

IN THE *Field*





Exotic Hunt in Texas

ARTICLE AND PHOTOS BY **CRAIG MOORE**

Over the years Texas has become a great counterweight to my life in New England. The hill country offers relief from the winter and some of the best whitetail hunting anywhere. But what makes Texas unique are the people who have taken wildlife conservation to a level not seen or understood in other places.

The herds of exotic animals and the thorny scrub of the hill country seem to transport folks to the plains of Africa—all while avoiding a 20-hour plane ride.

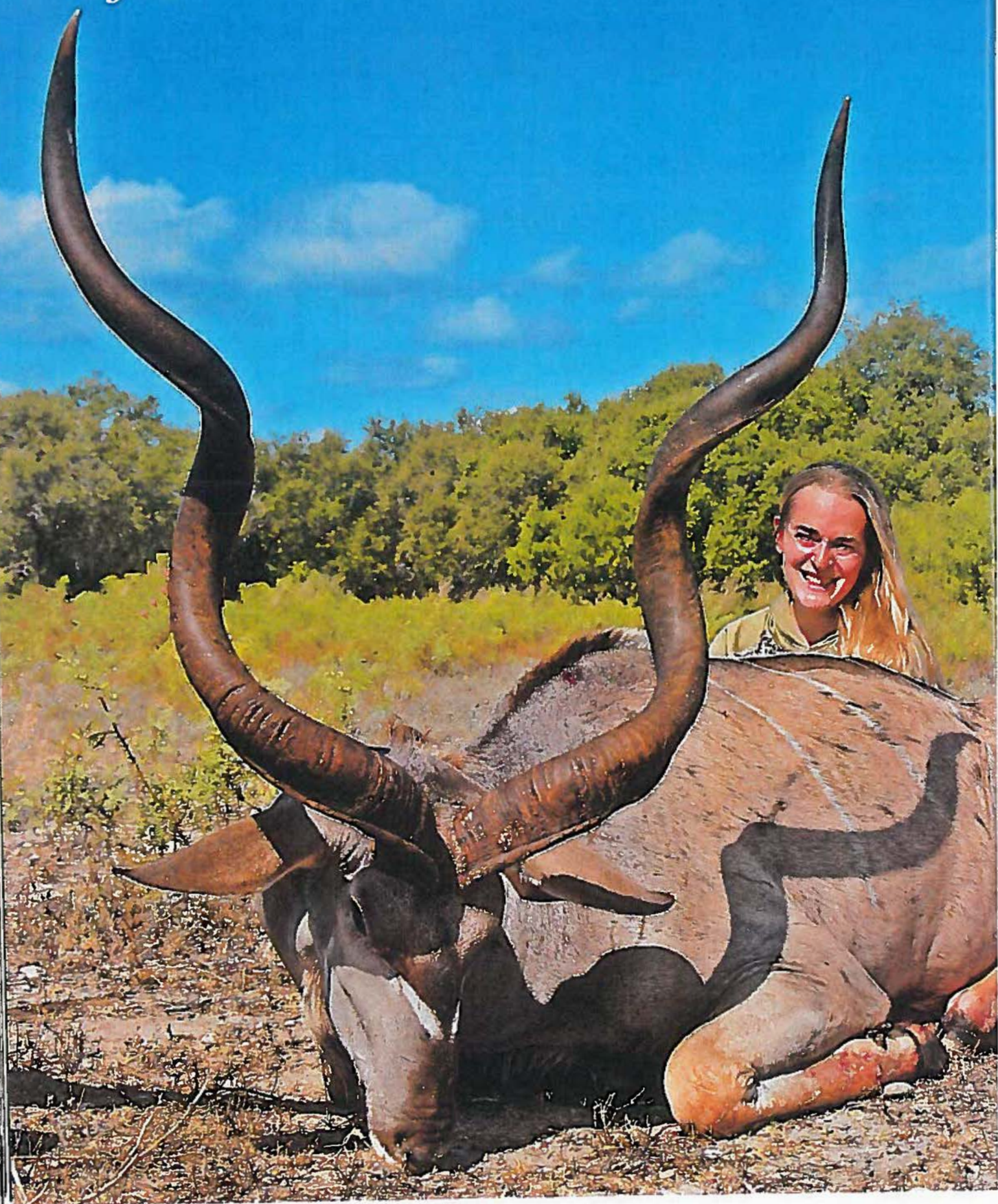
One Thursday morning my wife Samie called me from her office: “Hey, it looks like I have a meeting in Houston a couple of weeks from Monday.”

