



Wildlife

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### **INSIDE THIS ISSUE**

What Can I Do to Prepare My Land to Sell? By: Hunter Brant

**Benefiting Wildlife** By: Matt Petersen

Soil Analysis – A Critical **Component of Food Plot Success** By: Dana Johnson

Creating a Fishing and Dog Training Lake By: Scott Brown

Wildlife Trends Journal Management Calendar By: Dave Edwards

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## Earl Says...

ast week two young hunters who hunt just to the north of our property were climbing into their tree stands which were set up side by side for filming. One was already in his stand and while the other was stepping into his stand they both fell from over 20 feet. They were both life flighted to the hospital. One was severely knocked unconscious and the other was in the hospital several days with broken bones. They will be okay but will take some time to mend. They were lucky but neither were wearing their life lines.

Please use this example to use all the safety equipment you can and demand any hunters on your property to do the same. Hunting can be one of the safest sports in the world if we all use common sense. Take care and be safe in the woods.





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### What Can I Do to Prepare My Land to Sell?



A fter a prolonged trend of strong demand and generally increasing prices for Land, we get the sense that there may be a pull back in the market or at least a time to pause and wait and see. Perhaps as a landowner you are asking, "Did I miss my opportunity to sell?" We think every market presents an opportunity but we know that planning ahead always produces the best chance of success, in Life and in Land.

Many of our clients who follow this mantra have asked us over the years, "What do I need to be doing now in order to sell my property in the next few years?" Their forward thinking had led them to the right question and looking back I think it delivered better results for them when they did decide to sell. Given the current market, now is a good

4

time to re-visit some of these case studies and see what worked, it's a good chance it will continue to work.

#### In a loose order of importance the following is our guide to preparing your property for sale in the future:

**Water** – water is a major selling feature of any farm, ranch or plantation and we consistently see it deliver higher values compared to properties that don't. This could be included on a list of criteria when looking for a property to buy but that is a different article. Many of our clients have a river, creek or lake already on their property, in this case we recommend evaluating ways to enhance this feature. If it's a lake or water feature, how can you enhance the fishing opportu-

#### By Hunter Brant

Oakwood Realty Group is a real estate brokerage firm offering brokerage and consulting services to buyers and sellers of high quality hunting, recreational, and incomeproducing land in Florida, Georgia, South Carolina and Alabama. Our clients choose us for the **trust** and expertise we provide. We strive to build long term client relationships through hard work and integrity in everything we do. We hope you have found these tips to be helpful and that you will consider Oakwood when the time comes to sell your property. In the meantime, we are happy to meet with you on your Property to review in more detail the strategies discussed in this article.

nity or its attraction to waterfowl? These 2 things don't often mix so you have to decide which direction you're going.

For fishing be thinking about accessibility of the lake either by dock or boat access. Both of these are relatively inexpensive to add and give the lake a big benefit. Once you're on the water, fishability means managing aquatics, both native and invasive. A healthy lake that adds value and is easy to fish definitely requires management of aquatic vegetation. An overgrown lake is definitely a negative and represents a major expense for the perspective Buyer. The quality of the fishing adds a major selling feature as something that can be enjoyed year round by friends and family that don't hunt and by hunters between seasons. Consulting with a fisheries

biologist is the BEST way to get results in this department.

Aesthetics are critical. This point really applies not only to lakes but also to creeks and rivers. If the lake or river is a focal point of the property, overlooked by a cabin or home, spending the money to manicure the lake / riverbanks improves accessibility and shows potential Buyers that the property has been thoughtfully maintained. I've seen numerous properties with river frontage that can not be accessed easily. If your land sits along a river make sure you can access it and show it off to prospective Buyers. The advent of frontend mulchers and hydraulic arm mounted mowers has revolutionized the management of these areas. If you can't see it, it makes it a lot harder to pay more for it. This investment will pay a return at time of sale.

Adding a lake to a property can be costly depending on where you are

but many properties have ideal lake sites that just have to be improved. If your property has one of these sites we recommend consulting with a knowledgeable Land Broker to see if he thinks it will increase the property value. An expert Broker should also have contacts



#### Harper's Pond, Estill, SC.

At the time of Listing above, the lake had just been treated for lily pads, as evidenced by the brown streaks, but just had small areas of open water for fishing.



A new waterfowl impoundment designed and built by Oakwood's Habitat company, close to completion in an undisclosed location in the South. Duck Hunters are a notoriously secretive bunch...

5

for helping you design and construct the lake. If you have the right soil type and are located close to a growing population center it is likely you can find a Buyer for your dirt thereby decreasing the cost of building the lake. We have consulted on many lake construction projects over the years and are happy to meet with landowners to discuss cost and return on investment. This is a minimum 3-5 year project if you want to give the lake time to establish quality fishing so planning ahead is key here.

