



Thrill Kill:

RECREATIONAL ANIMAL SLAUGHTER IN THE U.S.

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THRILL KILL: RECREATIONAL ANIMAL SLAUGHTER IN THE U.S.

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Content Warning: This report contains graphic imagery of animal abuse and death (throughout), and documentation and description of racist imagery (pages 13 – 20) . Reader discretion is advised.



INTRODUCTION



Angela Grimes
Chief Executive Officer
Born Free USA

Born Free USA has a long history of investigating and reporting on the brutal realities of trapping, fur trade, and other practices that cause great harm and suffering to animals. It is not easy for us to witness, document, and write about these topics – and we know it is hard for you to read – but this information is vital to making change.

Over the last several months, our campaigns team took on what might be the most heinous subject matter: *thrill killing*. We investigated canned hunting, coyote and rattlesnake killing contests, and aerial gunning. How these “pastimes” are carried out and seeing innocent animals tortured is disturbing enough, but it rattles us to the core that they are done for fun.

We documented coyotes and wild hogs being gunned down with automatic weapons from the air; exotic antelope – some critically endangered or extinct in the wild – bred on ranches for the sole purpose of being killed one day; and families (yes, children) participating in the torture of thousands of rattlesnakes.

It is beyond my comprehension that humans have the capacity to take joy from such heinous activities, yet each year, thousands of animals are killed across the U.S. in the name of “fun” in killing contests and trophy hunts.

This report is difficult to read, but it is vital that you do and share with the people in your life who love and value animals. Please, help us shine a light on these atrocities and pursue the reforms needed to put an end to this unnecessary loss of life in the name recreation.

LEGAL ≠ ETHICAL



“Thrill killing” is a term most used in the context of human murder and, in particular, those murders carried out for the “sheer excitement of the act.”¹ However, the term has been selectively used in more recent years to describe the mass killing of animals, for example in relation to an incident in Wisconsin in 2020 when a group of young people killed 40 deer and a horse. The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) was quick to condemn the act at the time and, importantly, make the point that “it’s not hunting.” The gratuitous nature of the killing was reported across media outlets.² While it was quick to speak out about the illegal mass slaughter of deer, Wisconsin DNR have made no comment on the nature of the state’s multiple “killing contests” such as the Moondog Madness competition during which teams pay \$150 to kill as many coyotes as possible over a 24-hour period. On its Facebook page,

Moondog Madness organizers confirm that the first round of the competition, held in January 2023, saw 101 coyotes killed.³ In response to concerns over this instance of mass killing, Wisconsin DNR said that

concerned citizens should contact their elected representatives, but reminded people that it is “illegal to interfere with individuals engaged in lawful hunting.”⁴



Figure 1 – In 2020, a group of young people in Wisconsin killed 40 deer and a horse in “thrill kills.”



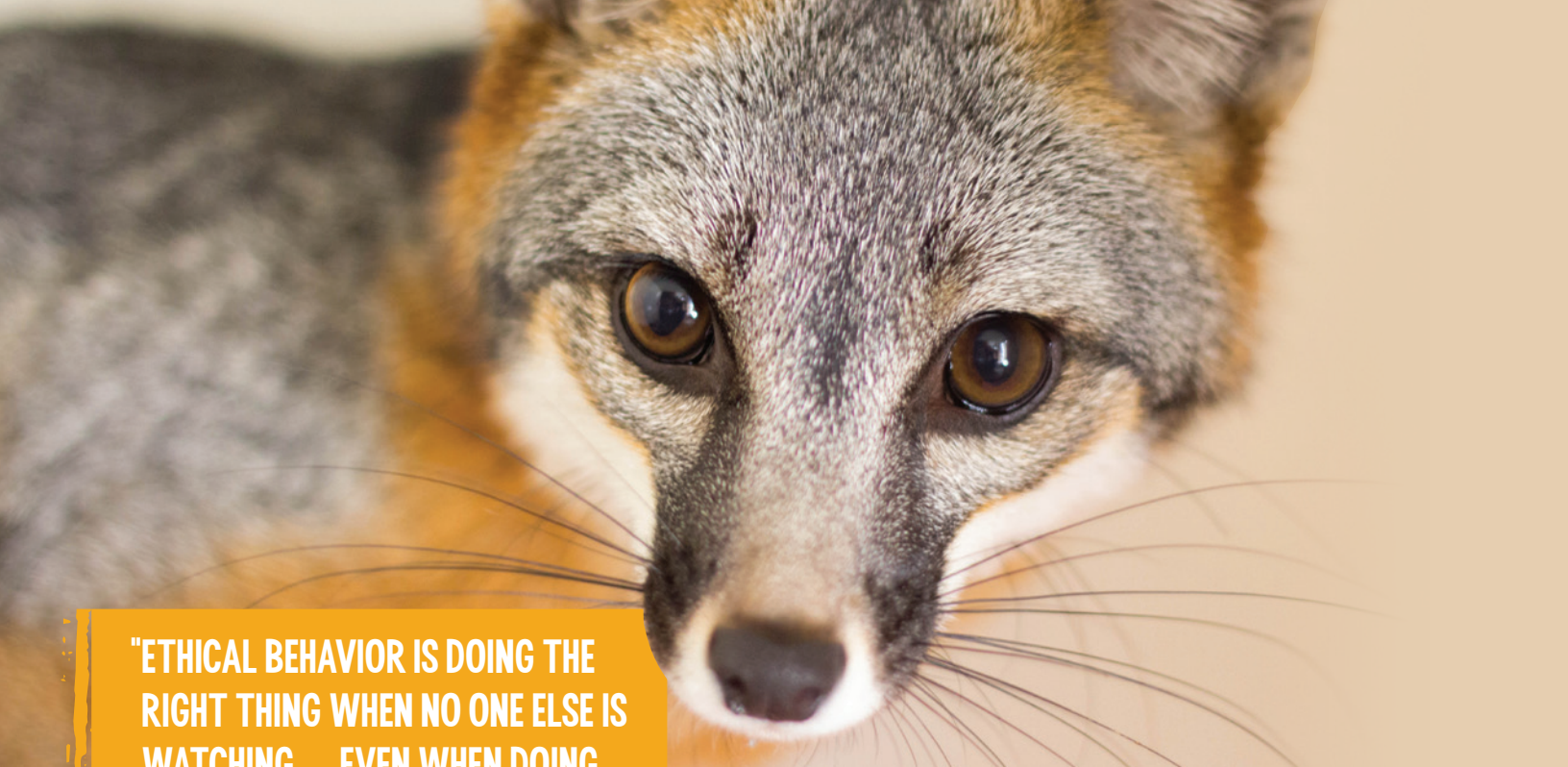
Figure 2 – Photograph from “Moondog Madness” Facebook Page, January 2023.

1 Bonn, S.A. (2015) The zodiac and other Thrill Killers, Psychology Today. Sussex Publishers. Available at: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/wicked-deeds/201509/the-zodiac-and-other-thrill-killers> (Accessed: March 2, 2023).

2 D’Angelo, B. (2020) Wisconsin juveniles shoot over 40 deer, 1 horse in ‘Thrill kills,’ officials say, KIRO 7 News Seattle. KIRO 7 News Seattle. Available at: <https://www.kiro7.com/news/trending/wisconsin-juveniles-shoot-over-40-deer-1-horse-thrill-kills-officials-say/QM3IJQ374FFRZLC2IY4AJYNVPU/> (Accessed: March 2, 2023).

3 See: <https://www.facebook.com/1moondogmadness/posts/pfbid02SuqAiw7EmhVYA12rPeH9zdXb7BpCgimPjX98HLSoa6JP2mcsERWWxTThnTgA2TNI>

4 Perry, R. (2023) Hunting or Slaughter?; the debate over Wisconsin Coyote Killing Contests, WKOW. Available at: https://www.wkow.com/news/hunting-or-slaughter-the-debate-over-wisconsin-coyote-killing-contests/article_abc5214a-9922-11ed-9d9c-6b0de425d6df.html (Accessed: March 2, 2023).



"ETHICAL BEHAVIOR IS DOING THE RIGHT THING WHEN NO ONE ELSE IS WATCHING – EVEN WHEN DOING THE WRONG THING IS LEGAL."

In reality, there is little to tell the killing of the 40 deer and the killing of 101 coyotes apart – both were apparently carried out with the prime objective of killing as many animals as possible. Both saw animals violently killed with firearms. With so little to tell the incidents apart, it seems reasonable to argue that the only difference between them was one was legal and one was not.

Killing contests are not the only extreme hunting activities available to prospective thrill killers. In this report, we explore the growing trophy hunting industry offering opportunities to kill African species without leaving the United States. One website offering exotic animal hunting

proudly displays photographs of 41 dead Scimitar horned-oryx

with happy hunters grinning for the camera.⁵ It is thought that there are just 90 of these animals left living free in their natural range, yet the equivalent of half the entire remaining wild population has been slaughtered for cash at just one Texas ranch.

Helicopter hunting of feral pigs is another thrill kill activity growing in popularity. Hunters whoop and scream in excitement as they use fully automatic weapons to fire at terrified families of wild pigs, desperately trying to outrun the gun. No experience is necessary to be a helicopter hunter, and clients are let loose with automatic weapons after just 60 minutes of safety training.

In the Texas hunter education resources, they quote the importance of being an “ethical hunter,” quoting Aldo Leopold, the “father of wildlife management,” who said: “Ethical behavior is doing the right thing when no one else is watching – even when doing the wrong thing is legal.”⁶

In this research, we will question whether there really is a difference between legal and illegal “thrill killing” – we argue that thrill killing can never be considered ethical, even if it is currently legal.

5 Scimitar horned oryx hunting (no date) Scimitar Horned Oryx Hunting – Texas Hunt Lodge. Available at: <https://www.texas hunt lodge.com/hunting-packages/scimitar-horned-oryx-hunts> (Accessed: March 15, 2023).

6 Today’s Hunter in Texas (2013), Slide 256. Available at: <https://tpwd.texas.gov/education/hunter-education/hunter-education-instructor/class-materials>

WHY TEXAS?



THE LONE STAR STATE AS THE EPICENTER OF THRILL KILLING IN THE UNITED STATES

According to 2020 data, Texas issues the most paid hunting licenses in the entire country, with 1,120,620 licenses issued that year. The hunting license revenue of Texas was \$46,886,984, which was surpassed only by Colorado, whose income from hunting licenses was \$59,006,693.⁷ In addition to Texas being a state where hunting is common, it is also becoming the epicenter of thrill killing, with around 50 killing contests staged per year, making it likely that Texas hosts more of these events than any other state in the country.⁸

What is certain is that Texas is currently home to the largest

of these contests, namely the West Texas Big Bobcat Contest and the Sweetwater Rattlesnake Roundup.