I set up a hunting trip to coincide with her business meetings. We would fly to San Antonio on Friday and hunt through the weekend and then stay with friends in Houston on Sunday night and go home on Tuesday after her meeting.

Upon arriving in Devil's River Nature Area, we met Hunter Ross of Desert Safaris; an affable character of West Texas charm. Together, we worked out a plan to hunt free range axis on Friday and then go to a ranch where I could hunt scimitar horned oryx.

The majestic curls, coloring and unique history of the scimitar oryx enchanted me. Texas ranchers saved the scimitar oryx, now almost extinct in its native habitat.

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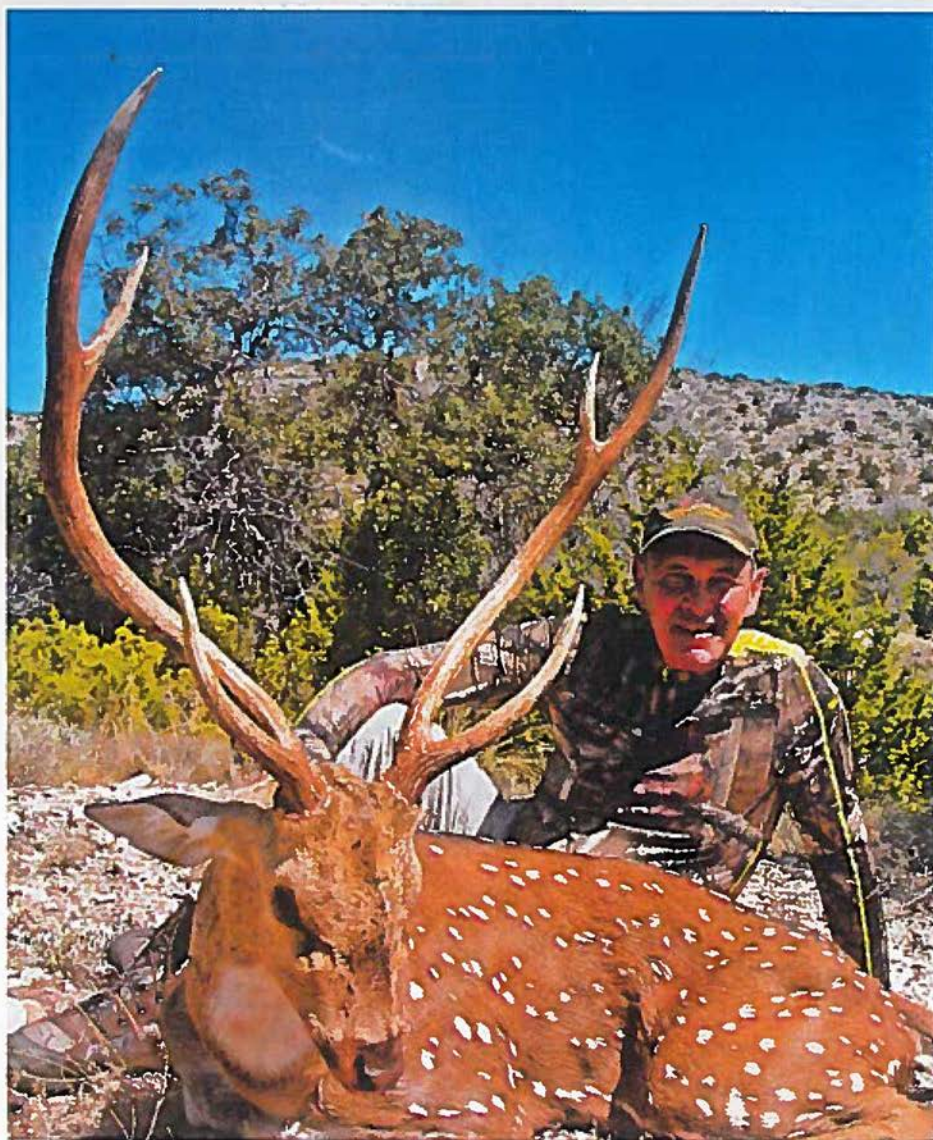




