

2017 TEXAS PLAGUE SURVEILLANCE REPORT

Each year the Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS), in conjunction with Texas AgriLife Extension/Wildlife Services and occasionally other agencies, collects samples from wildlife for plague (the bacterium *Yersinia pestis*) testing. Samples are collected primarily from carnivores using Nobuto blood filter strips in the course of predator-control actions or as part of targeted surveillance efforts for plague and other zoonotic diseases. Although most carnivores are resistant to plague, they develop antibodies when exposed to *Y. pestis*, thereby making them good indicators of plague activity within their territories. Animal and arthropod surveillance results indicate that there are natural reservoirs for the plague organism in much of the state.

Plague, which occurs naturally in Texas, can cause severe human disease and death. Clinical- or laboratory-confirmed cases in animals or humans are reportable to DSHS. Surveillance for plague enables DSHS to alert physicians and veterinarians to be vigilant for signs of the disease in their patients when increased plague activity is detected in wildlife. *Y. pestis* can be used as a bioterrorism weapon and unusual plague activity related to its use as a weapon can be recognized more easily if natural disease occurrence is well characterized.

Plague in Humans

There were no reported human cases of plague in Texas during 2017.

Plague in Animals

In calendar year 2017, samples from 858 mammals and fleas collected from 98 counties (39% of Texas counties) were submitted for plague testing. The DSHS Laboratory Services Section received Nobuto strip samples from 846 animals (98.6% of samples submitted) for serologic testing, of which 843 samples were tested; 3 of the samples were not tested due to specimen damage, insufficient specimen quantity, missing specimen, or limited supplies of laboratory reagents. Northern Arizona University (NAU) in Flagstaff, Arizona, received 12 fleas (1.4% of samples submitted) for testing by polymerase chain reaction (PCR); all flea specimens were tested.

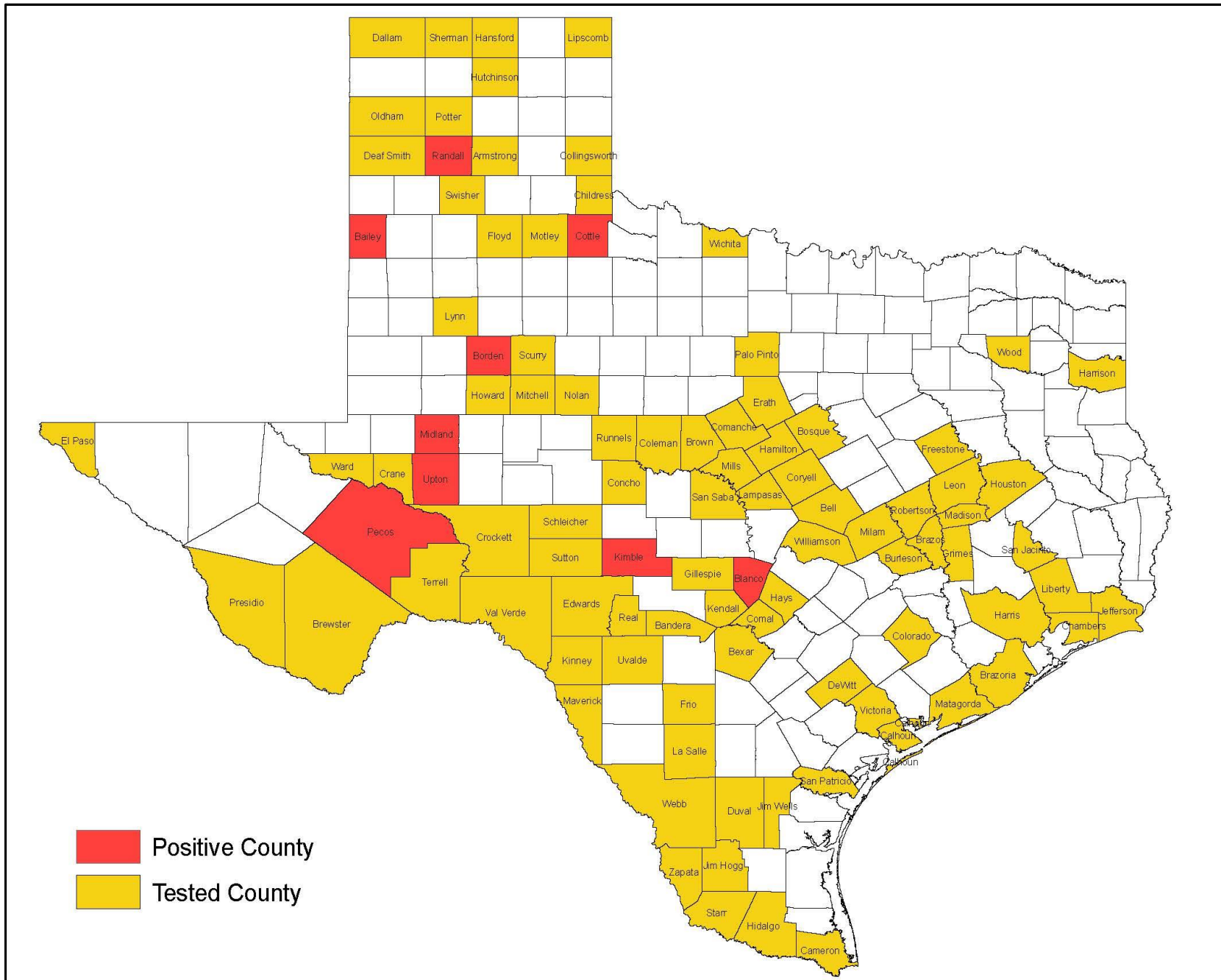
Plague antibodies at a titer of $\geq 1:32$, which indicates probable exposure to *Y. pestis*, were reported for 22 Nobuto samples (2.6% of those tested by DSHS) collected from 9 counties (3.5% of Texas counties) and 821 samples (97.4% of those tested by DSHS) were negative at a titer of $<1:32$. A positive PCR result was reported for 1 flea (8.3% of those tested by NAU) and negative PCR results were reported for 11 fleas (91.7% of those tested by NAU). Overall, out of the 855 statewide samples submitted and tested, 23 (2.7%) were positive for plague and 832 (97.3%) were negative for plague. Positive results are reported in Table 1; negative results are reported in Table 2.