But thrill killing is not limited to the killing contests that result in the deaths of hundreds of animals each time they are hosted. Texas is also home to a number of other thrill kill experiences. Ultra-violent hog hunting experiences during which hunters gun down dozens of feral hogs with fully automatic weapons while hanging out of helicopters are on the rise thanks to a 2011 rule explicitly allowing people to pay for the experience of killing from aircraft. Ranches housing exotic

animal species advertise the opportunity to stalk and kill extinct in the wild African animals for thousands of dollars at a time.⁹ Modelling their operations on safari hunting in Africa, the Texas hunts offer an expensive, albeit more affordable, alternative to flying to Africa to kill animals as trophies.

Texas is not the only state that allows the activities outlined in this research. While Arizona, California, Colorado, Massachusetts, New Mexico, and Vermont have banned killing contests,¹⁰ they are legal in 42 states. Exotic hunting ranches can be found in New York,¹¹ Ohio,¹² and Oklahoma,¹³ among others.

7 US Fish and Wildlife Service National Hunting License Data (2020). Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20211102082141/https://www.fws.gov/wsfrprograms/Subpages/LicenseInfo/Nat%20Hunting%20License%20Report%202020.pdf>

8 Admundson, S. and Kitty Block (2021) Undercover investigation lays bare extreme cruelty in Indiana and Texas wildlife killing contests. foxes, bobcats, coyotes among animals blasted with assault rifles, HSLF. Available at: <https://hslf.org/blog/2021/02/undercover-investigation-lays-bare-extreme-cruelty-indiana-and-texas-wildlife-killing#:~:text=Texas%2C%20in%20fact%2C%20likely%20has,even%20mountain%20lions%20and%20crows>. (Accessed: March 2, 2023).

9 Zebra hunts – hunting in Texas (2023) Squaw Mountain Ranch. Available at: <https://www.squawmountainranch.com/zebra-hunts/#pricing> (Accessed: March 2, 2023).

10 Somvichian-Clausen, A. (2022) The controversy over wildlife killing contests, The Hill. Available at: <https://thehill.com/changing-america/sustainability/environment/544533-the-controversy-over-wildlife-killing-contests/#:~:text=In%202014%2C%20California%20became%20the,are%20now%20considering%20similar%20action>. (Accessed: March 15, 2023).

11 Cold Brook Hunts (no date) Cold brook hunts. Available at: <http://coldbrookhunts.com/> (Accessed: March 9, 2023).

12 Welcome Double D ranch (2021) Double D Ranch. Available at: <https://doubledranch.info/> (Accessed: March 9, 2023).

13 Exotic Hunts (no date) Hog Wild Boar Hunting Ranch. Available at: <https://www.hogwildok.com/exotics.html> (Accessed: March 9, 2023).



Figure 3 – Winner of “Biggest Bobcat” In the March 2023 WTBBC.
Source: WTBBC Facebook Page.

Montana¹⁴ and Idaho¹⁵ are two states that issue permits to allow aerial hunting of coyotes and foxes for the purpose of “protecting livestock” and Nebraska also allows shooting of coyotes from aircraft with correct permissions.¹⁶ Louisiana issues permits to kill feral hogs from aircraft¹⁷ however, to our knowledge, Texas is the only state that currently allows hunters to pay for the “experience” of killing hogs from helicopters. While some of the activities outlined in this research occur in other parts of the country, Texas is undoubtedly where the high-

est number occur and where the activities are most publicized and celebrated. As such, we use Texas as a case study due to the prevalence and range of these kinds of activities within the state.

KILLING CONTESTS IN TEXAS

Texas is home to the “highest paying hunting contest in the country,”¹⁸ The West Texas Big Bobcat Contest. It is hosted three times per year, in January, February, and March, and pays out hundreds of thousands of dollars of prizes each year.¹⁹

According to results published

by the contest organizers, more than \$2.6 million has been distributed in prize money since 2014 and a minimum of 7,024 animals have been killed. The true number of animals killed is likely far higher than this as the organizers only publish figures relating to the winning teams. Prizes are given for the heaviest bobcats killed – 1st to 5th place, as well as the most bobcats, the most grey foxes, the most coyotes, and since 2021, the heaviest grey fox. To qualify for the main prize of biggest bobcat, the organizers demand that the team kill at least five grey foxes or five coyotes to be in with a chance. The biggest jackpot paid out, \$50,190, was paid out in 2020²⁰ and usually sits around \$45,000. Teams must be at least two people, and there have been 11,529 teams reported since 2014, meaning more than 23,000 hunters have taken part in the contest since that time. These numbers are conservative because figures for 2016 were not made publicly available.

Texas Rattlesnake Roundup²¹ is another killing contest that

14 Administrative rules of the state of Montana. Available at: <https://rules.mt.gov/gateway/Subchapterhome.asp?scn=32.22.1> (Accessed: March 15, 2023).

15 Idaho State Legislature. Available at: <https://legislature.idaho.gov/statutesrules/idstat/title22/t22ch1/sect22-102A/> (Accessed: March 15, 2023).

16 Rules and regulations division (2022) Nebraska Secretary of State. Available at: https://www.nebraska.gov/rules-and-regs/regsearch/Rules/Game_and_Parks_Commission/Title-163/Chapter-4.pdf (Accessed: March 15, 2023).

17 Louisiana Legislature (no date). Available at: <https://www.doa.la.gov/media/dw0asdgl/76.pdf> (Accessed: March 15, 2023).

18 West Texas Big Bobcat Contest: The highest paying predator hunting contest in the U.S.A. (no date) West Texas Big Bobcat Contest | The highest paying predator hunting contest in the U.S.A. Available at: <https://www.wtbcc.org/> (Accessed: March 2, 2023).

19 Results (2023) West Texas Big Bobcat Contest. Available at: <https://www.wtbcc.org/category/results/> (Accessed: March 2, 2023).

20 January 2020 results: West Texas big bobcat contest (2020) West Texas Big Bobcat Contest | The highest paying predator hunting contest in the U.S.A. Available at: <https://www.wtbcc.org/2020/01/26/january-2020-results/> (Accessed: March 2, 2023).

21 Sweetwater Jaycees (No date). Available at: <http://www.rattlesnakeroundup.net/> (Accessed: March 2, 2023).

targets rattlesnakes and other native wildlife and advertises itself as the world's largest rattlesnake roundup. Based in Sweetwater, Texas, the contest hosts a four-day event around rattlesnake cruelty, with hundreds of snakes being brought to the event to be publicly slaughtered and skinned. Attendance is said to be around 30,000 people each year.²² The snakes, who may have been gathered over long periods of time prior to the event – and likely held in poor conditions – are thrown into pits on top of one another where they are kicked around and then decapitated in front of watching audiences. In the “Miss Snake Charmer

Pageant,” young children are encouraged to put bloody handprints on the wall as a macabre painting activity.²³

In 2016, due to particularly favorable conditions for rattlesnakes to thrive, the Sweetwater roundup resulted in the collection (and death) of 24,262 lb. of rattlesnakes.²⁴ The snakes are deemed so unimportant as individuals and are killed in such numbers that they are measured by their collective weight. As an estimate, based on an average sized adult rattlesnake weighing 1.15 lb. (a number arrived at as part of research linked to the event in 1992²⁵), this accounts for 21,097 individual snakes.

In the last three years, numbers have been between 2,600 and 3,800 snakes (based on the same average weight of 1.15 lb. per snake).

There is money to be made by entrants in the roundup, though not the amounts seen at the bobcat killing contests. First prize for highest weight is \$800, with the longest snake prize being up to \$900 (if the previous record is broken).²⁶ Sweetwater Jaycees also commits to buying the snakes from the snake hunters, at \$13 per pound for the first 3,000 lb. and \$7 per pound thereafter.²⁷ Disturbingly, the roundup is organized as part of the Junior Chamber International (JCI USA), which is a youth leadership development organization that describes itself as follows: *JCI is a grassroots movement of young active citizens ages 18 to 40 who are dedicated to creating positive change in our respective communities around the world. We empower young people by developing their skills, knowledge and understanding. These young people have the confidence to stand up, make informed decisions and lead their communities to take concrete action towards sustainable impact.*²⁸



Figure 4 – Sweetwater Rattlesnake Roundup 2023. Source: Born Free USA.

22 Results (2023) West Texas Big Bobcat Contest. Available at: <https://www.wtbbc.org/category/results/> (Accessed: March 2, 2023).

23 McCarther, J. (no date) Children get to stamp the wall with a bloody handprint after skinning a rattlesnake., We Animals Media. Available at: <https://stock.weanimalsmedia.org/asset/1611/> (Accessed: March 2, 2023).

24 2016 Results (no date) Sweetwater Jaycees. Available at: <http://www.rattlesnakeroundup.net/2016.html> (Accessed: March 2, 2023).

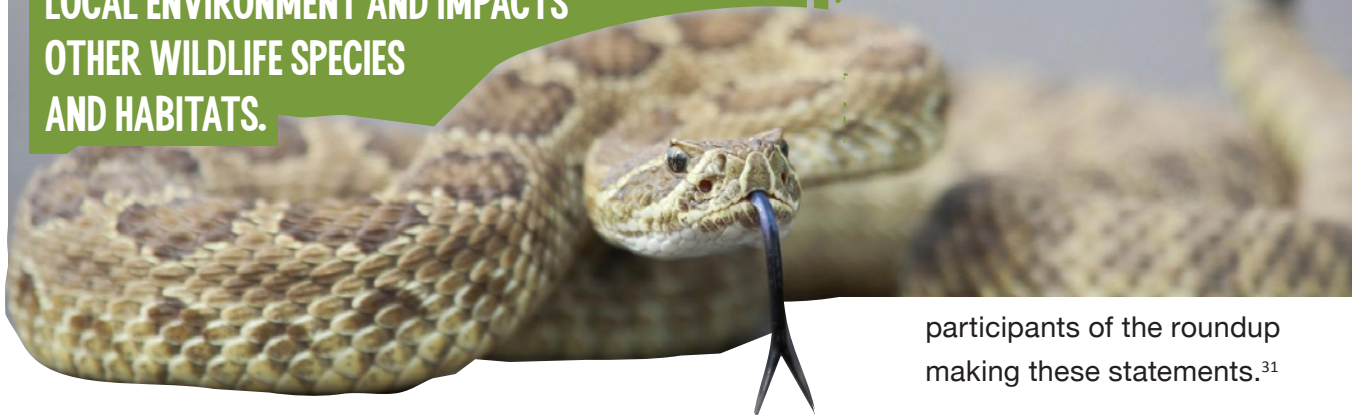
25 Weir, J.A.C.K. (1992) “The Sweetwater rattlesnake round-up: A case study in environmental ethics,” *Conservation Biology*, 6(1), pp. 116–127. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1523-1739.1992.610116.x>.

26 Snake hunters (no date) Sweetwater Jaycees. Available at: <http://www.rattlesnakeroundup.net/snake-hunters.html> (Accessed: March 2, 2023).