For Waterfowl, the improvements can be more costly and time consuming but have a big upside by adding a hunting opportunity that was not previously present. You must have a consistent water source, be able to create a food supply and be in an area that historically holds waterfowl for best results. Developing waterfowl habitat is its own article and is unique to each area of the Country but these are the factors you are looking for. The general trend over the last 10 years has seen a sharp increase in managed waterfowl habitat both on private and public land, all vying for a relatively fixed amount of waterfowl in the fall flight so consulting an expert about the feasibility of waterfowl improvements and the implementation of them are critical before spending this money. When done correctly we have seen this add tremendous value to a property.

These points take time to imple-

ment and time to take effect; planning ahead and consulting with an expert will achieve the best results!

Roads and Ditches - You would think this one is fairly obvious but we show a lot of properties that have poor roads, not enough roads and poor drainage. We have also been in a prolonged wet cycle here in the South, which has delayed many road and drainage maintenance projects. This is probably a timely tip even if you're not thinking about selling. But if you are, it's a must. A broker can not show a prospective Buyer the whole property without a good road system. To address this on your property you may have to construct some new roads to accentuate selling features on your property or you



Photo courtesy of Stro Morrison, Morrison Forest Management, Estill, SC. While not currently planted as a food plot this buffer serves multiple purposes as discussed above, most importantly creating edge habitat for wildlife over a long corridor.

6

may just need to invest in maintaining existing roads, regardless this is an investment that pays a big return at time of sale. A lot of clients just think of roads as the road surface itself but overgrown roads are just as big a hindrance as bumpy and rough roads. Daylighting roads, meaning clearing vegetation along road edges, shows thoughtful maintenance, improves visibility and aesthetics, allows roads to dry faster and creates additional wildlife habitat.

After many years of showing Land I would say one of the biggest concerns for Buyers during a showing is flooding and drainage related issues. A good drainage system keeps roads open and eliminates flooding and contributes immensely to a successful showing. Again, this will not be completed over night so plan ahead for these improvements.

**Presentation** – Part of this topic was covered under Water in maintenance of your lakes and ponds but it is much broader. Habitat, fences, improvements and houses are also key to good presentation. A fresh coat of paint or clearing a fence line or adding a perimeter firebreak will yield a far greater return than their cost.

Consulting your Broker in advance will lead to a great Presentation, faster sale and a higher sales price. A simple example that yields multiple benefits is creating a border between different stand types. I first saw this as we opened our Charleston brokerage office and I began to tour different SC plantations. I'm not sure if it originated there but it really jumped out at me. I thought, here is something that creates a unique and attractive aesthetic, shows thoughtful management, benefits multiple wildlife species at once by creating significant edge habitat and a food source and makes timber management easier. It's a win-win-win but again it didn't happen overnight.

Habitat – Timber and Understory condition: This one is a little more subtle but you know it when you see it, it is definitely of high importance in the High Quality Properties we typically sell and is sought after by astute Buyers. It can pay dividends on any property but takes the most time to achieve.

It is one thing to run a prescribed fire through an overgrown pine stand the year you plan to sell, mulch an overgrown hardwood stand or do some mowing to create a manicured effect but it is entirely something different to achieve a diversity of well managed, fire maintained habitat with a sustainable timber income for the benefit of all wildlife, reduction of wildfire risk and financial return to the Owner during ownership. Many of our clients have committed substantial time and money to implementing these practices on their property over many decades and we have endeavored as brokers to make sure they are rewarded for it.

#### Looking back this is the single biggest driver of value in our sales and distinguishes the High Quality Properties from the rest.

**Property Records** – If your property generates income or you're managing for wildlife keeping good records demonstrates the longevity of your program and helps us as your Broker demonstrate the value of the Property. For income producing parts like farm leases, government subsidies, timber sales or Ag sales it doesn't take much extra time to keep good records that a Buyer can easily understand but it is really hard to piece back together years of records after the fact. For wildlife,

trail cameras have become an essential tool in demonstrating what is actually on the Property. Keep in mind that a Broker compiles his marketing during just one time or season on the Property but demonstrating the history of a property and the progression of quality management over the years helps the Broker to demonstrate why your Property is different than others and creates confidence in a Buyer that he knows what he is Buying. This can be as simple as trail camera pictures of mature deer or memorable duck hunts over the years or as detailed as a 10-year history of the number of coveys moved per hour on every quail hunt. Every bit of history helps demonstrate the value of your Property.

Collectively these tips will increase your property's potential to achieve the highest possible value at time of sale. This is not an exhaustive list, there are certainly many other ideas and tips that's could be considered worthwhile. The main thing is to begin with the end in mind and thus be prepared when the time comes to sell.

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### **Benefiting Wildlife**



### By Matt Petersen

Matt Petersen, owner of Petersen's Wildlife Management, is a wildlife and land manager. Contact him at petersenswildlife@yahoo. com.