Table 1. Animals Positive for Plague by County and Titer, 2017

| County | Titer/PCR Result | Coyote | Flea | Gray Fox | Number Positive (County) | Number Tested (All Species) | Percent Positive (All Species) |
|-------------------------------------|------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Bailey | PCR + | | 1 | | 3 | 8 | 37.5% |
| | 1:256 | 1 | | | | | |
| | 1:512 | 1 | | | | | |
| Blanco | 1:32 | | | 1 | 2 | 20 | 10.0% |
| | 1:64 | | | 1 | | | |
| Borden | 1:32 | 1 | | | 2 | 13 | 15.4% |
| | 1:1024 | 1 | | | | | |
| Cottle | 1:128 | 1 | | | 1 | 2 | 50.0% |
| Kimble | 1:64 | | | 1 | 1 | 26 | 3.8% |
| Midland | 1:512 | 1 | | | 1 | 2 | 50.0% |
| Pecos | 1:64 | 1 | | | 1 | 18 | 5.6% |
| Randall | 1:32 | 2 | | | 11 | 58 | 19.0% |
| | 1:128 | 3 | | | | | |
| | 1:256 | 2 | | | | | |
| | 1:512 | 2 | | | | | |
| | 1:1024 | 1 | | | | | |
| | 1:4096 | 1 | | | | | |
| Upton | 1:128 | 1 | | | 1 | 28 | 3.6% |
| Number Positive (Statewide) | | 19 | 1 | 3 | 23 | | |
| Number Tested (Statewide) | | 658 | 23 | 152 | 855 | | |
| Percent Positive (Statewide) | | 2.9% | 4.3% | 2.0% | 2.7% | | |