27 *Ibid.*

28 About Us (no date) JCI USA. Available at: <https://www.jciusa.org/about-us> (Accessed: March 2, 2023).

THE PRACTICE OF GASSING NOT ONLY FACILITATES THE CAPTURE OF SNAKES BUT POLLUTES THE LOCAL ENVIRONMENT AND IMPACTS OTHER WILDLIFE SPECIES AND HABITATS.



Our researchers contacted JCI USA to ask for their views on the roundup and if they believed a largescale killing contest was compatible with the organization's modern-day values as a youth leadership organization. We did not receive a response. After our investigator visited the event in person (see below), a follow up email was sent to JCI International with photographs of stalls displaying racist hate symbols. We asked them to provide a response, but the email was ignored.

Snakes are sometimes captured using a method called gassing in which gasoline is poured into burrows in order for the fumes to flush the animals out. Illegal in 29 states, the practice of gassing not only facilitates the capture of snakes but pollutes

the local environment and impacts other wildlife species and habitats.²⁹ A petition to ban snake gassing was considered and dismissed by Texas Parks and Wildlife Services in 2016, despite the majority of parties consulted as part of the consideration process agreeing that gassing snakes may cause harm to the environment and other animals.³⁰

Those who support the rattlesnake roundup claim that, without the contest, Sweetwater and the surrounding area would be overrun with rattlesnakes, that snake bite incidents would rise, and that the snakes hunted as part of the roundup are "milked" for their venom, which is then used to create antivenin treatments. A 2019 undercover video showed footage of

participants of the roundup making these statements.³¹

Claims venom extracted from rattlesnakes as part of the roundup is then used to develop antivenin to treat snakebites are proven to be false by information published on the roundup's own website. In a report by Texas Parks and Wildlife as part of the consideration of snake gassing mentioned above, they clarify that manufacturers of antivenin get their venom from captive populations of rattlesnakes and could not use venom collected as part of the roundup. They go on to confirm that major manufacturer, BTG International, may have used antivenin from a roundup between 2011 and 2013 due to issues with their supply chain. They amended their supply chain processes after this to ensure that it could not happen

29 Barrouquere, B. (2016) Know what snake gassing is? you can do it in Texas, Houston Chronicle. Houston Chronicle. Available at: <https://www.chron.com/news/houston-texas/texas/article/Know-what-snake-gassing-is-You-can-do-it-in-Texas-10275719.php#:~:text=For%20those%20not%20familiar%20with,the%20fumes%20flush%20them%20out.&text=That%20makes%20the%20snakes%20easier,at%20an%20annual%20spring%20roundup>. (Accessed: March 2, 2023).

30 Davis, J.M. (no date) Snake Harvest Working Group Final Report Executive Summary. rep. Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. Available at: https://tpwd.texas.gov/huntwild/wild/wildlife_diversity/nongame/media/TPWD-SHWG-Executive-Summary.pdf

31 See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bKWmGsVYEyU>

again.³² This report is republished on the Sweetwater Jaycees website.

Suggestions that the rattlesnake population is being controlled by the roundup is also brought into question by researchers. A 1992 article published in *Conservation Biology*³³ highlighted that, as there is no accompanying census being carried out tandem to the hunting, nor is there any control area being designated for the roundup, any suggestion that the roundup is controlling populations is unsubstantiated. While on the one hand organizers claimed that the roundup was preventing a population explosion, they also conversely claimed that it was having no impact on the population as they continue to hunt high numbers of snakes each year. Researchers said that this claim could be neither confirmed nor refuted but that the increased number of snakes brought in by the roundup was not due to overabundant populations, but due to the increased number of hunters year on year, taking from an increasingly large geographical area. They pointed out that the number of snakes captured per hunter per year had not risen. The same researchers raised



Figure 5 – Photo from Central Texas Varmint Extreme Facebook page, March 2023.

concerns that the hunts would have a long-term ecological impact due to estimates based on the number of females and yearling adults “that have not and will not be able to reproduce.” Interestingly, the contests organizers seem to walk a line of insisting to those concerned about the snakes that their actions are reducing the populations but then reassuring conservationists concerned about ecological damage that the hunts have no meaningful impact. It stands to reason that both of these things cannot be true at the same time.

Michael Price, a herpetologist from the San Angelo area said in press that: “It’s about money. It’s become such a tradition, and it brings in a tremendous amount of money to the community. That’s my biggest issue; it’s not about population control, and it’s not about safety. It’s about money, and it is what it is.”³⁴

In addition to the major bobcat and rattlesnake killing events, there are numerous killing contests across the state of Texas. One of those is the Wise County Hog Contest and associated Kill’emall [Kill Them All]

32 Davis, J.M. (no date) Snake Harvest Working Group Final Report Executive Summary. rep. Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. Available at: https://tpwd.texas.gov/huntwild/wild/wildlife_diversity/nongame/media/TPWD-SHWG-Executive-Summary.pdf

33 WEIR, J.A.C.K. (1992) “The sweetwater rattlesnake round-up: A case study in environmental ethics,” *Conservation Biology*, 6(1), pp. 116–127. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1523-1739.1992.610116.x>.

34 Mulder, B. (2016) Sweetwater’s rattlesnake roundup draws scrutiny, *Midland Reporter-Telegram*. Midland Reporter-Telegram. Available at: <https://www.mrt.com/news/article/Sweetwater-s-Rattlesnake-Roundup-draws-scrutiny-7402870.php> (Accessed: March 2, 2023).



Figure 6 – The Wise County Hog Contest posed dead pigs with beer bottles as part of their advertising. Source: Wise County Hog Contest Facebook Page, December 2022.

Contest. These two events allow hunting across the states of both Texas and Oklahoma but have their weigh in at the organizer’s home in north Texas. The purpose of the contest, according to the founder is “to help get rid of hogs and give a little bit of braggin’ rights as well.”³⁵ The payouts advertised for the 2023 Hog Contest include a jackpot of \$70,000 and a total payout for all prizewinners of \$205,520. The Kill’emall Contest has categories including most racoons, most

bobcats, and most coyotes.³⁶ Like many of the other contests and companies researched as part of this project, the Wise County contest uses its social media platform to share discriminatory viewpoints, including multiple transphobic posts on its Facebook page.³⁷

Central Texas Varmint Extreme contest has one of the largest target lists for which participants can win prizes. They give points for killing mountain lions, bobcats, red foxes, coyotes, ringtail

cats, grey foxes, and raccoons and have prizes for the heaviest bobcat, grey fox, racoon, red fox, ringtail cat, jackrabbit, opossum, hog, and coyote. In total, they encourage hunters to target ten species.³⁸ In the mission statement of the contest, there is no suggestion that the contest has been established to either control populations or to rid the area of animals causing damage or predated livestock, as other contests sometimes claim. They state simply that “As varmint hunting competitors we realize a need for a well-organized, professional contest with high payouts in Central Texas.”³⁹ They do not clarify the “need” beyond this statement so we can assume that it is motivated by convenience of location and money.

Killing contests are controversial and have found critics even within the hunting fraternity. In an interview, Eric Nuse, former Director of the International Hunter Education Association said: “We don’t like anything that smacks of commercialization with money or prizes. Anything that doesn’t honor the animals grates on us and seems inherently wrong. These contests create very poor PR for hunters.”⁴⁰

35 The Hunting Game (no date) Thehuntinggame.com. Available at: <https://www.thehuntinggame.com/about/> (Accessed: March 2, 2023).

36 Kill ‘Em All Hog Contest (no date) Thehuntinggame.com. Available at: <https://www.thehuntinggame.com/kill-em-all-hog-contest/> (Accessed: March 2, 2023).

37 For example: <https://www.facebook.com/thehuntinggame/photos/pb.100067624375325.-2207520000./2505519616328837/?type=3> and <https://www.facebook.com/thehuntinggame/photos/pb.100067624375325.-2207520000./3220282118185913/?type=3>

38 Scoring (no date) Central Texas Varmint Extreme. Available at: <https://ctvextreme.org/scoring/> (Accessed: March 2, 2023).

39 A professional, weigh-in varmint hunting competition with high payouts in Central Texas. (no date) Central Texas Varmint Extreme. Available at: <https://ctvextreme.org/> (Accessed: March 2, 2023).

40 Ted Williams *et al.* (2022) Coyote carnage: The gruesome truth about wildlife killing contests, Yale E360. Available at: <https://e360.yale.edu/features/coyote-carnage-the-gruesome-truth-about-wildlife-killing-contests> (Accessed: March 2, 2023).



**SUCH HAPHAZARD
REMOVAL OF INDIVIDUAL
ANIMALS CAN HAVE
UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES
SUCH AS DISRUPTING
POPULATION AGE AND
SOCIAL STRUCTURE**

While there are some suggestions by contest organizers that they are killing species for the purposes of population control, or to protect livestock on farmland from “nuisance” species, this is not a primary selling point of the competitions. The main selling points were the prize money.

For example, on the website for the West Texas Big Bobcat Contest, the opening statement says:

“Do you think you have what it takes to win the highest paying hunting contest in the country? Then put your money where your mouth is, and enter the West Texas Big Bobcat Contest.

In 2008, we wanted to create a new contest format that gives everyone a shot at the grand prize. We feel like we’ve done that with the WTBBC.”

We found no reference to any other purpose for the contest on the site.

On the Wise County Hog Hunting Contest, they do reference the growing numbers of feral hogs and the hope that the contest will control numbers, but the primary focus of the information is around the prize money to be won.⁴¹

Even if there were some element of lethal population control to the contests, a spokesperson for Texas Parks and Wildlife Service

has been quoted in press, saying: “Such haphazard removal of individuals can have unintended consequences such as disrupting population age and social structure, as well as increasing litter sizes of certain targeted predators.” This concern is backed up by multiple studies and individual scientists. Project Coyote led a sign-on statement in 2020,⁴² endorsed by 70 conservation scientists, in opposition to killing contests on scientific grounds, arguing that killing contests were not only ineffective at controlling livestock predation, but that they may exacerbate it.

There are estimated to be more than 600 killing contests in Texas alone.⁴³

41 The Hunting Game (no date) Thehuntinggame.com. Available at: <https://www.thehuntinggame.com/about/> (Accessed: March 2, 2023).

42 Statement in opposition to wildlife killing contests (2020) Project Coyote. Available at: https://www.projectcoyote.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/SAB-Letter-Against-WKCs_FINAL_2021.01.13.pdf?eType=EmailBlastContent&eId=6cac5eec-3b8f-464b-b860-a06fdff807aa (Accessed: March 7, 2023).

43 Somvichian-Clausen, A. (2021) The controversy over wildlife killing contests, The Hill. The Hill. Available at: <https://thehill.com/changing-america/sustainability/environment/544533-the-controversy-over-wildlife-killing-contests/> (Accessed: March 2, 2023).