In the Southeast and other heavily hunted areas of our country, it is easy to conclude that everyone is a hunter on opening day of firearm season for deer and turkey. Vehicles can be seen in gas stations with ATVs in tow, with their drivers in full camo headed to and from hunting properties. Trucks line the roads of public land and it seems every backwoods trail, access area, or old logging road has a 4x4 parked in it. All the country stores are flooded with hunters looking for a bite of breakfast and a coffee in the morning after a chilly sit or a tank of gas and a snack before they head home after of day of hunting. Social media is full of harvest pictures of animals with taglines such as "Freezer's full" or "Finally

8

got it done" attached to them. All of these signs point to deer, turkey, dove, quail, you name it, but hunting season is in and people are out enjoying all the season has to offer.

As a wildlife manager who works on rural properties for a living and has wildlife and hunting to thank for that, I love seeing the "signs" of all the hunting seasons. I smile when I see the young guys in their old 4x4's flying down the road trying to beat the daylight to get to a farm before the turkeys wake up or to get in a tree before the deer rise from their beds in the evening. I love when the old men at the gas station ask me "Have you got one yet?" or the older ladies that tell me they "Sure would love some deer meat!". These things stir emotions in hunters and sportsmen that only other hunters and sportsmen alike can understand.

The love for the signs of the seasons, as well as my love for wildlife, bring me to the basis of this article. As hunters, land managers, wildlife lovers, sportsmen, stewards, whatever label that we may fall under, we all need to strive to give back to the wildlife that we pursue and love. There are so many reasons why we should endeavor to give back, but the obvious ones are to sustain the wildlife resource and even to grow it for the present and future generations; to cast hunters as managers that care for the animals, we chase in order to keep our platform strong to aid in our continued fight with anti-hunters; and mainly just for the love of the game and everything they give us to sustain us with their sustenance as well as our instinctual drive to pursue them.

Now it would be easy for anyone reading this article to think "I bet he's wanting us to give back because that means we spend our money on products, advice, or a service that this guy provides". It is true that I'm a land and wildlife management professional and I assist folks with many of the projects and topics that will be covered here, but what lead me to my profession was, and still is, a deep love and respect for all forms of wildlife. I have performed and participated in all of the topics covered here long before I went into the business of helping others do the same. It was through the fulfillment I received watching my hard work come to fruition in the ways of watching wildlife thrive and multiply, seeing young hunters, and even older new hunters, join our ranks, hunter-friendly legislation being passed, and so forth, that I realized the power that all folks have to benefit wildlife, if they so choose. This article will touch on some ways to do so that people of all walks of life, ability, and financial status can give back to wild animals and wild places.

#### KILL INVASIVE PLANT AND ANIMAL SPECIES

In certain situations of wildlife management, it often can be better to focus on taking certain things off the landscape versus trying to place things on it. This is the case with invasives in both the form of plants and animals.

First, we'll discuss **invasive plants**. There are many invasive

plant species that have invaded the US and in doing so have taken space away from many native plant species. Plants such as Japanese stiltgrass, Sericea lespedeza, Autumn olive, Tall fescue, Kudzu, and Tree of Heaven are some of the worst offenders that I see in my travels of the Southeast. These plants all spread quickly and, in most cases, have very little wildlife benefit, but even for those that do slightly benefit wildlife, the negatives far outweigh the positives overall. All of the plants listed above have varying degrees of difficulty in regard to their ability to be controlled both through herbicide and mechanical methods. For example, Kudzu is known for its extremely fast growth and ability to climb high into the top of trees and often eventually killing most other plant life it encounters through its ability to smother them. It also will normally require specialty herbicides that will kill non-target plant life that are beneficial to wildlife. Kudzu is a plant that needs to be fought for years to gain control in most cases where established, and a plant I would definitely suggest contacting a professional with experience in fighting it. On the other end of the spectrum, Japanese stiltgrass can also outcompete many other plants, but doesn't grow nearly as fast as Kudzu. It also doesn't possess the same ability to climb and smother trees the way Kudzu can. Fortunately, it has a larger range of herbicides and even some mechanical methods that can be used for control that have less effects on wildlife beneficial plants. When it comes to controlling these invasive plants, balance the difficulty of control and the size of the desired area of control with your knowledge, equipment, and time for the best outcome. It's best to take a long-term approach also while managing these plants. It's easy to get burned out trying to

control invasives all at once. Chip away at the problem over time and do so knowing that any control you can accomplish is better than none at all. Also, simply cleaning equipment can be a huge help in controlling invasive plants. Seeds that often pile up on tractors or implements can easily spread unwanted seed from field to field. Taking the time to clean equipment between work sessions is a great way to stop invasive plants from spreading.

When it comes to **invasive** animals, species such as wild hogs, Burmese pythons, nutrias, feral cats, and even the emerald ash borer come to mind. Depending on where you live in the country will determine if all, or any, of these invasive animals are a threat to your local wildlife, but all of these listed have affected my many acres of wildlife habitat. All of these animals come with their own challenges of control, but the important fact to note here is that we identify them on our properties and do our best to control their spread and effects on wildlife and habitat.