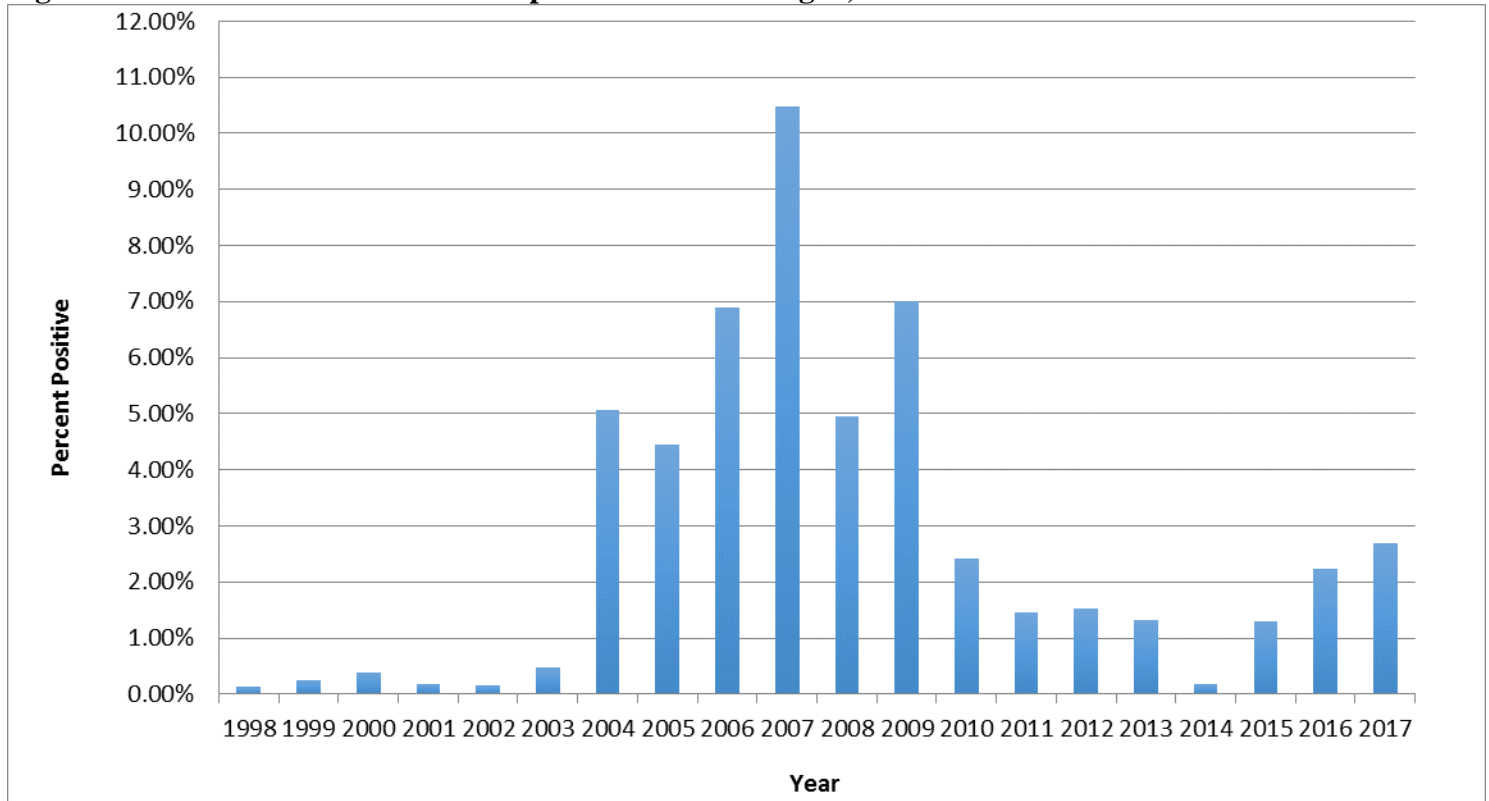
The geographic distribution by county of specimens tested and specimens testing positive for *Yersinia pestis* in 2017 is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Counties Tested and Counties Positive for Plague, 2017