CASE STUDY:

THE 2023 RATTLESNAKE ROUNDUP: ANIMAL ABUSE AND RACISM IN THE NAME OF YOUTH LEADERSHIP

Liz Tyson – Born Free USA Programs Director



Figure 7 – The Sweetwater Rattlesnake Roundup 2023. Photo: Born Free USA.

On Sunday, March 12, 2023, I attended the Rattlesnake Roundup in Sweetwater, Texas. Having researched the event, I was largely prepared for what I saw – animal abuse writ large – but the scale of the abuse was nonetheless overwhelming. As we parked the car, we were between two trucks, both with families with young children. I chatted with the mother of one of the families – she had brought their new puppy with them to

help socialize her to crowds. They were all smiles and excited about their novel day out.

I paid my \$10 to enter and was immediately struck by the sound of stressed snakes “rattling” their tails in warning. The sound could be heard over the loud-speaker announcing different elements of the event as soon as I entered the large room. Casting my eye over the arena, teeming with families, I noticed

stalls with the confederate flag – a recognized hate symbol and emblem of white supremacy – proudly displayed as a backdrop to their wares. In some states, the display of this flag in public places is banned. Other flags included the “Punisher” skull symbol, with the phrase “Liberty of Death” emblazoned across it. The logo, owned by Disney, is a motif that has been coopted by the far right in recent years, and in particular the “Proud Boys”

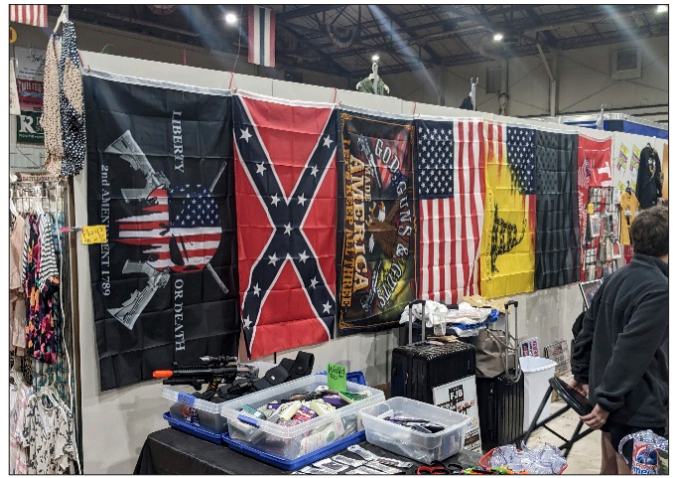


Figure 8 and Figure 9 – Racist iconography was openly displayed at the event. Photos: Born Free USA.



Figure 10 – Snakes were hit on the head with balloons to encourage them to strike. Photo: Born Free USA.

neo-fascist group. No one seemed to bat an eye, and these stalls were as busy as the others.

There were three “pits” where live snakes were being harassed in different ways. At the first pit I visited, staff were using snake hooks to lift snakes onto the display table and then goading them with balloons. The spectacle – which involved hitting the snake on the head with the balloon – was designed to make the snake strike and burst the balloon.



Figure 11 – The snakes were “milked” for their venom. Photo: Born Free USA.

In the second pit, snakes were being pulled out of a plastic trash can to be “milked” for their venom. This involved the staff placing the snake on the display table and pushing the snake hook hard down on the snake’s head to stop them from moving. The snakes were then grasped by the jaws from behind and pushed down onto a glass funnel until they clamped down with their fangs. The staff would then squeeze their venom glands to extract the venom before holding the snake out for visitors to touch their heads and bodies.



Figure 12 – Snakes piled into trash cans were pulled out to be used in the various “demonstrations”. Photo: Born Free USA.

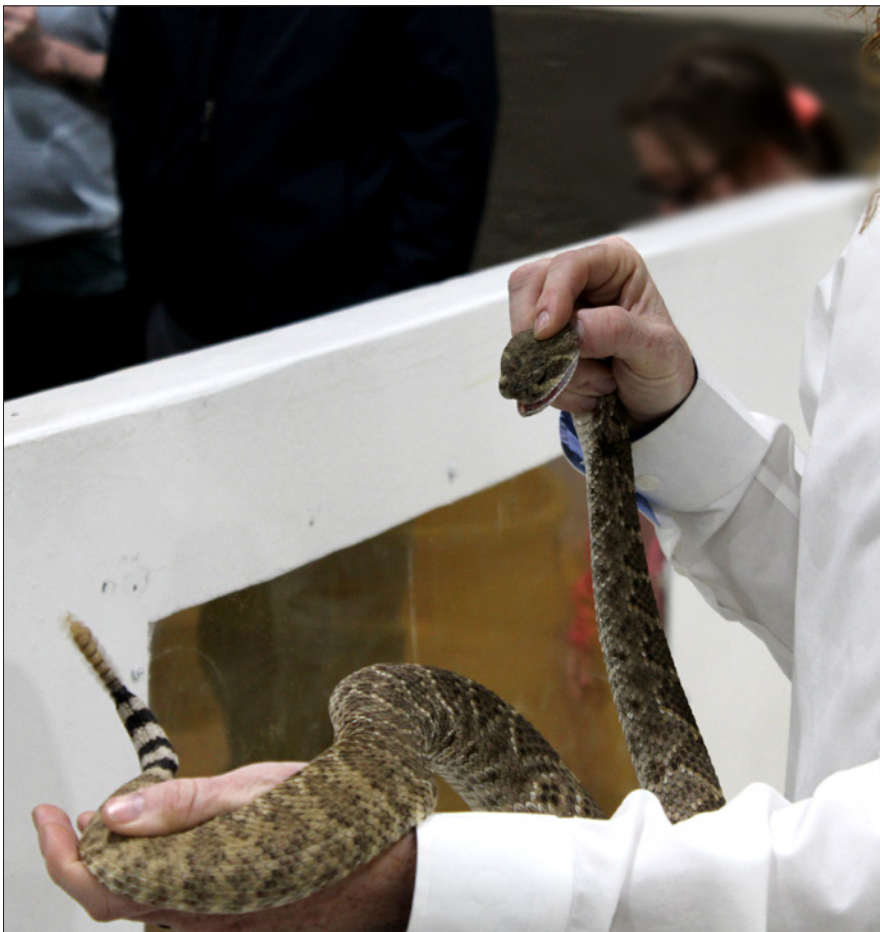


Figure 13 – After being “milked” the snakes were held out to visitors for them to touch
Photo: Born Free USA.

While I watched, a spectator told a young child that the venom was used to create vaccines that would save your life if you were bitten by a rattlesnake. I asked the staff member what the purpose of milking was and he replied that the venom is spun down in a centrifuge then used for research. I asked if it was used to create antivenin and he paused and said that it had been in the past but not anymore. He gave no other information on what “research” was carried out using the venom.

Along the back wall of the room was the “Skinning Pit” – a bloody table above which beheaded snakes were hanged by their tails to be skinned. A production line of people were pulling out the snakes’



Figure 14 – The “Skinning Pit” had an ongoing display of snakes being skinned for the audience. Photo: Born Free USA.



Figure 15 – Young children were encouraged to skin snakes. Photo: Born Free USA.



Figure 16 – Children and adults were encouraged to place a bloody handprint on the wall in a macabre display. Photo: Born Free USA.

innards and then tearing their skins off their bodies. Children were being encouraged to join in and, as I watched, a young boy skinned a snake to the delight of the staff. Blood ran down his forearms as he tore the snake’s body free of the skin. Behind him, a macabre wall of handprints painted in blood acted as a backdrop to the scene. Sawdust covered the floor to soak up the blood and a large trash can containing dead snakes sat by them to provide a constant supply. I asked the staff if they were sure that the snakes in the trash can were dead and they laughed and said they had chopped their heads off and that they were “ex snakes.”



Figure 17 – Snakes were picked up, pushed around, and kicked as part of the event. Photo: Born Free USA.

The final pit was the source of the loud rattling noise which could be heard all around the room. In it were perhaps thousands of snakes, piled on top of one another and being kicked around by staff walking around in the pit and talking to the audience. At least some of the snakes were dead. Footage I captured showed one of the staff poking a motionless snake with a snake hook. It is unclear whether the snakes died in the pit – perhaps from being crushed under the weight of the hundreds of bodies on top of them – or if they were already dead when thrown into the pit. Most were still alive – the sound of the rattles was overwhelming.



Figure 18 – Thousands of snakes were piled on top of one another in one pit. Photo: Born Free USA.



Figure 19 – The event includes a pageant for “Miss Sweetwater”. The winner takes part in demonstrations. Photo: Born Free USA.



Figure 20 – “Miss Texas” was a guest at the event. She acknowledged that the animals were scared. Photo: Born Free USA.

Miss Texas, Averie Bishop, was a special guest at the event. She told audiences she had been there since Friday. She was escorted around the various pits and encouraged to take an active part in the various displays. Unlike the staff at the event, she seemed to have some sympathy for the snakes. As she gripped one snake’s head as part of a “milking” display, she spoke to the snake saying “It’s nearly over, I know you’re scared.”

Averie Bishop is the first Asian American Miss Texas and sits on the Dallas Anti-Hate Advisory Council, whose founder, Mayor Eric Johnson said: “Nobody should feel uncomfortable or unsafe in Dallas because of who they are, because of their race or ethnicity, their sexual and gender identity, their religion or their national origin.” It is unclear how an event which embraces racist iconography aligns with these values.



Figure 21 – Taxidermized snakes were for sale at the event. Photo: Born Free USA.



Figure 22 – Trinkets made from different parts of the snakes were on sale. Photo: Born Free USA.

In addition to the live snakes, stallholders peddled their trade around the edge of the room. Along with weapons on sale, customers could purchase cooked rattlesnake meat and multiple products made from the bodies of dead animals. At the official merchandise stall for the event, rattlesnake heads preserved in jars were for sale and at others, rattlesnake heads and rattles were being sold as keyrings. Dozens of dead rattlesnakes were taxidermized and positioned as if they were about to strike. Wallets, belts, and hat decorations made from the skin of dead snakes were also on sale. Cruel fur products and “comedy” items such as stuffed dead armadillos holding onto beer bottles were also up for grabs.



Figure 23 – Trinkets made from different parts of the snakes were on sale. Photo: Born Free USA.



Figure 24 – Macabre “comedy” items like these dead armadillos were on sale. Photo: Born Free USA.

By the time I write this report, the rattling will have stopped. The living snakes whose presence drew thousands of paying visitors will have been killed and the prize money for their lifeless bodies will have been distributed. Having researched the roundup prior to attending, I was not shocked by the event, but it did put the scale of the cruelty being meted out into perspective. Thousands of animals, both dead and alive, suffered to create an event bizarrely promoted as family-friendly. Benefitting Junior Chamber International (JCI), which markets itself as a youth development organization whose core philosophy is to: “inspire confidence, unite communities, enhance equal opportunities, establish justice, embrace cultural diversity, and create sustainable impact,” it is impossible for me to align the event I witnessed this weekend with any of these values. Instead, the Sweetwater Jaycee’s Rattlesnake Roundup is a showcase of cruelty and unfettered prejudice, glorifying violence and dominion over animals, humans, and the wider environment.