Just as with invasive plants, it's often wise to consult with professionals on the best practices to efficiently manage invasive animals. The same long-range approach is best suited in tackling these animals as well, and again take pride that for every invasive animal you remove that more space and resources are left for native wildlife and habitat.

#### MANAGE YOUR TIMBER

A very common occurrence on farms that I consult on or provide habitat services on is areas of nonmanaged timber. It's very common for a landowner to tell me "We don't like to cut trees" or "We don't hunt back there so we just let those trees grow". My thought is always



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Planting wildlife beneficial trees and shrubs is a great way to provide cover and food for wildlife as well as future generations of managers and landowners.

"Well if you want better wildlife habitat and better hunting like you claim, you would manage that timber!". That doesn't always mean a huge clearcut that looks like the surface of the moon for 10 years, but what it does mean is that folks have a willingness to do what's best for the health of the timber stand and its future, which often leads to the best outcome for wildlife as well. In my opinion, it's wise to consult with a forester, either state or private, that has a background in wildlife habitat that complements their knowledge of timber systems, health, and markets. Have them give suggestions on the status of your property's timber and what methods are needed in the short and long term to keep the resource healthy while at the same time maximizing its yield for wildlife.

A couple of methods I like to use to manage timber stands on a smaller scale are daylighting desirable trees and, at the same time, creating stump or mineral sprouts. What I mean by daylighting trees is simply removing competition in the form of other trees, shrubs, or vegetation that have encroached on the desirable trees' space and overcrowding it. A good example would be a well formed, middle-aged white oak that has been surrounded by trees such as sweet gums or maples. The gums and maples will often outgrow the oak and compete for sun, moisture, and nutrients. By cutting the unwanted hardwood trees around this tree you will allow the oak to further spread its canopy and allow it to thrive under less competition, which studies have shown to be the best way to increase yield and longeyity in oaks. Very similar results and yield can be seen by daylighting other hard mast and soft mast trees alike. Often times, if the trees that are being removed to daylight the beneficial trees are hard-

woods, they can be cut and left to stump sprout. The newly sprouted shoots will put off tender new leaves that deer relish and are full of protein and other nutrients (depending on species). This is a great way to remove over abundant or less desirable trees from the landscape, while at the same time



Controlling predators on the landscape is a great way to enhance wildlife populations and is especially helpful with vulnerable species such as ground nesting birds.

creating nutrient dense forage at deer level.

While on the topic of timber, planting wildlife desirable trees and shrubs are a great way to give back to wildlife and future generations at the same time. The benefits of both the hard and soft mast trees/shrubs produce are obvious but some trees can provide great mast while at the same time producing marketable timber for future generations. Even pines, such as Loblolly and Longleaf pines, are wildlife beneficial trees, if used in conjunction with fire.

#### **TRAP PREDATORS**

Trapping predators is an excellent method to increase wildlife populations and help bring back especially vulnerable species, such as turkey and quail. Whenever I mention trapping to clients, more often than not, they immediately think of removing coyotes. I do suggest managing coyote populations, whether it be through trapping or highly effective hunting methods such as thermal imaging and night vision technology paired with distress calls. Coyotes are the main predators for fawns, and even kill some adult deer also. They also kill their fair share of strutting Tom turkeys as well as nesting hens. Hens are especially vulnerable to coyote predation when they are sitting on their nests at night when coyotes are most active. In regard to difficulty of successful trapping, coyotes rank right at the top of North American predators. They are naturally wary and are quick learners if they escape a trap or become educated by hunters. I advise folks to do their research before even attempting to trap coyotes, and often suggest bringing in a professional trapper if possible. There is quite a learning curve to becoming a successful-K-9 trapper, and if results are needed quickly, a seasoned trapper can be the best route more often than not.

I am always quick to remind my clients that there is more to trapping than just targeting coyotes. Predators such as **foxes** can kill their share of small game, raid turkey nests, and have even been documented killing fawns. In areas where their numbers are high, we target them also.

The main two predators that I notice being overlooked are raccoons and opossums. Both of these predators are especially hard on ground nesting birds, such as turkeys and quail. Also, they both enjoy similar foods as game species, such as grains, fruits, and seeds. Opossums are, to this day, still said to be tick vacuums that walk through the woods eating tick after tick. Recent studies have shown that while an opossum will eat a tick, they prefer other foods such as fruits, eggs, grains, other insects, and so on. In my mind, I would much rather keep their population low and allow other

animals to eat the ticks, like turkeys. In my experience, raccoons seem to be the real problem when it comes to nest predation. Raccoons are very smart and often move in small family groups for most of the year. If they stumble across a nest, they are smart enough to remember that and continue to revisit the nest in search of eggs. They also do a great job of reproducing and getting their young to maturity. When you couple this with less people hunting and trapping them and their lack of natural predators, you can get a high population in a hurry. On the scale of difficulty, racoons and opossums are fairly easy to catch. Again, I advise folks to research the topic first, but a novice trapper can start catching racoons and opossums quickly, which often leads to better nesting success.