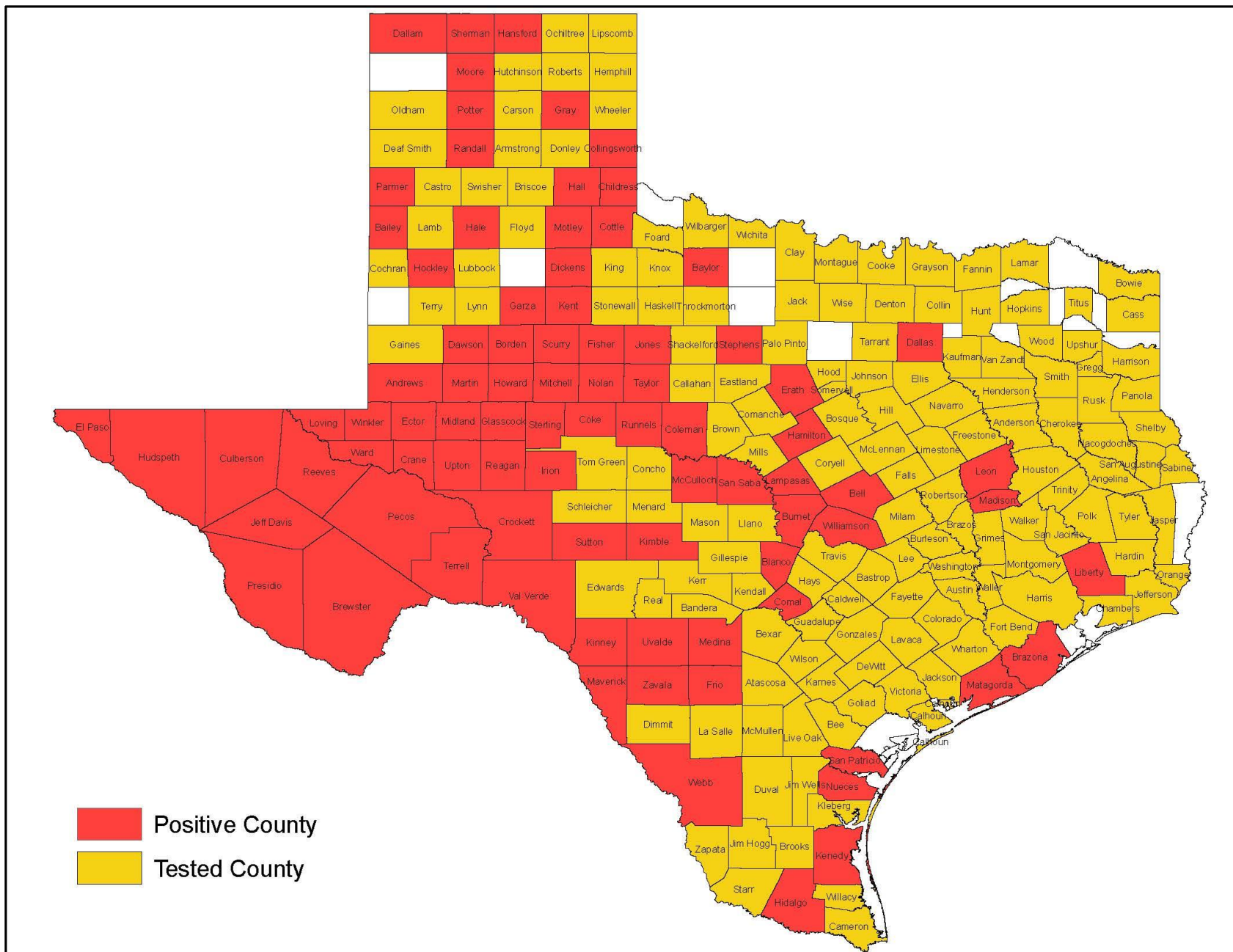
A comparison of the percent of surveillance samples positive for plague during 2017 to the percent positive in the previous 19 years indicates a continuing overall lower level of detected plague activity from 2010-2017, as compared to 2004-2009 (Figure 2); however, the prevalence has been increasing since 2015. Factors such as climate, changing ecosystems, predator activity, and host and flea population size and dynamics may affect the magnitude of plague transmission within wildlife populations. Differences in sampling rates and the species and locations sampled may also affect the detection of plague activity within wildlife populations.

Figure 2. Percent of Surveillance Samples Positive for Plague, 1998-2017



While plague is considered endemic in far west Texas and the Panhandle region, statewide surveillance demonstrates that there may be naturally occurring risk in all but the extreme eastern part of the state (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Counties Tested and Counties Positive for Plague, 1976-2017



By using educational materials, news releases, a public-access website, and conference presentations, DSHS personnel keep veterinarians, physicians, and the general public aware of the plague risk in Texas. Even in areas with historically low plague activity, infections may occur in hunters or campers who visit plague-endemic areas or in pets and wildlife transported from those areas. There is also a risk that new areas of infection may be established by moving animals across the state.

Table 2 shows the complete listing, by county and species, of samples that tested negative for plague in 2017.

Table 2. Animals Negative for Plague by County, 2017

| County | Bobcat | Coyote | Flea | Gray Fox | Raccoon | Red Fox | Total |
|---------------|--------|--------|------|----------|---------|---------|-------|
| Armstrong | | 1 | | | | | 1 |
| Bailey | | 5 | | | | | 5 |
| Bandera | | | | 1 | | | 1 |
| Bell | | 6 | | 2 | | | 8 |
| Bexar | | 1 | | | | | 1 |
| Blanco | | | | 18 | | | 18 |
| Borden | 3 | 8 | | | | | 11 |
| Bosque | 1 | 1 | | | | | 2 |
| Brazoria | | 6 | | | | | 6 |
| Brazos | | 1 | | | | | 1 |
| Brewster | | 14 | | 2 | | | 16 |
| Brown | | 4 | | | | | 4 |
| Burleson | | 6 | | | | | 6 |
| Calhoun | | 6 | | | | | 6 |
| Cameron | | 2 | | | | | 2 |
| Chambers | | 14 | | | | | 14 |
| Childress | | 1 | | | | | 1 |
| Coleman | | 4 | | | | | 4 |
| Collingsworth | | 2 | | | | | 2 |
| Colorado | 1 | 19 | | | | | 20 |
| Comal | | 3 | | | | | 3 |
| Comanche | | 2 | | | | | 2 |
| Concho | | 2 | | | | | 2 |
| Coryell | | 17 | | | | | 17 |
| Cottle | | 1 | | | | | 1 |
| Crane | | 3 | | | | | 3 |
| Crockett | | 2 | | 1 | | | 3 |
| Dallam | | 1 | | | | | 1 |
| Deaf Smith | | 17 | | | | | 17 |
| DeWitt | | 4 | | | | | 4 |
| Duval | | 4 | | | | | 4 |
| Edwards | | 1 | | 2 | 1 | | 4 |
| El Paso | | 7 | | | | | 7 |
| Erath | | 4 | | | | | 4 |
| Floyd | | 1 | | | | | 1 |