KILLING IN NOVEL WAYS

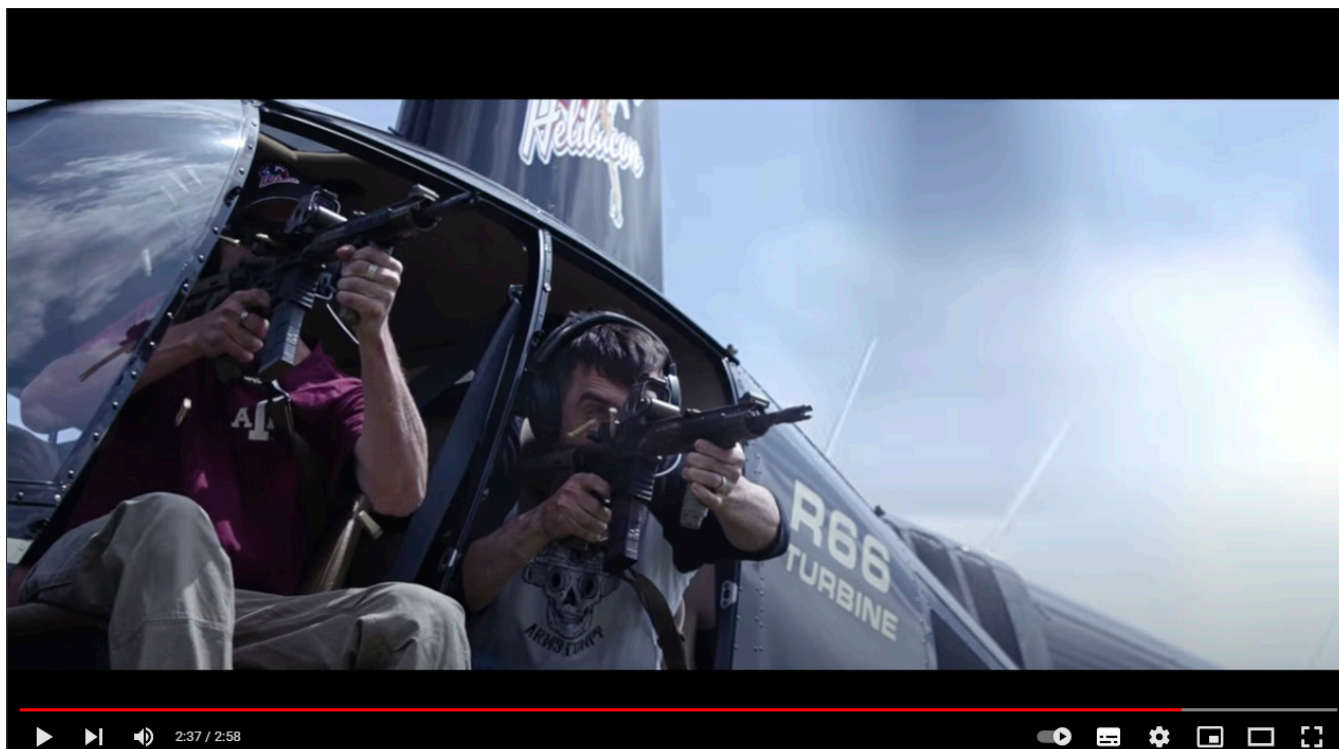


Figure 25 – Screenshot from one of Helibacon’s promotional videos. Source: YouTube.

The federal Airborne Hunting Act⁴⁴ bans the shooting or harassing of animals from an aircraft but allows states to grant permits to shoot animals from aircraft “to administer or protect or aid in the administration or protection of land, water, wildlife, livestock, domesticated animals, human life, or crops.” For many years, Texas allowed the hunting of feral hogs from helicopters but, in 2011, a new law⁴⁵ was introduced that further commercialized the practice. The new law allowed a gunner

with landowner permission to pay to fly with a permit holder and gun down hogs themselves. This, in turn, led to companies offering hog hunting from helicopters as an “experience” to paying customers willing to part with thousands of dollars for the privilege. Under the same law, coyotes can also be killed from aircraft.

Helibacon is one of the companies offering thrill killers the chance to chase stressed and frightened wild hogs down in a helicopter and blast them

away with machine guns.⁴⁶ In its advertising paraphernalia, the company asks: “Do you want to buzz droves of hogs 15 feet off the ground at highway speeds? Texas is the place to be! We’ll supply the machine guns, you bring the trigger finger.” With costs ranging from \$2,995 – \$5,495, hunters can use fully automatic machine guns to kill both feral pigs and coyotes. No hunting experience is necessary, and shooters are given just one hour of safety training before being handed semi or fully-auto-

44 Airborne Hunting Act (16 U.S.C. 742j1).

45 HB 716 2011 Texas State Legislature

46 Helicopter hog hunting trips in Texas (2023) HeliBacon. Available at: <https://www.helibacon.com/texas-helicopter-hog-hunting/> (Accessed: March 2, 2023).

matic weapons.⁴⁷ The company claims in its FAQs that it ensures that animals are dead and not wounded but a video posted online shows a hog shot and writhing on the floor as the helicopter continues to fly onwards.⁴⁸ In another video, a hunter is shown firing multiple rounds at a hog from a low flying position. The hog is hit more than once and is seen staggering around, injured but not killed by the shots.⁴⁹ In the same video, a hunter laughs as he says that “you are not allowed to use automatic weapons while we are hunting back in Canada so it’s a completely different experience.” The video then shows the same hunters shouting with delight as they kill a hog. According to an interview with owners, 75% of their clientele come from out of state where gun laws are stricter and 30% of their clients are from overseas.^{50 51} In another video, produced by Helibacon as an advertisement for the experiences they are selling, the owner opens the video by saying “My name is [name] with Helibacon,

and we shoot guns out of helicopters for fun.”

While the advertising for the company is all about the killing and fun that can be had shooting from a helicopter, they also make the claim that, “although it is enjoyable to fly low level in a helicopter and shoot full-auto machine guns from the aircraft, it is not sport hunting.” In their FAQ section, they reiterate that their purpose is not sport or fun, but “to reduce the amount of over-populated feral hogs and coyotes.”⁵² The reason it is important for the company to insist on this point is because sport hunting from aircrafts is illegal in Texas. Despite the purported aim of the exercise being to help control feral pig populations, the owner of Helibacon admitted in a media interview that: “Honestly, I don’t think we actually had a significant impact on the total population numbers in a county.”⁵³ This admission is backed up by a spokesperson for Texas Parks and Wildlife Department who told press in 2012 that

aerial killing is not “particularly effective for feral hog control.”⁵⁴ Research into the efficacy of various different methods – both lethal and non-lethal – to control feral hogs also found that aerial hunting was ineffective. Citing a 1993 study, which simulated disease outbreak, researchers used aerial shooting to evaluate the effectiveness of feral hog eradication plans. While they were able to remove 80% of the population in five days, one year later, the number of hogs had grown to 77% of the original numbers.⁵⁵ Reasons for the failure of aerial hunting include that the animals learn to avoid the helicopter when they hear it approach, that the helicopters simply push populations off land where the hogs are prevalent and onto neighboring properties, that the pigs are largely nocturnal so hunts are carried out at the wrong time, that most hunts are carried out in the cooler weather of the fall and winter rather than when crops are growing in the spring and summer, and the inability

47 Helicopter hog hunting in Texas: Faqs (2023) HeliBacon. Available at: <https://www.helibacon.com/faqs-hog-hunting/> (Accessed: March 2, 2023).

48 Our videos: Hog Hunting & Machine Gun Rental in Texas (2022) HeliBacon. Available at: <https://www.helibacon.com/videos/?playlist=ede2deb&video=eb007c1> (Accessed: March 2, 2023).

49 *Ibid.* Available at: <https://www.helibacon.com/videos/?playlist=ede2deb&video=9099a5c>

50 *Ibid.* Available at: <https://www.helibacon.com/videos/?playlist=ede2deb&video=9099a5c>

51 Ramchandani, A. (2017) The business of shooting pigs from the Sky - Pacific Standard, Pacific Standard. Available at: <https://psmag.com/magazine/the-business-of-shooting-pigs-from-the-sky> (Accessed: March 6, 2023).

52 Helicopter hog hunting in Texas: Faqs (2023) HeliBacon. Available at: <https://www.helibacon.com/faqs-hog-hunting/> (Accessed: March 2, 2023).

53 Ramchandani, A. (2017) The business of shooting pigs from the Sky - Pacific Standard, Pacific Standard. Available at: <https://psmag.com/magazine/the-business-of-shooting-pigs-from-the-sky> (Accessed: March 6, 2023).

54 ‘Pork chopper’ law hasn’t helped quell feral hogs in Texas, state says (2012) Dallas News. Available at: <https://www.dallasnews.com/news/texas/2012/08/25/pork-chopper-law-hasnt-helped-quell-feral-hogs-in-texas-state-says/> (Accessed: March 7, 2023).

55 Massei, G., Roy, S. and Bunting, R. (no date) Too many hogs? A review of methods to mitigate impact by wild boar and feral hogs, DigitalCommons@USU. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/hwi/vol15/iss1/10/> (Accessed: March 7, 2023).



Figure 26 – A terrified pig tries to outrun the helicopter.
Source: YouTube.

to use aerial hunting near residential areas, roads, or other populated areas. Some farmers say that the panic over damage caused by the feral pigs is overstated, with one saying in an interview with press that there is “unwarranted mass hysteria” on the issue.⁵⁶

Helibacon publishes videos of customer interviews on their website that show the true nature of the hunts they offer. The violent nature of the experiences offered by Helibacon were exemplified in a video with a hunter who laughs as he says: “We pulled up on the first hogs and... I kinda blacked out and just started shooting... rounds off everywhere, I wasn’t aiming for anything, I got so excited...”⁵⁷ In response, the interviewer laughs and says “That’s great!”

Texas hunter education resources go to lengths to highlight the need for a “vital shot”⁵⁸ that kills the animal swiftly and with as little suffering as possible. Clearly, this demand is not being met when hunters are “kinda blacked out and just... shooting rounds off everywhere.”

Another satisfied Helibacon customer said: “Absolute amazing experience. You shoot from



Figure 27 – The same pig is hit. They stagger and then collapse.
Source: YouTube.

the top, through the spine and they do a little twitch and then you get down there and it comes out the belly, and you see the guts everywhere... Fantastic!” His friend is also in shot and throws his head back laughing at this statement.⁵⁹



Figure 28 – Helibacon clients laugh as they describe the moment the pigs are killed and “you see the guts everywhere”.
Source: YouTube.

