

DEATH CATCHES UP WITH MANY ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS BEFORE THE LAW CAN;

EXTREME TEMPERATURES, FATIGUE TAKE A TOLL

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Body

Every year, an average of nearly 300 illegal immigrants trying to cross the Mexico-United States border die in the attempt.

They drown fording rivers; they get hit by cars and trains. In the winter, they freeze to death in the mountains. In the summer, they drop from thirst in the sand dunes of south Texas.

From 1993 through 1996, at least 1,185 undocumented migrants died crossing the border.

Several years ago, Tobin Armstrong, a rancher in south Texas, came upon a 22-year-old woman slumped under a shade tree. She was dead.

"I think this was a desperate woman trying to get somewhere to change her life, and she ran out of gas," said Armstrong. "It's an appalling situation. It's gotten progressively worse because the word's gotten back that they can make it, and once they make it, it's home free."

So far this year, 10 bodies of illegal immigrants have been found in Kenedy County, including yet another on Armstrong's ranch. Last year, 19 were discovered.

Guided by smugglers, groups of up to 50 who have already crossed the border at Brownsville 60 miles south are dropped off at Armstrong's fence, just a few miles south of a U.S. Border Patrol highway checkpoint. They hike through the brush, often wearing three layers of clothing and carrying bags of groceries. Trekking north toward Corpus Christi or Houston, some walk the entire length of Kenedy County - 57 miles - before catching a ride. In the summer, temperatures can rise to 108 degrees.

"They tear down your fences, they leave your gates open, they break the pipes to get the water to drink it," Armstrong said. "They break into any house that's unprotected or unguarded. They'll tear the wall down to get in. They will trash out any assets you have in the pasture."

"They don't do this just because they want to be disruptive, but because they're hungry and are looking for food or water or shelter."

After years of using his ranch as a thoroughfare, immigrants have carved paths as wide as sidewalks through his thick brush and pastures.

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His ranch hands have been threatened at gunpoint by immigrants.

"Unless you're properly armed, you just stay away from them," he said. "There's no way of knowing where these people came from, what their criminal background is, what their health situation is. These people are desperate enough to die in substantial numbers out here."

Smugglers - called "coyotes" - often leave the weak behind so they can collect their fees when they deliver the rest to their destinations.

Every time a body is found, it costs the county up to \$ 3,000, including an autopsy and burial for those who can't be identified. At the cemetery in Sarita, the county seat, some 25 headstones bear no names.

According to the University of Houston study, from 1993 through 1996, the Texas-Mexico border was the deadliest link, with 844 immigrants dying. Ninety-two percent drowned in the Rio Grande. San Diego was the deadliest county along the border; 193 people died, most in traffic accidents and drownings in the Tijuana River. In Arizona, 69 died, and in New Mexico, 11 were found dead.

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