| County | Bobcat | Coyote | Flea | Gray Fox | Raccoon | Red Fox | Total |
|------------|--------|--------|------|----------|---------|---------|-------|
| Freestone | | 1 | | | | | 1 |
| Frio | | 3 | | | | | 3 |
| Gillespie | | | | 2 | | | 2 |
| Grimes | | 1 | | | | | 1 |
| Hamilton | | 2 | | | 1 | | 3 |
| Hansford | | 10 | | | | | 10 |
| Harris | | 9 | | | | | 9 |
| Harrison | | 3 | | 2 | | | 5 |
| Hays | | 16 | | | | | 16 |
| Hidalgo | | 27 | | | | | 27 |
| Houston | | 3 | | | | | 3 |
| Howard | 1 | 4 | | | | | 5 |
| Hutchinson | | 9 | | | | | 9 |
| Jefferson | | 27 | | | | | 27 |
| Jim Hogg | | 7 | | | | | 7 |
| Jim Wells | | 14 | | | | | 14 |
| Kendall | | | | 9 | | | 9 |
| Kimble | | 11 | | 8 | 6 | | 25 |
| Kinney | 3 | 5 | | | | | 8 |
| La Salle | | 1 | | | | | 1 |
| Lampasas | | 13 | | 2 | | | 15 |
| Leon | 1 | 7 | | 1 | | | 9 |
| Liberty | | 2 | | | 1 | | 3 |
| Lipscomb | | 14 | | | | | 14 |
| Lynn | | 1 | | | | | 1 |
| Madison | | 1 | | | | | 1 |
| Matagorda | | 3 | | | | | 3 |
| Maverick | | 54 | | | | | 54 |
| Midland | | | | 1 | | | 1 |
| Milam | | 1 | | | | | 1 |
| Mills | | 15 | | | | 1 | 16 |
| Mitchell | | 1 | | | | | 1 |
| Motley | | 16 | | | | | 16 |
| Nolan | | 2 | | 2 | | | 4 |
| Oldham | | 3 | | | | | 3 |
| Palo Pinto | | 1 | | | | | 1 |
| Pecos | | 17 | | | | | 17 |
| Potter | | 2 | | | | | 2 |
| Presidio | | 6 | | | | | 6 |
| Randall | | 24 | 22 | | | 1 | 47 |
| Real | | 1 | | | | | 1 |
| Robertson | | 5 | | | | | 5 |
| Runnels | | 1 | | | | | 1 |

| County | Bobcat | Coyote | Flea | Gray Fox | Raccoon | Red Fox | Total |
|--------------|-----------|------------|-----------|------------|-----------|----------|------------|
| San Jacinto | | 1 | | | | | 1 |
| San Patricio | | 1 | | | | | 1 |
| San Saba | | 14 | | 2 | | | 16 |
| Schleicher | | 1 | | | | | 1 |
| Scurry | | 2 | | | | | 2 |
| Sherman | | 5 | | | | | 5 |
| Starr | | 2 | | | | | 2 |
| Sutton | | | | 1 | | | 1 |
| Swisher | | 6 | | | | | 6 |
| Terrell | | 3 | | 85 | | | 88 |
| Upton | | 21 | | 6 | | | 27 |
| Uvalde | | 2 | | | | | 2 |
| Val Verde | | 1 | | | | | 1 |
| Victoria | | 30 | | | 1 | | 31 |
| Ward | | 3 | | 1 | | | 4 |
| Webb | | 16 | | | | | 16 |
| Wichita | | 3 | | | | | 3 |
| Williamson | | 12 | | 1 | | | 13 |
| Wood | | 2 | | | | | 2 |
| Zapata | | 1 | | | | | 1 |
| Total | 10 | 639 | 22 | 149 | 10 | 2 | 832 |