

Trashing Out Wildlife

Illegal immigration's negative impact on hunting. Story and photos by Trent Swanson.

Almost 10 years ago, my brother and I drew late-December Coues deer tags in one of Arizona's famed border units. We scouted hard, hunted long, and were lucky to find a great deer bedded in an accessible spot. My brother gave me first dibs, so I quickly made a plan and executed a stalk that put me within 150 yards of him. The beautiful buck grossed 107 inches.

Just four years later, I drew the tag again with high expectations. I didn't have as much time to scout, but felt I knew the area fairly well and would be able to make up for the scouting with some hard-core glassing. As dawn broke on one of our favorite glassing spots, I immediately noticed a difference. There was trash scattered all around. I thought to myself, I can't believe hunters don't clean up after themselves. It didn't take long to realize the trash wasn't left by careless hunters, but by illegal immigrants on their trek north to the land of opportunity.

In addition to the trash, we found trails along the washes as well-worn as any that I maintained during my time on a Forest Service trail crew during college. The one thing we didn't find much of was deer. Areas previously teeming with deer now appeared devoid of all four-legged life. Towards the end

of the hunt, we found out why.

One afternoon, I pointed my tripod-mounted binoculars south to glass a huge basin and the mesquite flats, and found a line of people walking along one of the well-worn paths. My stepdad was with me so we talked over our options and decided to call Border Patrol. As the group moved closer, we skedad-dled back to the pickup, and after talking with Border Patrol again, a Blackhawk helicopter soon hovered over us. In the ensuing minutes, we watched them (and were asked to help) round up more than 50 illegal immigrants. At dusk, we pointed our pickup north and left the airborne agents to await their ground support and transportation. We called it quits and I went home empty-handed.

The thousands of immigrants who pass through the area directly affect the wildlife by pushing them from their historic habitats. As Border Patrol steps up its patrols in the easily accessible areas, it pushes the illegal crossers into more rugged country, impacting wildlife even more. Competition at water holes has also become a major concern since the illegals not only use the tanks for the water they provide, but also for staging areas. This pushes wildlife to more remote waters, which makes them more susceptible to predators. In addi-

tion, hunters must be concerned for their own safety and welfare in the backcountry. And don't forget the trash!

A handful of Tucson bow hunters started a group called Arizona Hunters Who Care that organizes trash cleanups in the deserts south of Tucson. My wife and I joined them for a cleanup, and with donated gloves, trash bags, and long-handled trash grabbers, we set out to fill our bags. It didn't take long to find a trail with some scattered water bottles. After following it up and over a hill, we discovered a typical lay-up area where the illegals stopped to rest, refresh, and change clothes. Water bottles, food cans, deodorant, toothbrushes, razors, backpacks, and clothing covered the ground. We quickly filled our bags, and after a few trips, had enough bags to fill the back of our pickup. Back at the check-in area, we added them to the ever-growing pile. Other volunteers found bikes, tires, car parts, and even drugs. We felt proud to help, but knew we made a very small dent in a huge problem.

Recently, Arizona has been a source of debate due to S.B. 1070, which basically mirrors federal law and allows local law enforcement to ask individuals about their immigration status if "reasonable suspicion" exists. The law prohibits racial profiling and is similar to seatbelt laws—if you are pulled over for speeding and aren't wearing a seatbelt, you'll get a ticket. Under S.B. 1070, an individual must first be suspected of breaking some other law before an officer can ask about immigration status, and then only if they have "reasonable suspicion" the individual is in our country illegally. The law just adds one more tool for law enforcement officers to use while battling the other illegal immigration issues of drug running, human smuggling, and border violence.

The law is on hold for now due to legal challenges by activist groups and the federal government, but according to a couple of Rasmussen polls, 71 percent of Arizonans favor the law and 58 percent of national voters support it. I strongly support it, and think we should do much more to secure our borders. Since I live in Arizona, I see the direct result of the huge influx of illegal immigrants and the drain they put on our social services and infrastructure. I also realize that legal



The deserts of southern Arizona used to be prized for their wildlife diversity, abundance, and quality. The author is shown here with his Coues deer 10 years ago. The buck grossed 107 inches.



The illegal immigration problem extends out to our deserts, where habitats are destroyed by trash, trash, and more trash that fill the washes. The wildlife gets pushed out of historical areas, impacting their health and survival while people are warned by government agency staff of the area's dangers.

BELOW: Mountains of trash are just one way illegal immigrants negatively impact everything.



immigration is the foundation of our country and the way my great-grandparents arrived. I don't want to prevent immigration; I just want it done the right way.

If we can cut down on illegal immigration and the resulting border problems, hopefully we can start to regain our borderlands from the grasp of criminals. The Arizona Game & Fish Department warns hunters heading to that part of the state, and the Bureau of Land Management recently erected signs on our public lands warning citizens of the impending danger. In addition, our local ranchers and law enforcement officers have been attacked and killed. While this happens, the

desert landscape quickly changes. Trash, trash, and more trash fill the washes. The wildlife gets pushed out of historical areas, impacting their health and survival.

On the surface, illegal immigration conjures up visions of workers looking for a better life. Underlying that, however, are many more criminal issues and the loss of an area that is prized for its hunting opportunities. As citizens, we should be outraged by illegal immigration. As hunters, we should support any ideas that can cut down on the number of illegals crossing through our fragile deserts and littering along the way.

Trent Swanson started chasing critters with a rod and gun over 30 years ago. He is a partner in a company that specializes in risk management for the outdoors and is married to a Kansas farmer's daughter. They are raising their young son in Chino Valley, Arizona's first territorial capital. This article first appeared as a column in Western Hunter, a magazine dedicated to the gear, tactics, information, and adventure of hunting the West (www.westernhuntermagazine.net).



Illegal immigrants await ground transportation.