

Like mother, like daughters

Kerr County | Hunting:
Sisters, mother run
West Kerr Ranch

By Thomas Phillips

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The pickup eases to a stop, and Ashley Kana peers into the brush outside. She grew up at the West Kerr Ranch and lives and works here full time now. She knows just about every bush, rock and shadow.

This time, what has caught her eye is alive: A small group of elk shuffles amidst cedar a few dozen yards away. The cows nervously trot off, and a lone bull tries to hold his ground but relents to follow his harem.

The West Kerr presents so many interesting angles.

■ Winner of the statewide Excellence in Range Management and Lone Star Land Steward awards;

■ A massive, 10,500-acre tract split off from the YO Ranch;

■ Run by two sisters and their mother.

Guiding hunts, booking hunters and maintaining the deer and exotics populations at this converted livestock ranch west of Mountain Home rests with mother Barbara Kana and sisters Kelcie and Ashley.

"I've had a lot of hunters shocked at first," Ashley Kana said.

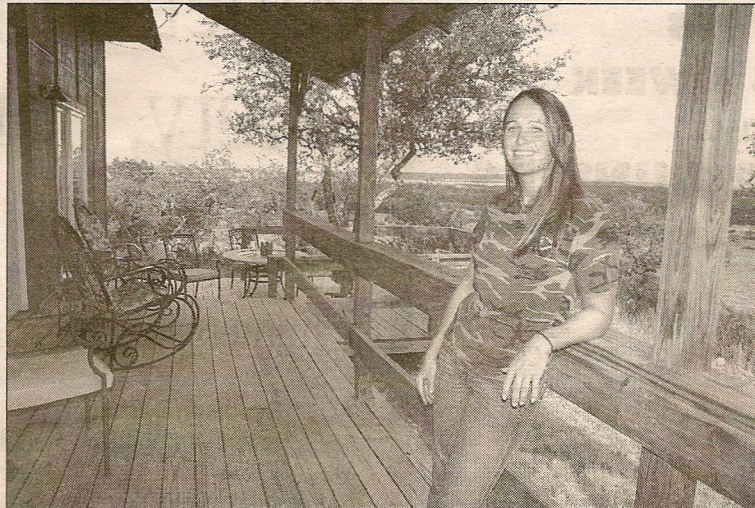
The shock must wear off. The Kanas have grown the business through word of mouth and their Web site, Ashley said, so many hunters know about the ranch's situation before they make reservations.

"My mom had a passion for hunting; she taught us how to hunt," Ashley Kana said on a recent tour. "She had a passion for the land."

"My mom's not in it for the money; none of us are. You can't get rich doing this. We're doing it because this is what we love to do. It's our passion."

Being run by women does not seem to attract more women hunters, Ashley Kana said. But fathers of daughters who see women hunting seem more inclined to hunt here, Ashley Kana said.

"I think that's attractive to a father," she said.



Thomas Phillips/Times Sports Design Editor, photo@dailytimes.com

Ashley Kana stands on a deck at her family's West Kerr Ranch. Ashley, her sister, Kelcie, and mother, Barbara, manage the 10,500-acre spread and guide hunters for white-tailed deer and exotics.

fallow, Aoudad sheep, elk and black buck antelope. The exotics, except for the elk, came with the property when Barbara Kana's father, Bob Trull, bought it from the YO — legendary for its exotics — in 1976.

The elk were introduced later, and no other exotic additions have been

made since Trull's purchase, Ashley Kana said.

Trull managed the West Kerr for livestock. Cattle and goats decimated the vegetation, and in 1990 Barbara received permission to manage 2,500

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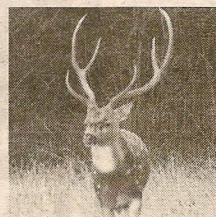
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In the field

Species that hunters mainly pursue are native white-tailed deer, turkey and hogs, and exotics: axis, sika,

acres for wildlife. She took courses through the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department to learn management techniques. She learned to use prescribed burns and began working with a wildlife biologist to help manage her populations.

Eighteen years later, wildlife biologist Fielding Harwell still studies those animals, enclosed in the high-fenced property, though he now is semi-retired after 40 years with TPWD.

He said managing the wildlife at the ranch is like managing it at seven ranches because of its size and how it is divided internally into seven subsections by high fences. Gates on the internal fences remain open, Ashley Kana said, but they still affect the wildlife management.

The Kanas work with TPWD on their management program. They annually survey the game populations and set harvest goals.

They have achieved a one-to-one male-female sex ratio and are working to improve body mass and antler size.

Hunters have 52 blinds and feeders to choose from when hunting the West Kerr. Guides can escort hunters all day during their hunt or drop them off at the stand and retrieve them later.

U.S. 83 divides the ranch, with 4,000 acres west of the highway. Animals on the western part receive a protein supplement in their diet. The additional protein boosts body and antler size.

The ranch is noticeable when viewed from satellite photos such as



Thomas Phillips/ photo@dailytimes.com

The West Kerr Ranch sits in western Kerr County on U.S. 83.

those on Google Maps. One of Barbara Kana's initial land treatments was to cut swaths through the overgrown cedar brush, leaving alternating stripes of forested and open land. The mixed landscape aids the wildlife.

The Kanas try to burn the open spaces yearly to minimize cedar growth and promote the growth of leafy vegetation, which deer prefer.

"This ranch was one of the first ranches in this part of the country that started burning," Harwell said. "... It's essential to control the re-growth of cedar. It improves the habitat for wildlife and livestock while at the same time controlling cedar."

"We battle cedar," Ashley Kana said.

No live creeks pass through the ranch, so windmills pump water to troughs to meet animals' needs.

Indoors

Lodging at the West Kerr provides modest space for dozens of hunters and guests. Two cabins and a mobile home have beds, bunk beds, dining space and living areas.

The Game Room — that's game as in wildlife — has walls covered in taxidermy and provides a community space for down time during hunts.

The buildings sit atop a hill, and the view stretches for miles. Decks and ample seating look over the ranch from the Game Room and mobile home.

Price and priorities

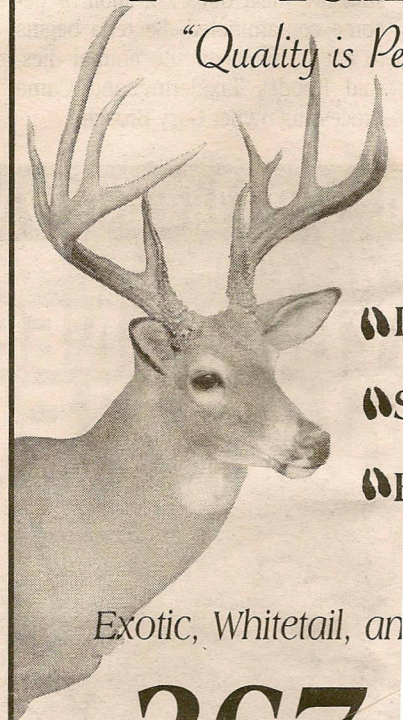
Prices vary depending, generally, on the species and sex of the animal sought, hunting method used, length of stay and other factors. Several package hunts are available.

Taxidermy is available on site, and, yes, a Kana woman is involved with that, too. Kelcie Kana began preparing mounts in 1998.

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