In addition to Helibacon, there are multiple other helicopter hunting companies in Texas. These include Last Shadow, which invites hunters to “unleash their inner beast” and boasts: “you’ll barrel through the sky in our turbine-powered MD600N helicopter scouring hundreds of thousands of acres of Texas farmland to show feral hogs the

56 ‘Pork chopper’ law hasn’t helped quell feral hogs in Texas, state says (2012) Dallas News. Available at: <https://www.dallasnews.com/news/texas/2012/08/25/pork-chopper-law-hasnt-helped-quell-feral-hogs-in-texas-state-says/> (Accessed: March 7, 2023).

57 *Ibid.* Available at: <https://www.helibacon.com/videos/?playlist=ede2deb&video=d755ee6>

58 Today’s Hunter in Texas (2013), Slides 282 - 294. Available at: <https://tpwd.texas.gov/education/hunter-education/hunter-education-instructor/class-materials>

59 Our videos: Hog Hunting & Machine Gun Rental in Texas (2022) HeliBacon. Available at: <https://www.helibacon.com/videos/?playlist=ede2deb&video=1681603>

'Last Shadow' they'll ever see."⁶⁰ Last Shadow charges from \$1,100 - \$1,600 per person, per hour, dependent on the number of hunters participating. Like Helibacon, hunters are required to take a one-hour safety briefing before being let loose with semi-automatic weapons.

A third company, Pork Choppers Aviation, offers hog hunting for \$2,750 per person for a two-hour hunt. They post laughing videos on their social media of their clients gunning down animals, along with racist "jokes" about immigrants.⁶¹ They claim that "We try to arrange for as much of the meat to go to a good cause as possible. Due to the liability risk incurred by

many of the homeless shelters and food banks, most wild hog meat is rejected from potential transmission of disease." The implication is that *some* homeless shelters and food banks take feral hog meat hunted by the company. This statement is misleading. In fact, it is illegal under federal law⁶² and the Texas Animal Health Commission Rules⁶³ for hogs who are not live-trapped and processed at authorized slaughterhouses to be donated to food banks or used for any other form of human consumption with the exception of feeding the hunter themselves and their guests.⁶⁴ It is unclear what the "good causes" referred to by the com-

pany might be, but the mention of food banks and homeless shelters is somewhat cynical given that none of the animals killed by the company's clients will be used for this purpose. Pork Choppers also has a podcast entitled "Man Sh!t" where the hosts discuss various subjects and make repeated sexist, homophobic, transphobic, racist, and misogynistic remarks.⁶⁵ They describe the podcast as follows: "The name says it all... in a society of political correctness, safe spaces and declining levels of testosterone, we're here to give you a glimpse into any and everything real men do."⁶⁶



Figure 29 – Last Shadow promotional video shows clients gunning down running pigs. Source: YouTube.



Figure 30 – two gunmen fire on a single pig from a helicopter. Source: YouTube.

60 Helicopter hog hunting: Last shadow: Temple, TX (2022) Last Shadow. Available at: <https://lastshadow.com/experiences/> (Accessed: March 2, 2023).

61 See: <https://www.facebook.com/porkchoppersaviation/photos/pb.100064838552451.-2207520000./6073666009321689/?type=3>

62 Summary of federal inspection requirements for meat products brochure (no date) Food Safety and Inspection Service. USDA. Available at: https://www.fsis.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media_file/2021-02/Fed-Food-Inspect-Requirements.pdf (Accessed: March 2, 2023).

63 TAHCC complete rules - texas animal health commission (no date) Texas Animal Health Commission. Available at: <https://www.tahc.texas.gov/regis/pdf/TAHCCCompleteRules.pdf> (Accessed: March 2, 2023).

64 Cochran, A. (2022) Feral hogs and their meat: This is what you need to know about chomping down on these Texas swine, KPRC. KPRC Click2Houston. Available at: <https://www.click2houston.com/features/2022/05/13/feral-hogs-and-their-meat-this-is-what-you-need-to-know-about-chomping-down-on-these-texas-swine/> (Accessed: March 2, 2023).

65 Man sh!t podcast (no date) porkchoppers. Available at: <https://www.porkchoppersaviation.com/man-shit-podcast> (Accessed: March 2, 2023). E.g., Episodes 27, 35, 59.

66 Man sh!t podcast (no date) porkchoppers. Available at: <https://www.porkchoppersaviation.com/man-shit-podcast> (Accessed: March 2, 2023).



Figure 31 – Helihunter shared a video of pigs being injured, but not killed, by a crossbow. Source: YouTube.

While most helicopter hunting companies advertise hunts with rifles, others allow hunting with different weapons, including crossbows. A video⁶⁷ shared on YouTube by Viral Outdoors showed a hunter flying with a company called Helihunter shooting pigs with a crossbow from the aircraft. The video, uploaded in 2012, claims that it is a world’s first. Many of the pigs continued to run with the crossbow arrows lodged in their flesh. There were multiple examples in the video of animals being seriously wounded but not quickly killed by the hunter. It appeared that even other hunters were appalled by what they saw as comments on the video demonstrated. One commenter said: “In lots of ways, humans are an invasive species. We are destructive. But that is not an excuse to shoot a human being and watch them squirm in pain, is it? I have nothing against hunting, in fact, hunting is good! I love hunting! I just think all shots should be as clean and quick as possible, and minimize animal suffering. Happy hunting everyone!” Another said: “I am all for hunting and killing the hogs... But with a crossbow from a helicopter just seems cruel...”



Figure 32 – The hunters continue to chase a pig who has already been hit with an arrow to shoot them again. Source: YouTube.

In a later video, uploaded in 2019, a bow hunter flying with South Texas Ranch tells the camera that hunting hogs with a bow is a “bucket list” item for him. He acknowledges that it might not be effective but wants to try regardless. It is clear that this is not about quick kills of invasive animals but using sentient living beings for target practice for the entertainment of the hunter.⁶⁸

While killing feral pigs from a helicopter is legal in Texas, there is evidence that this method of hunting has also been employed illegally within the state. In 2019, four men were charged with using a helicopter to trophy hunt. They killed a barbary sheep and a blackbuck antelope. As trophy hunting is considered “sport” hunting, this is not permitted under the rules relating to helicopter hunting. The men were fined and given one year of probation, during which time they were not allowed to possess firearms or sport hunt.⁶⁹

67 See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LGDOTot2VU8>

68 See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yVLYw8yJDoA>

69 Four men fined after illegally sport hunting from helicopter (2019) Southern District of Texas | Four Men Fined After Illegally Sport Hunting from Helicopter | United States Department of Justice. U.S. Attorney’s Office, Southern District of Texas. Available at: <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdtx/pr/four-men-fined-after-illegally-sport-hunting-helicopter> (Accessed: March 6, 2023).



Figure 33 – In 2019, four men were charged with illegally hunting from a helicopter. They killed a Barbary sheep and a blackbuck antelope.

There are estimated to be around 100 companies using helicopters to hunt feral hogs.⁷⁰ It is unclear how many of those offer tourists the opportunity to kill animals from their aircrafts, but our research identified at least 23 such companies.

⁷⁰ Ramchandani, A. (2017) The business of shooting pigs from the Sky - Pacific Standard, Pacific Standard. Available at: <https://psmag.com/magazine/the-business-of-shooting-pigs-from-the-sky> (Accessed: March 6, 2023).

TROPHY HUNTING IN TEXAS

Trophy hunting is a type of “sport hunting” most associated with the African continent. Trophy hunting is the killing of an animal for sport or pleasure in order to display part or all of their body as a trophy. Often, hunters pay thousands of dollars to kill large “game” animals such as lions, elephants, giraffes, and zebras. The practice gained particular notoriety in 2015 when U.S. dentist, Walter Palmer, allegedly baited a beloved Zimbabwean lion, Cecil, to encourage him to cross the boundary of a protected area. Once out of the national park, Palmer then shot Cecil with a bow and arrow, ultimately beheading him, and leaving his corpse to rot.⁷¹ The story gained global attention – in part because of the suggested illegality of the particular kill and in part because Cecil was a well-known animal who was loved by locals and tourists. Either way, the story blew up and the global conversation it sparked is still going on eight years later. Of course, Cecil



Figure 34 – In 2015, the death of Cecil the lion at the hands of an American trophy hunter garnered global attention and condemnation.

was not the only animal killed by trophy hunters. It is estimated that 700,000 hunting trophies – including skulls, mounts, and teeth of animals such as giraffes, rhinos, and zebras – have been imported into the U.S. between 2016 and 2020.⁷²

While trophy hunting abroad continues despite controversy and growing opposition, less is publicized about trophy hunting right here in the United States, with Texas at its epicenter.⁷³ An estimated 5,000 Texas ranches breed exotic species, with numbers of non-native species living there thought to be around two

⁷¹ Rogers, K. (2015) American hunter killed Cecil, beloved lion who was lured out of his sanctuary, The New York Times. The New York Times. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/29/world/africa/american-hunter-is-accused-of-killing-cecil-a-beloved-lion-in-zimbabwe.html> (Accessed: March 2, 2023).

⁷² Romaine, J. (2022) US hunters imported more than 700K trophies in ‘disturbing’ trend: Report, The Hill. The Hill. Available at: <https://thehill.com/changing-america/sustainability/environment/598127-us-hunters-imported-more-than-700k-trophies-in/#:~:text=of%20hunting%20trophies.,U.S.%20hunters%20imported%20more%20than%20700%2C000%20hunting%20trophies%20%E2%80%94%20including%20skulls,the%20course%20of%205%20years> (Accessed: March 2, 2023)..

⁷³ Baylon, J. (no date) How trophy hunting in Texas became a multibillion-dollar industry, Business Insider. Business Insider. Available at: <https://www.businessinsider.com/how-trophy-hunting-in-texas-became-a-multibillion-dollar-industry-2021-6> (Accessed: March 2, 2023).



Figure 35 – Thirteen of the 41 Scimitar Horned Oryx killed at just one hunting ranch. Source: Texas Hunting Lodge.

million individuals.⁷⁴ ABC News reported in 2018 that a thousand of those ranches allow the animals to be hunted.⁷⁵ Animals such as the Scimitar-horned Oryx, an antelope species that was declared Extinct in the Wild in 2000, and for which a small reintroduction program is being carried out in Chad,⁷⁶ can be killed in Texas if the hunter is willing to pay between \$2,950 - \$17,500.^{77 78} In 2022, Sahara Conservation confirmed that there are currently 90 individuals in the wild. In contrast, the website of just one Texas

74 Ferguson, W. (2021) How Texas hunting went exotic, Texas Monthly. Available at: <https://www.texasmonthly.com/travel/how-texas-hunting-went-exotic/> (Accessed: March 2, 2023).