#### PLANT A FOOD PLOT

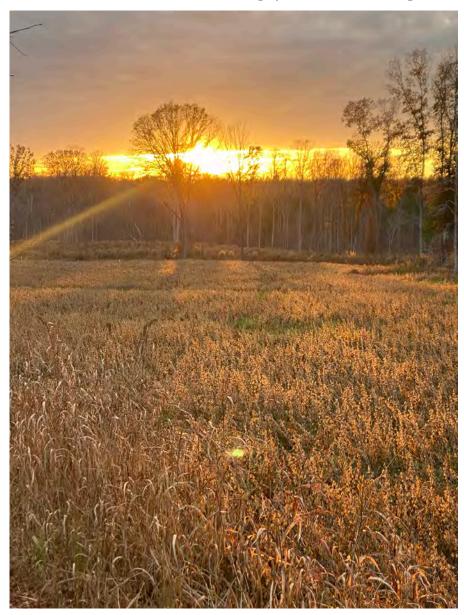
Planting a food plot is a fantastic way of giving back to wildlife, while at the same time increasing your property's carrying capacity, as well as your harvest opportunities. Let's take a perennial clover **food plot** for example. According to studies conducted at the University of Tennessee, the average annual production of a ladino clover plot is 7,500 lbs. per acre of high-quality forage that's always available and free choice to all types of wildlife year-round (depending on the region). All types of small animals, such as **rabbits**, mice, turtles, birds, insects, and many more, can be seen foraging in these plots. Of course, game animals, such as **deer** and **turkey** benefit from them greatly throughout the year. I often have folks refer to feeding deer when they are putting out feed such as shelled corn or other attractants. To me, this is really just baiting because it's often centered around deer season

and its main intent is to attract deer to a spot to be harvested. Once deer season goes out or people have filled their tags, they stop putting out the bait and the deer are left foraging on whatever they have available on the landscape. Where legal, I have no issue with baiting, but I think it's important to note the differences in pouring out a pile of feed versus planting a quality food plot. Long after, and even before season, a food plot is feeding animals and, as noted before, other game species. It goes beyond just being available in hunting season

and helps animals through the stresses of winter and other tough periods.

#### KEEP WILDLIFE POPULATIONS IN CHECK

We already touched on this topic as it pertains to predators, but it's important to note that game populations need to be kept in balance as well. Deer are well known to become over-populated and, where they do, can wreak havoc on the habitat. They often over-browse plants, trees, and shrubs that are highly selected and reducing their



Planting a food plot is an excellent way of providing tons of high-quality forage per acre for all types of wildlife to utilize.

ability to replicate on the landscape. This leaves an opening for all the low-quality plant life to take up the void and dominate the overpopulated areas. What I often see on these sites is timber stands full of gum, pine, beech, and other low selected trees, often accompanied by a browse line just out of deer reach on mature trees that are desirable. Often the plant life in deer reach is made up of plants such as **tall fescue**,

broomsedge, Japan grass, and other non-palatable grasses. Broadleafs such as sericea lespedeza, dead nettle, ground ivy, plantains and other broadleaf plants are common. What is also common is less wildlife overall. Since the deer have limited the diversity of plant, shrub, and tree species on the landscape through browse and often allowed a handful of those forementioned species to dominate, lots of different wildlife species can't persist there and move on. I also see stunted and poorly developed deer. Small body sizes, along with poor antler development are a sure sign in lacking nutrition and poor habitat quality. Interesting enough, this is just as common on many hunting properties where landowners won't harvest enough deer as it is in suburban areas or townships that don't allow hunting. This overcrowding and high population often end in poor outcomes for individual deer. Higher rates of predation, car hits, and disease are the norm. These endings for wildlife and deer in particular are much crueler than a quick kill from a hunter's bullet or arrow. I encourage all of my clients to further educate themselves on the population dynamic on their properties and to make a real effort to keep game populations in check for both wildlife and the habitats sake.



It's easy to see by the look in this young man's eyes that he'll be a hunter for life!

#### MAKE A PLAN

By sitting down and taking the time to make a plan for habitat work, hunting objectives, equipment maintenance, property goals, hiring prudent contractors, etc., we can keep our eye on the prize, per se, and not lose sight of our yearly goals and objectives. It also forces us to prioritize goals which will ultimately make us more productive and likely to achieve them. I often hear folks talk about money as it relates to wildlife and land management. They'll tell you that it's a rich man's hobby and it can't be conducted by people without means. While there is truth in the fact the fertilizer, herbicide, seed, and tractors are expensive, the main limiting factor I see is time when it comes to achieving management goals. By making a plan ahead of the habitat and hunting seasons, time can be saved and allow us to put available funds to good use and maximize returns.