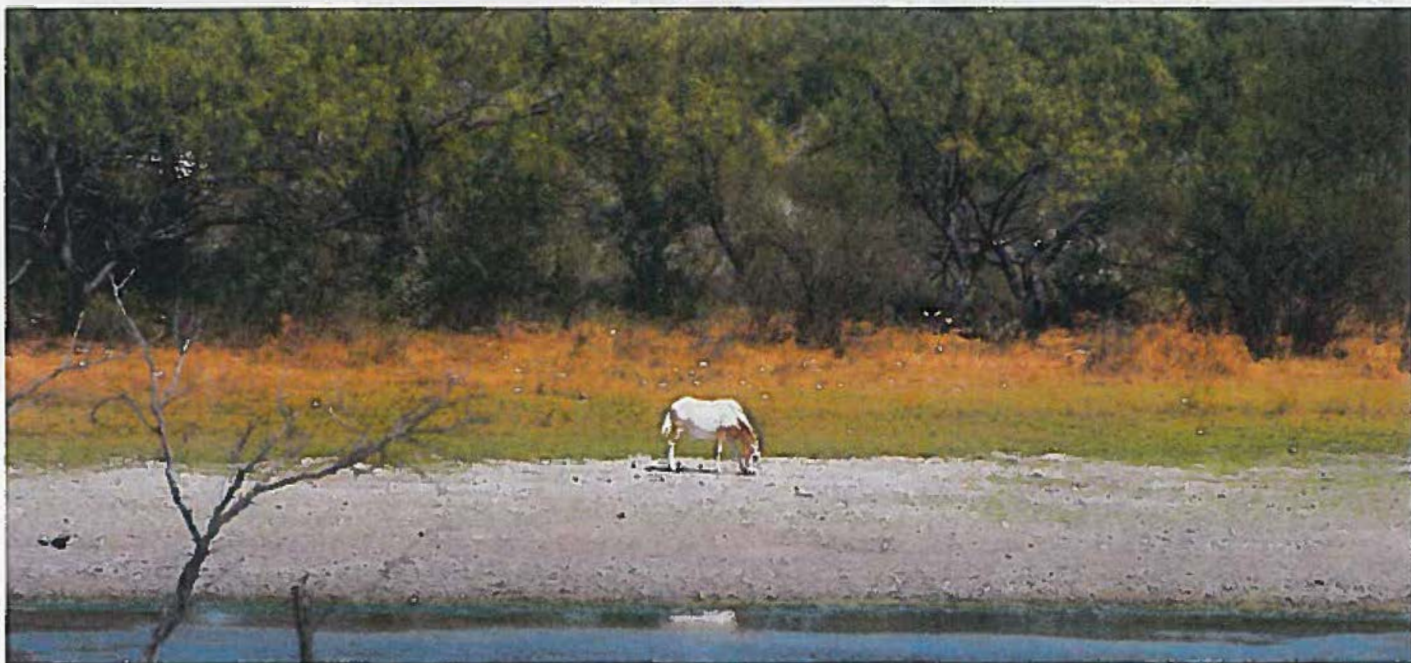
Lone Star hunters and conservationists ensured the species' future through self-regulated hunting practices. Recently, a law making it illegal to harvest scimitar horned oryx was presented to Texas Lawmakers. Fortunately, Texas' legislators saw the shortsightedness in the bill. Without sportsmen, the species would be doomed to extinction.

The hunt began when Ross took us to a craggy ridge so we could glass a steep canyon and opposite slope. Just before sundown, a mature buck with high antlers came out of the trees with seven does. They were just under 400 yards below me. My Ruger Precision Rifle chambered in 6.5 Creedmoor barked once and the buck fell in place. Although I had sampled delicious cuts of axis, this was my first hunt for one. We were off to a good start.