75 Louszko, A. (no date) ABC News. ABC News Network. Available at: <https://abcnews.go.com/amp/US/texas-ranches-hunting-exotic-animals-touted-support-conservation/story?id=56243840> (Accessed: March 2, 2023).

76 Species - scimitar-horned oryx (2023) SaharaConservation. Available at: <https://saharaconservation.org/scimitar-horned-oryx/#1525708741984-6cdcbfd3-01fb5bf0-6846> (Accessed: March 2, 2023).

77 Scimitar horned oryx hunts (no date) Miles&MilesOutfitters. Available at: <https://schuntingranch.com/our-hunts/scimitar-horned-oryx> (Accessed: March 2, 2023).

78 Scimitar horned oryx hunting (no date) Texas Hunt Lodge. Available at: [https://www.texashuntlodge.com/hunting-packages/scimitar-horned-oryx-hunts#:~:text=The%20Scimitar%20Horned%20Oryx%20was,%2C%20Junction\)%20region%20of%20Texas.](https://www.texashuntlodge.com/hunting-packages/scimitar-horned-oryx-hunts#:~:text=The%20Scimitar%20Horned%20Oryx%20was,%2C%20Junction)%20region%20of%20Texas.) (Accessed: March 2, 2023).

FEBRUARY 2023 HUNT PHOTOS



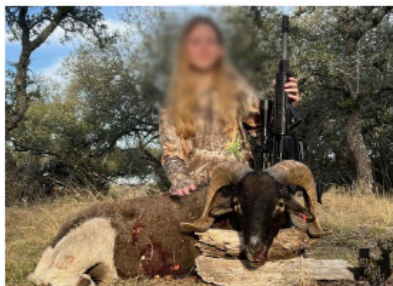
February 28, 2023 Trophy Wild Boar Hunting



February 28, 2023 Record Class Texas Dall Hunting



February 28, 2023 Trophy Wild Boar Hunting



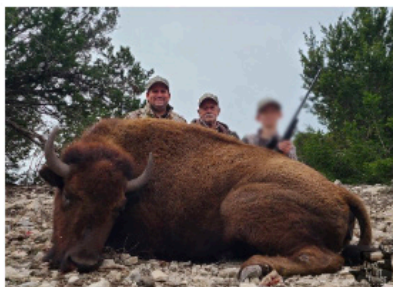
February 23, 2023 Painted Desert Ram Hunting



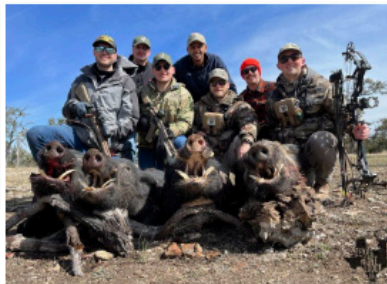
February 23, 2023 Trophy Buffalo Hunting



February 20, 2023 Trophy Painted Dagon 4 Horn Hunting



February 19, 2023 Meat Buffalo Hunting



February 18, 2023 Trophy Wild Boar Hunting



February 18, 2023 Broken Horn Nile Lechwe Hunting

Figure 36 – Gallery of some animals hunted in one month at Texas Hunt Lodge. Source: Texas Hunt Lodge.

hunting ranch where Scimitar Oryx can be hunted displayed photos of 41 dead oryx – equivalent to almost 50% of the world’s entire free-living populations – killed for cash by their clients.⁷⁹

Other endangered species that can be killed for money in Texas include the Nile Lechwe antelope, the most threatened lechwe species, classed as Endangered by the IUCN. There are thought to be around 32,000 individuals left in their natural habitat. Their scarcity means that the price on their heads as trophies can be as high as \$15,000.⁸⁰ Dama gazelles, a Critically Endangered species thought to have a population of fewer than 500 individuals, can be slaughtered by hunters for prices around \$10,000.⁸¹

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ Nile lechwe hunting (no date) Texas Hunt Lodge. Available at: <https://www.texashuntlodge.com/hunting-packages/nile-lechwe-hunt#:~:text=Texas%20Hunt%20Lodge%20allows%20the,a%20suitable%20trophy%20year%20round.> (Accessed: March 2, 2023).

⁸¹ Dama gazelle hunting: 18,000 acres in Texas: 60+ species (2022) OX Ranch. Available at: <https://www.oxhuntingranch.com/texas/dama-gazelle-hunting> (Accessed: March 2, 2023). /



Figure 37 – The deer watch as the “stalking” hunter sets up his shot. Source: YouTube.

Pere David’s deer – another species Extinct in the wild – can be killed for \$8,500.⁸²

A 2007 report published by Texas A&M University suggested that the economic impact of the exotic hunting ranching in Texas was around \$1.3 billion.⁸³ It states that it is “a growing and important segment of the Texas economy, contributing to the vitality of rural areas of the state.” It is likely that these figures have risen in the intervening years as more ranches engage in this kind of commercial venture.

The cruel practice of hunting semi-tame animals, often in the same places that they come every day to be fed or access water, and in areas that have perimeter fencing to prevent the animals from escaping is known as canned hunting. A journalist from Texas Monthly magazine said on a visit to Ox Ranch, Texas: “Many of the critters had ginormous racks that would have wowed on a wall mount, but they were accustomed to being fed by humans every day and seemed about as wild as a Hereford cow.” While the hunting ranches humor their clients and claim to give them “authentic”

hunting experiences, canned hunting has been likened to shooting fish in a barrel.⁸⁴ Like the helicopter hunting companies, the hunting ranches publicize their work online, often sharing graphic videos of animals being killed. The farce of the canned hunting operation can be found in a video shared on YouTube from Texas Hunting Lodge where the hunter and his guide “stalk” an Extinct in the wild Pere David’s deer. While they claim to be “stalking” the animal, the video shows them near a deer feeder tramping loudly through long grass as the deer and a large buffalo watch them. Clearly accustomed to human presence, there is no skill in shooting a tame deer at close range. Despite the close proximity, and the deer showing no signs of fear, it takes two rifle shots to kill them.⁸⁵

82 Pere David Deer Hunting (no date) Texas Hunt Lodge. Available at: <https://www.texashuntlodge.com/hunting-packages/pere-davids-deer#:~:text=Texas%20Hunt%20Lodge%20is%20the,trophy%20most%20of%20the%20year>. (Accessed: March 2, 2023).

83 Economic Impact of the Exotic Wildlife Industry (no date) Texas A & M University. Agricultural and Food Policy Center. Available at: <https://www.afpc.tamu.edu/research/publications/496/rr-2007-02.pdf> (Accessed: March 2, 2023).

84 Editor, B. (2021) Shooting fish in a barrel: U.S. canned hunting industry offers ‘menus’ of rare animals for a thrill kill, A Humane World. Available at: <https://blog.humanesociety.org/2021/01/shooting-fish-in-a-barrel-u-s-canned-hunting-industry-offers-menus-of-rare-animals-for-a-thrill-kill.html> (Accessed: March 2, 2023).

85 See: https://youtu.be/pV-_JQkdYkU

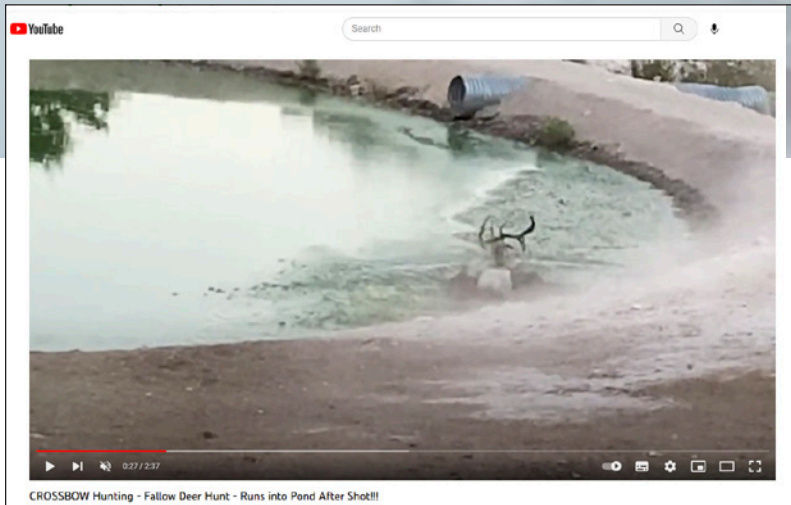


Figure 38 – The deer is hit and runs into the pond. Source: YouTube.

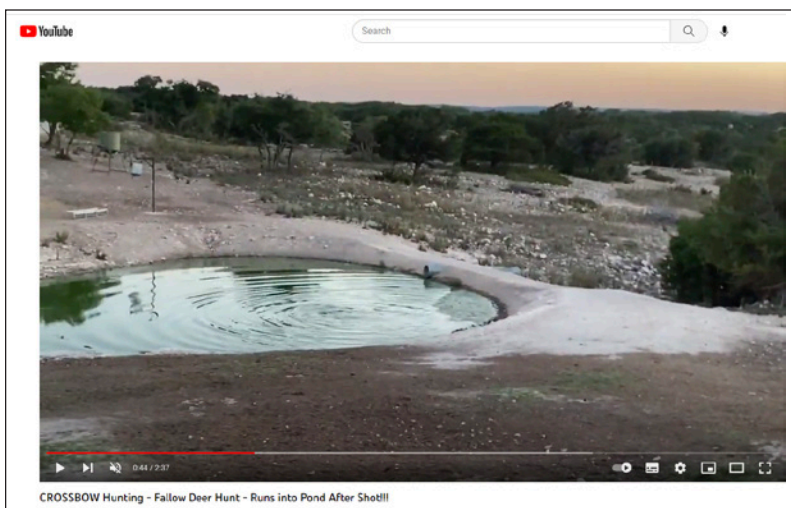


Figure 39 – The deer disappears below the surface and drowns. Source: YouTube.

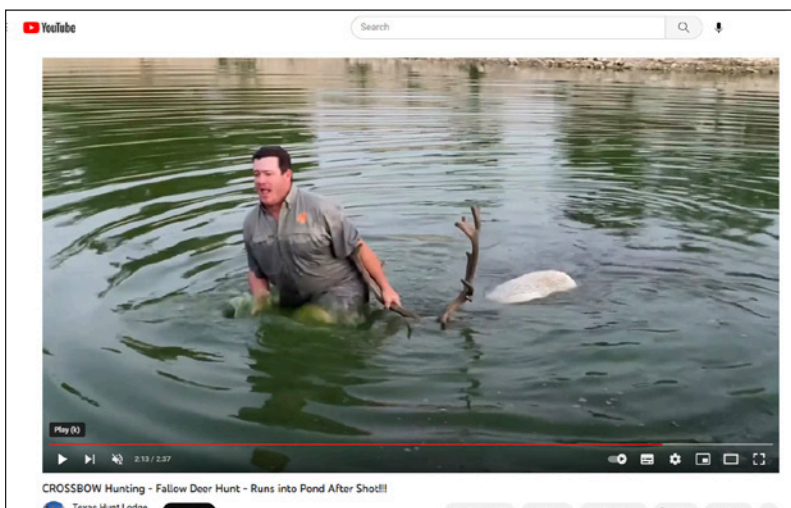


Figure 40 – The guide continues to laugh as he pulls the dead deer from the pond. Source: YouTube.