#### TAKE THE TIME TO INTRODUCE NEW HUNTERS

Introducing new hunters, whether

it be kids or adults, to the hunting lifestyle will benefit the teacher as much, if not more, than the student. I have learned so much over the years from mentoring youth and adults alike and have received lots of joy from doing so. It's very important for the future of hunting and conservation of wild places and wildlife species alike that we show as many people as possible the value of all three. Even if these folks aren't fully recruited as hunters, the hope is that we can leave a lasting enough impression on them to ensure that they view hunting and wildlife both in a positive light and a value to their future. Hunting has also given many young men and women a way to stay out of trouble and even adults a new purpose and love in life. It also provides them a new skill that allows them to obtain their own organic meat that is healthier than anything found at a grocery store. The snowball effect of introducing one person to hunting that introduces another friend or their spouse or children is real and is a great benefit for people, wildlife, and land alike.

#### GO TO A WILDLIFE EVENT OR BANQUET

There are so many fantastic nonprofit conservation organizations that do a great job in raising awareness of issues that threaten wildlife. Regardless if those threats are from natural occurrences such as disease, droughts, flooding, etc., issues with habitat loss, dwindling populations, and even fight for hunters' rights at federal and state levels. These groups also provide much needed funding for wildlife beneficial research, habitat enhancement, education, new hunter recruitment, and the list goes on and on. A few of the big names include the National Deer Association, **National Wild Turkey** Federation, Rocky Mount Elk Foundation, Quail Unlimited,

#### **Pheasants Forever, Ducks**

**Unlimited**, etc. For the most part, if you have a game species that you love to pursue, there is a non-profit group in North America that is dedicated to keeping that animal's population on the rise in both the present and the future. All of these groups are comprised of hunters and other stewards of wildlife and game species that love these animals and care deeply about their future. It's neat to be around a group of like-minded people at a banquet or similar wildlife event and these gatherings often are accompanied by good food, cold drinks, music, and genuinely good fellowship. They are typically structured to raise funds for local branches of the chosen conservation group, as well as the national office. These funds tend to be used

to address local issues of the branch as well as broad issues across the beneficiary animal's range. For the same price a couple may spend on a nice meal, folks can enjoy that nice meal and know they are supporting wildlife while attending one of these events.

#### CONCLUSION

It's easy to take away from this article that if you hunt, fish, enjoy wild places, and love the animals that call them home, you should strive to give back in some way to wildlife. There are many ways to do so and actions that can be done for folks of any background, financial means, or free time. Put one of the suggestions to use this year and you'll be better for it and so will the wildlife you love!

Memories of Spring just may be the latest and greatest insight into turkey hunting that members of the Tenth Legion will salute!

— Will Primos

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## Soil Analysis – A Critical Component of Food Plot Success



**P**ood plots are an important L' factor in a quality wildlife management program and provide many benefits to hunters and landowners alike. Food plots attract and increase the chance of harvesting wildlife species such as deer, turkeys, dove and even wild hogs. During the summer months, food plots are used to provide essential wildlife habitats and highquality forage to increase antler development and help pregnant doe during gestation. Food plots can also provide suitable bugging areas for turkeys as well as cover and feeding areas for quail.

With the many benefits food plots provide, one must do their research and carefully prepare the very ingredient responsible for a food plot's success or failure – **soil**.

Between seed, fertilizer, time, and equipment costs, planting a oneacre food plot can cost more than \$250. Many people buy the same commercial mix every year, spread 4 bags of 13(N)-13(P)-13(K) (N-Nitrogen; P-phosphorus, and K-potassium) per acre and expect everything to grow vibrant and healthy. If the plot soil pH is below 5.5 or above 7.4, all that money may have been wasted, not to mention the cost of fertilizers that may have been unnecessary.

A successful food plot program requires knowledge of the soil and what it has available by way of nutrients for a plant to not only grow, but thrive. Cation exchange capacity, pH, available phosphorus, nitrogen, and potassium are all important factors to consider. Each

#### By Dana Johnson

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Black belt clays have a high CEC and water holding capacity. Unfortunately they can have an alkaline pH. A soil test will tell you this important information.

has a direct effect in the production and attractiveness of a plot. A soil analysis provides all the information you need to get a food plot management plan together to ensure maximum forage production. A soil analysis is low cost, and one of the most important pieces of information when planting food plots.

## What does a soil analysis tell us and how do we get one?

A soil analysis is the best way to start a good nutrition plan for each plot so the crops grown can provide the most attractive and nutrient rich foods for the wildlife. A soil analysis will identify limiting factors in forage production such as pH along with macronutrients like phosphorus and potassium. The minimal cost of a soil analysis up





Soil probe

Auger

front can save thousands of dollars in wasted fertilizer and seed down the road. An analysis will also steer how a seed and fertilizer budget should be allocated for each field. Think of it as a risk management tool for food plots.