Southeast of Del Rio is the Tequesquite Ranch. It has over 8,000 acres of land where an incredible assortment of animals roam. It boasts the largest herd of scimitar oryx in the world; between 450 and 500 head. As we drove down the long dirt trail to the main lodge we passed a sign that said, "Watch for elephants on the road". While there were no longer elephants on the ranch, there were gemsbok, kudu, impala, zebras, wildebeests, and many animals I didn't even recognize. We pulled up to the main lodge, built beside a small lake that served as a water hole, offering guests spectacular scenery. Large African animals were coming and going, sleeping







in the trees, wading in the water; it was remarkable. I might as well have been in Africa!

Tequesquite Ranch is the creation of Jack Philips, a very successful Texas oil man who has spent a fortune on protecting and preserving wild animals from all over the planet. Hunting is part of the management plan for the herds with older bulls being harvested each year. The herds thrive and the number of species keeps growing. Next year black rhinos may become part of the effort.

When Samie saw a large kudu at the water hole and became very excited. She had seen a full body mount of a kudu bull in Cabela's a few months earlier and had inquired about going to Africa to shoot one. She talked to outfitters at our regional sports show and collected a shopping bag full of brochures and information. After pouring through the materials and videos, she decided the flight was too long and the accommodations looked unappealing. Her idea of roughing it is a hotel without room service. But now, there were kudus roaming all around this beautiful ranch! She soon asked if she could hunt for one. The ranch foreman was surprised but said there were two very old bulls Samie could hunt.

I had not planned on shooting such a large animal or I would have probably taken my 300 Win Mag rather than the new 6.5 Creedmoor. A 143-grain bullet seemed a little light to take down an animal as big as an elk, but my wife was undaunted. We staked out a field where the kudu frequently came in the evening to feed. Soon a huge bull with a number of cows and younger bulls appeared. It was late and the light was fading. The big bull was only 120 yards away but refused to turn and all we could see was his rump. With only minutes left before dark, he turned slightly offering a very difficult shot. I asked my wife if she wanted to try for him and she said yes. She aimed below the hump on his back and she squeezed off a shot. The kudu jumped and ran into the thick cover. It was dark, just barely a sign of movement. I looked through the scope as the light died: nothing. We walked into the

bush and there was the kudu. Samie's shot rang true. She radiated pride holding the massive curls of her 57" kudu.

After a good night's sleep and breakfast, we drove for a couple of hours in search of a scimitar oryx. The number of exotics boggled my mind. And while the scimitar oryx were beautiful, I became infatuated with the gemsbok, another member of the oryx family. Looking at their beautiful markings and tall horns, I decided the scimitar would have to wait for another trip. I wanted a gemsbok.

Late in the morning our guide, who was glassing from the back of the truck, started thumping on the roof excitedly. We stopped and he pointed to where an old gemsbok bull was bedded in heavy cover about 100 yards off the trail. As we began our stalk the gemsbok rose and headed over a hill and out of sight. We quickly circled ahead about 200 yards and glassed west to where we thought the bull might emerge. I got set on the shooting sticks and aimed at an opening in the brush on the top of the ridge just over 200 yards and waited to see if he would cross it. A few minutes later he slid into view and my guide got his attention with a grunt. A perfect shoulder shot and the hardy gemsbok only took a few steps before he toppled. I gained a lot of confidence in that 6.5 Creedmoor. I was thrilled to shoot my first gemsbok!

We cleaned him and went back to take pictures and store him in the cooler and called my taxidermist. After lunch, we packed up and headed for Houston. It seemed surreal—as if we had just left Africa and were heading home.

It may have been my first trip to a big Texas exotic ranch, but it will not be my last. I came away impressed with the hard work and resources that these ranches require. No government program could do this. It takes private money and dedication to support real conservation. Texas has some great friends of wildlife and Jack Phillips is clearly one of them. My hat's off to him and the others who make this part of their life so we can continue to enjoy nature. ♡