In another video, hunters laugh hysterically as a fallow deer – a deer species native to Europe and Asia – is hit by a crossbow arrow shot from a blind and runs into a pond. The deer drowns as the hunters laugh. The guide exclaims in gasping breaths as he continues to laugh “He drowned!” The guide then dragged the deer out of the water by his antlers and the hunter poses for a “grab and grin” photograph with the dead animal.⁸⁶

86 See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rQ4WnCuigFo>



Hunting for African Porcupines in Texas

Figure 41 – The porcupine writhes on the ground with a visible gunshot wound, while the hunters film. Source: YouTube.

In another video from the same lodge, a porcupine is shot and killed in what is advertised as a “unique” hunting experience. As with the Pere David’s deer, it took the hunter two rifle shots to kill the slow-moving porcupine as the animal – known for having poor eyesight – foraged quietly in woodland. The guide films as the injured animal is still moving on the ground.⁸⁷

The Exotic Wildlife Association (EWA) is a Texas-based organization that actively promotes the commercialization of hunting Endangered animals, both in the U.S. and abroad. It states that a major part of its mission is to promote “conservation through commerce,” which includes defending the rights of ranchers to breed and kill Endangered animals for money. In its magazine, the EWA’s President, Tommy Oates, boasts lobbying efforts which were “successful in removing three species from the Endangered Species Act (Scimitar horned Oryx, Dama Gazelle, and Addax).”⁸⁸ The organization also cites its continued efforts to have seven more

species (Arabian Oryx, Red Lechwe, Barasingha, Eld’s Deer, Grevy’s Zebra, Banteng, and Gaur) removed from protection under the Endangered Species Act in one of the 2019 editions of the same magazine.⁸⁹

In an article published in the *Houston Chronicle* in 2018, the author writes that Charly Seale, Executive Director of EWA “is quick to point out that neither he nor his organization supports hunting Endangered species in the wild.” The article then quotes Seale as saying, “I’ve spent some of the best weeks of my life on photo safaris in Africa, and I’ve never been hunting. I find photos of hunters crouched

87 See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gd79nkFqxYU>

88 See: <https://fliphtml5.com/mlkp/efde/basic>

89 See: <http://online.fliphtml5.com/mlkp/dbov/#p=8>

over dead animals distasteful.” In direct contradiction to Seale’s claim, on the organization’s Instagram page, it shares posts and articles promoting and supporting trophy hunting of Critically Endangered species such as black rhino in Africa.⁹⁰ In its magazine, it shares photographs of hunters crouched over dead animals. In addition, the EWA website lists both the Dallas Safari Club and the Houston Safari Club as its “Conservation Partners.” The safari clubs are active and vocal proponents of trophy hunting both in the U.S. and abroad and lobby against legislation to

protect animals from the practice. The Dallas Safari Club alone spent \$80,000 in 2021 on federal government lobbying,⁹¹ and Safari Club international spent \$240,000.⁹² The EWA’s magazine also includes racist anti-immigration, anti-black,⁹³ anti-African,⁹⁴ and anti-Asian⁹⁵ rants, as well as articles espousing political⁹⁶ and public health⁹⁷ conspiracy theories.

Texas Parks and Wildlife Service, a government agency, actively promotes the trophy hunting of Extinct in the wild species such as the Scimitar Horned Oryx.⁹⁸

They run the “Big Time Texas Hunt” competition, which offers an exotic hunt as a prize. Entry is \$10 per person and,

according to the website, “All proceeds from Big Time Texas Hunts benefit wildlife conservation, research and public hunting in Texas.”⁹⁹

Trophy hunting in Texas is organized, growing, and has the backing of tens of thousands of lobbying dollars and government agencies alike. Organizations such as the EWA are actively fighting to have Endangered species removed from protection under the Endangered Species Act so that more animals can be killed for cash.



90 See: <https://www.instagram.com/p/B1tixPmFGQm/>

91 Dallas Safari Club Lobbying Profile (no date) OpenSecrets. Available at: <https://www.opensecrets.org/federal-lobbying/clients/summary?cycle=2021&id=D000025229> (Accessed: March 2, 2023).

92 Safari Club International Lobbying Profile (no date) OpenSecrets. Available at: <https://www.opensecrets.org/federal-lobbying/clients/summary?cycle=2021&id=D000000757> (Accessed: March 2, 2023).

93 See: <http://online.fliphtml5.com/mlkp/mrqa/#p=50>

94 See: <http://online.fliphtml5.com/mlkp/dbov/#p=57>

95 See: <https://fliphtml5.com/mlkp/atse/basic>

96 See: <https://fliphtml5.com/mlkp/atse/basic>

97 See: <http://online.fliphtml5.com/mlkp/mrqa/#p=50>

98 Texas Parks & Wildlife Department: Exotic safari (no date) TPWD. Available at: <https://tpwd.texas.gov/huntwild/hunt/public/btth/exotic.phtml> (Accessed: March 2, 2023).

99 Texas Parks & Wildlife Department: Big Time texas hunts (no date) TPWD. Available at: <https://tpwd.texas.gov/huntwild/hunt/public/btth/howtoenter.phtml> (Accessed: March 2, 2023).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

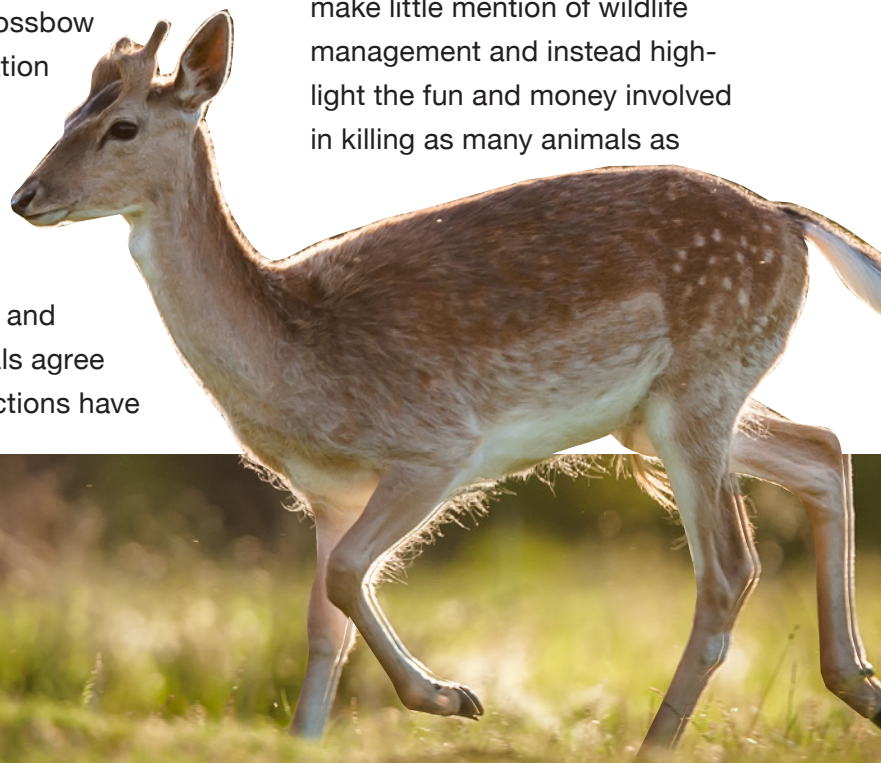
Thrill Killing is big business and, for those who count the value of animal lives in dollars, trophy hunting, helicopter hunting, and killing contests are undoubtedly generating income for the businesses and individuals involved, as well as creating some jobs. For those who believe that conservation of a species can be classified as breeding generation after generation to be gunned down by paying customers, trophy ranches in Texas are certainly responsible for the existence of animals belonging to Endangered and even Extinct in the wild species. For those who think firing on terrified animals from a helicopter, or killing hundreds of coyotes for prize money, is serving a higher ecological function by removing predatory or “pest” species from the environment, the bodies are certainly piling up.

But for those people who value the lives of individual animals and believe that their worth is something more than the cash value of their dead bodies, thrill killing is both abhorrent and unethical. No ethical analysis of trophy hunting on Texas ranches would conclude that breeding an animal with the purpose of then gunning them down in return for payment is conservation. No reasonable person would argue that lobbying to remove species from protection under the Endangered Species Act so that their lives can be sold to the highest bidder with a gun or a crossbow is conservation in action.

The helicopter hunting businesses and state officials agree that their actions have

little impact on the feral pig population, and studies have shown that areas where aerial eradication has been used are soon repopulated. It could not be clearer from client interviews that the sole purpose of these “experiences” has nothing to do with protecting the environment, and everything to do with killing animals for the fun of it.

Conservation scientists agree that killing contests do more harm than good in controlling predatory species and protecting livestock animals from harm. Even the contest organizers make little mention of wildlife management and instead highlight the fun and money involved in killing as many animals as



possible in a fixed time period. Those responsible for the largest rattlesnake roundup in the country make vague claims about preventing explosions of snake numbers, but also claim that their actions have no impact on rattlesnake populations. Experts say that there is no scientific evidence to support either claim because there are no meaningful controls over snake hunters. What we do know is that thousands of animals are brutally killed in the name of entertainment every year.

Even if any of the thrill killing activities explored in this report did constitute meaningful conservation actions, we argue that there must be a limit to the extent to which we, as a society, are willing to allow animals to suffer in the name of some “greater good.” Thrill killing is inexcusable in any context.

RECOMMENDATIONS

States must ban killing contests on the grounds that they are responsible for severe and widespread animal suffering, while failing to protect livestock animals from predation in any meaningful way.

Texas legislatures should revoke rules that allow hunters to purchase “pay to kill” experiences from helicopters on the grounds that allowing inexperienced hunters random opportunities to kill feral pigs from aircraft creates predictable and avoidable negative animal welfare impacts, while failing to meaningfully control feral pig populations.

States with feral pig populations should explore and exhaust non-lethal control methods as a priority for feral pigs, including assessing chemical contraception options and working with landowners to implement barrier exclusion of feral pigs and other deterrents.

JCI International should work with Sweetwater Jaycees to reconfigure the Rattlesnake Roundup to a themed carnival that does not center on animal killing and exploitation and which does not include racist symbolism of any kind. The event as it stands is incompatible with the values of a modern youth development and leadership organization.

The U.S. Government must introduce meaningful protections for the Scimitar horned Oryx, Dama Gazelle, and Addax and other threatened species to prevent them being hunted as trophies in the United States.





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