Crops require different nutrient needs along with optimal soil type. If clover or other inoculated legumes are going to be planted alone, nitrogen does not need to be present. However, phosphorus and potassium are necessary, each at different levels. Common winter cereal grains like wheat, rye, and oats do require nitrogen at higher levels. The pH is also extremely important in crop production and nutrient availability and a soil analysis will provide that information. Some plants grow better in a pH of 5.7 to 6.2 while others may prefer a more neutral pH of 7. If you know the pH of the soil, it may affect the decision about what crops are planted in which plot.

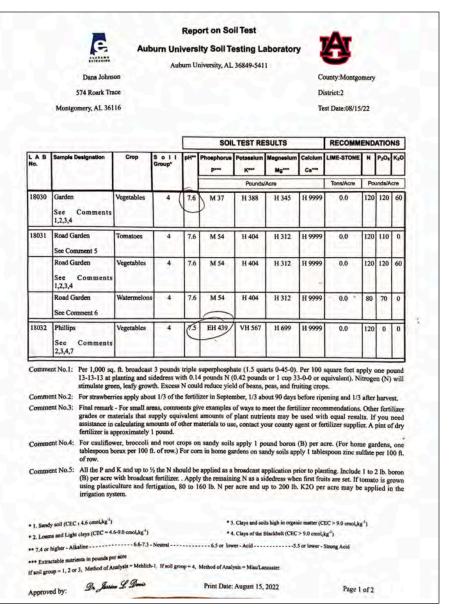
How a soil sample is collected is just as important as the final lab results as improper sampling can lead to invalid results. The first factor in taking a good soil sample is to have good spatial variability

over the entire plot. This will give a good sample of the field and provide a representation of what is most predominant in that plot. This means that the final 2 lbs. of soil sent to the lab should include soil from the entire plot. Collecting one scoop of soil from the middle of the plot and sending it in for analysis only provides information on that spot. Collecting samples from many sites in the plot will provide a more accurate result for interpretation. Most wildlife openings are under  $\frac{1}{2}$  acre and in these smaller plots, a minimum of three various samples should suffice, but five samples are recommended, especially in plots one acre or more.

The depth at which each soil sample is collected is also a factor in producing a good soil analysis. Collecting a hand full of soil from the top layer does not indicate what is happening at the root level. Some plants have shallow root systems. Yet others, like wheat, can penetrate many feet below the soil surface. An analysis of the top 6 inches may show nutrient values much different than what is 12" to 18" below the surface. Nutrients such as nitrogen can move many feet through the soil, but potassium may only move a few inches and phosphorus does not move at all. It is imperative to collect a sample that represents what is happening at the surface as well as one to two feet below.

Soil scientists use a soil probe to collect soil at varying levels. A probe is the fastest and simplest way to take soil samples from numerous plots quickly and is worth the cost. Soil test probes come in all lengths but one that will take a minimum 12" plug is recommended. The probe is pushed into the ground and the plug is easily removed. Soil probes can range from \$50 to \$200 a piece. The higher cost products tend to be heavy duty and have the added footstep that aids in penetrating deeper into the soil, making them ideal for sampling heavy clays.

Another collection tool that works well in sandy or loam soils is the small diameter dirt hole auger. These augers attach to cordless drills and are easy to use. I recommend the ones with the 1.5" bits as they don't put as much strain on the drill. They can be found at many big box stores and the ones with smaller bits work great. They



are very affordable, costing between \$15 to \$30. It takes a little more time to collect a sample, but it works effectively. The only issue that may arise with this tool is when trying to collect samples from a harder soil texture. Attempting to drill through dry clay soils down to 12" can prove a little difficult.

There are many other ways to get samples such as using a spade or shovel. These methods work but are very time consuming. No matter which method is used, make sure to collect plenty of 12" or deeper samples per plot. Put each sample in a bucket and mix well. Once the sample is thoroughly mixed, put a small amount into a container to submit to the lab. Labs only need a pound or two of soil for each analysis and many have their own containers and forms they require for submission. Depending on time of year and the soil lab, it can take more than 2 weeks to receive your analysis. Remember, the analysis is only as good as the sample provided.

#### **Understanding the Results**

Each lab will send the data from your soil samples in its own format. There is little consistency between each lab, but most will have the soil group which is correlated to the cation exchange capacity, pH, and macronutrient values. Next to these values, the report will indicate very low, low, medium, high, very high and sometimes extremely high levels for that nutrient. Some labs will provide recommendations on lime applications if the soil pH is too acidic. Nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium recommendations may be included as well.

Two unique soil analyses, recently conducted, are detailed below. The first analysis was conducted using soil collected from the vegetable garden at my personal residence. The other is from soil collected at a hunting property I've managed since 1999. Each location has different soil types, determining the way I approach managing soil pH and fertilization requirements. The soil analyses from each property also demonstrates how different crop fertilization needs can vary so widely on the same property.

