

Outdoors

Axis deer, for better or for worse

We in West Kerr County undoubtedly enjoy the presence of the largest herd of free-ranging axis deer in North America – and maybe in the new world. They are not an unmixed blessing, however. Yes, they're magnificent beasts, beautiful to the eye, and, yes, they provide perhaps the finest wild meat on this continent, but there is a downside.

However, let's look at some other interesting facts about axis deer. First, "axis" is actually this species' scientific name. Its common name in the language of its native land is "chital." My wife and I have so many axis around our home on Johnson Creek that we named the place "Chital Ridge."

The chital evolved in India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, and hunters who scorn the animal's wildness as a game animal forget that these deer grew up dodging tigers in the jungle.

I've hunted axis deer on ranches where they're treated like the native whitetails and found that similar hunting pressure makes them even spookier than whitetails. Where they're fed and protected, they get pretty gentle ... but so do whitetails, as every homeowner hereabouts knows all too well.

There are differences, however. Axis are herd ani-

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mals, where whitetails tend to be solitary or found in family groups of two or three. Since axis evolved in the tropics where there are no seasons, the bucks have no fixed period when they wear hardened antlers, and males with velvet antlers, polished antlers or no antlers at all can be found at any time of year. However, it seems to me that a majority of axis stags (the correct term) carry hard antlers between about March and November.

Unlike whitetails, axis males produce viable sperm and are capable of impregnating does year-round, regardless of the state of their antlers. For this reason, young fawns may be found in any month. Again, my impression is that more rutting activity takes place in July and August than at other times, and greater numbers of baby fawns can be seen from late February through April or May.

These deer are extremely hardy, and I don't remember

ever having seen a poor axis, even when the local whitetails are mostly skin and bones. One reason is that chital can subsist on grass, forbs, or browse. Whitetails, of course, eat little or no grass, and the two species don't compete much until the grass runs out. Then the spotted deer, which prefer grass when they can get it, switch to browse in direct competition with the whitetail deer. This versatility in foraging, together with the axis' larger size and greater aggressiveness, threatens the survival of native whitetails.

In fact, wildlife biologists at the Kerr Wildlife Management Area have predicted that the exotic deer, especially the axis, may someday drive out the whitetails entirely.

Although axis does almost never have twins, they also almost never miss giving birth at least once each year, and fawn survival seems to be excellent. Their numbers grow continually, despite the fact that they enjoy no legal protection at all under Texas' game laws. There is no closed season, no bag limit, and no other restrictions on harvesting that wonderful axis venison except the basic ones requiring a hunting license and permission from the landowner to hunt.

Axis tend to live in somewhat sedentary herds of does

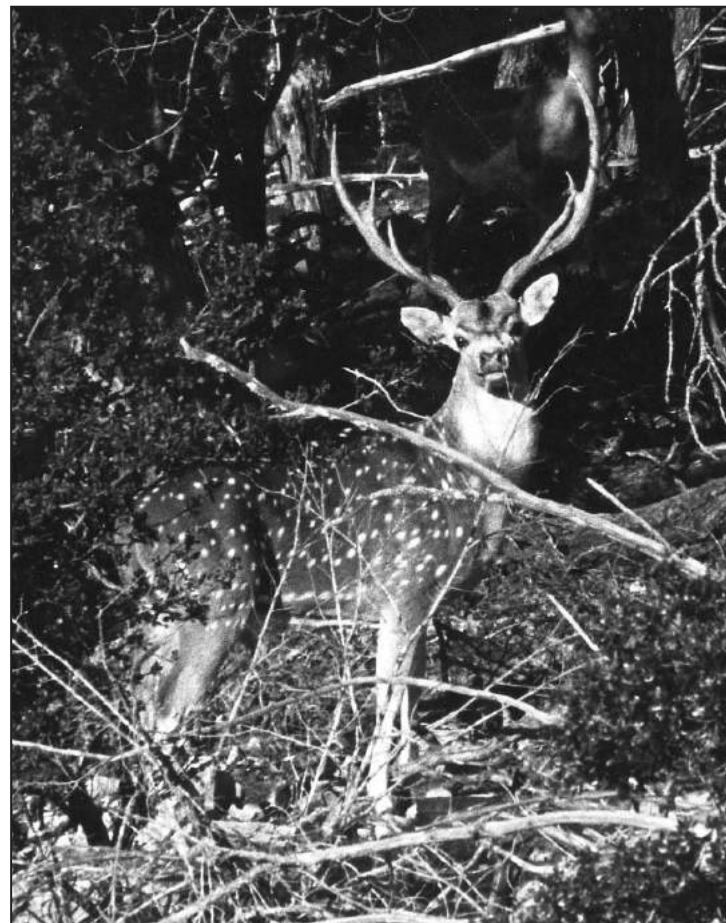


Photo by John Wootters

Even though the axis deer are handsome, sporting, and tasty, the author would hate to see them displace the native whitetail deer completely.

and fawns, while mature stags roam constantly, seeking estrus does. There is no such thing as a permanent "herd stag." The big boy you see with the local axis herd today may be three miles away tomorrow.

Obviously, more axis need to be culled from all local West Kerr herds, but I suspect that we will never control these foreigners with the rifle. It's good that they're pretty and taste good, because one of these days the axis might just be the only

wild deer we have in this area.

John Wootters is a semi-retired outdoors writer with more than 30 years experience. He was editor of Peterson's hunting magazine and author of the monthly column "Buck Sense" and has written the all-time best selling book on deer hunting, "Hunting Trophy deer." He has served on the Board of Directors of the National Rifle Association, and written for "Shooting Times," "Rifle," "Handloader," "Guns & Ammo" and Peterson's "Hunting."