetime. But something no one is excited about is the possibility of a predator killing the best deer before you do.

The Mills County Predator Association works to keep the predator population under control to protect the deer, turkey, quail, and other varied wildlife populations in this area. They even work with local ranchers to protect livestock.

What They Do For You

The exact date when the association was founded is difficult to uncover, although it's believed to have begun in Mills County around the mid-1900's or possibly before. Texas Wildlife Services, on the other hand, has been around for 102 years. The Predator Association raises money to pay Texas Wildlife Services to help fund two trapper positions in Mills County. The program has gone through many presidential hands before being taken over by local rancher Kody Sutherland.

"From raising livestock and being in the agriculture business, it didn't take me long to see the benefits of the association and see the need for it," Sutherland said "It's troubling,



A coyote, one of the biggest fawn predators, snaps up a quick meal.

discouraging, and really aggravating when you put your efforts into raising a kid crop or a lamb crop only to go out there one morning and see where something has killed that lamb or kid. Being in that line of work it didn't take me long to see the need and appreciate what these gentlemen do and what the Wildlife Services do."

The association holds two fundraisers and sends out an annual dues letter in order to raise money and continue funding trappers that keep the predator population under control - the Ranch Rodeo in the fall and a fundraiser at Melody Oaks in the spring. Both fundraisers have an auction that include donated goods from local people and businesses.

"Basically, we raise funds through our fundraisers and annual dues letter to generate money that we pay to Wildlife Services," Sutherland said. "That money helps fund two trapper positions here in Mills County which maintains the predator population."

The money is sent to the Wildlife Services State Office in San Antonio. Within that payment is the salary for the two trappers along with money

for fuel, vehicle maintenance, and all the equipment they need. Members and other supporters of the association contribute through volunteering their time and financial support, but the association still struggles.

"Wildlife Services has went up on us in cost every three years over the past nine years," Sutherland said. "This year the cost we are required to pay to them is going up substantially. Last year would have been that third year for them to go up and they didn't. Now in January 2018, they are going up sixteen percent."

Jett Johnson, former president, said money was a problem when he was president from the mid-80's to the mid-90's. "I came back to Goldthwaite in '86 and I bought a feed and fur lodger business," Johnson said. "Of course I dealt with all the ranchers and knew all the issues and all the problems - that's been a long time ago, but as always, we were having trouble getting enough money in to maintain the trapper fund." Johnson was passionate about the purpose and the need of the association.

"The main deal of what we see when we can't maintain these pred-

ators is it really, really, hurts our deer population," Johnson said. "All the wildlife population - the deer, the turkey, the quail. Maintaining a good, strong, trapper fund is vital for all of Mills County and for our wildlife."

Sutherland agrees the association is not only crucial to livestock production, but the welfare of wildlife as well.

"The damage a lot of people don't see is the damage predators have on wildlife," Sutherland said. "The main cause of fawn mortality, or death of fawns, is predation from animals whether it be a coyote or bobcat or red fox. It's not just counting livestock damage, but damage to wildlife as well."

Economic Issues

Predator damage isn't limited to livestock and wildlife, but extends into local economies.

"The main industry we have in Mills County is agriculture related," Sutherland said. "Farming and ranching along with the use of recreational wildlife in terms of hunting and fishing. Why we have to keep this program going is that it's not only just our heritage and our way of life, but it's also a way of bringing in tax dollars and dollars that can be used to help other organizations in the community."

By keeping the predator population under control, local economies flourish. Farmers, ranchers, and those involved with wildlife recreation can make a profit on their animals and in turn are able to give back to the community.

"When it comes time to help out our volunteer fire departments within the county, we are able to donate individually to their fundraisers," Sutherland said.

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