The first soil analysis is in illustration 1, Lab No. 10832, sample designation Phillips. This has been a garden site for 25 years and has never had a soil analysis completed. Soil types consist of blackbelt clays with a high cation exchange capacity (CEC - the capacity of a soil to retain nutrients.) Every year, a base 13-13-13 fertilizer has been laid. The soil analysis shows a pH of 7.5, extremely high phosphorus, and very high potassium. For growing general vegetables, the analysis recommends 120 lbs. per acre of nitrogen and no phosphorus or potassium.

Based on the soil analysis, the pH needs to be lowered, because both phosphorus and potassium are unavailable to the plant in this alkaline soil. This can be done by adding elemental sulfur, aluminum sulfate, or iron sulfate. Plants will start absorbing these nutrients once the pH is lowered to 7.0 and down to 6.0. Additionally, inclusion of ammonium nitrate can lower the pH level of this soil.

A few simple math calculations are then necessary to determine the amount of fertilizer recommended. For this plot, the results from the lab indicate a recommendation of 120 lbs. of nitrogen per acre. A 50 lb. bag of 32-0-0 means this bag is 32% nitrogen, hence the number 32 in the name. To know how many bags will need to be purchased, simply multiply the number of lbs. per bag. In this case, that would be 50 multiplied by 32%. The result is 16 which means each bag contains 16 lbs. of nitrogen. Divide the amount you need, 120 lbs. by 16lbs. and 7.5 is the result and number of bags you need to purchase for one acre.

In the same soil report, in illustration 1, Lab no. 18030, sample designation "Garden" has a pH of 7.6, but the lab recommends 120 lbs. of nitrogen, 120 lbs. of phosphorus and 60 lbs. of nitrogen. Already knowing that 7.5 bags of 32-0-0 is needed, the phosphorus and potassium must now be customized. To get 120 lbs. of phosphorus, use 5.21 bags of 0-46-0 or triple super phosphate and 2 bags of muriate of potash which is 0-0-60. I round up to whole bags as the extra spread over an acre will not hurt the crop.

When submitting a soil analysis, it is important to specify what crops are desired to be planted in the soil. To illustrate the point that different crops require different amounts of macronutrients, refer to the same illustration with lab number 18031 sample designation "Road Garden" and notice the nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium recommendations for three different crops. Tomatoes, other vegetables, and watermelons all require different amounts to maximize their crop





Sandy loam.

potential. If this entire field was going to be planted only in watermelons, 80 lbs. of nitrogen and 70 lbs. of phosphorus are needed. Potassium is not recommended. If vegetables, other than tomatoes were to be planted in this field, 120 lbs. of nitrogen, 120 lbs. of phosphorus and 60 lbs. of potassium are recommended. Finally, if tomatoes are to be planted, 120 lbs. of nitrogen, 110 lbs. of phosphorus and no potassium are the recommendation from the analysis.

The second soil test report, completed in October 2022, is from a hunting plantation in Macon County I've been managing since 1999. The soil types on this 1000acre property include all four soil groups. They include sandy soil, loams and light clays, soils with high organic matter, and finally blackbelt clay. Eight of the sixteen plots were tested as they are analyzed on a two-year rotation schedule. The results indicated the pH ranged from 5.1 to 7.7 and fertilizer recommendations were different for nearly every plot. Lab recommendations were calculated on pounds per acre and then adjusted based on field size.

Soil analysis was used to make specific decisions regarding each plot on this property. Two plots were not planted at all, but only limed. Lime takes approximately 3 to 6 months to raise a soil pH a full point and would still yield a low nutrient uptake by plants. If these fields had been planted and fertilized as normal, money would have simply been wasted on fertilizer and seed. The same holds true for another plot that was determined to be highly alkaline. In the spring, elemental sulfur will be added to this plot as the addition of sulfur can only create an impact when soil temperature is above 50 degrees. Ammonium nitrate could also be used to lower the pH, but one must also consider the cost of fertilizer in the planning process.

The remaining plots received specific added amounts of nutrients based on the soil analysis recommendations. Two plots had lower pH's and it was recommended to add one ton of lime per acre. The landowner and I decided to lime and plant anyway in the hopes that by mid-January the pH will have adjusted enough to allow for nutrient uptake by the plants. Other



plots received similar recommendations of additions of nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium. We completed our calculations of the nutrients needed for each plot, based on the contents of nutrients in a bag, and purchased accordingly.

#### Soil Analysis: Is It Worth It?

You now might be thinking you have to be a mathematician to know how to properly plant a food plot for maximum wildlife benefit. Planting food plots is already a difficult task getting the equipment ready and rounding up the manpower to plant multiple plots to be ready by hunting season. Why, then, do we make it more complicated, collecting soil samples, sending them to a lab and waiting two weeks to get a report with seemingly random numbers you don't understand. It can be tedious and time-consuming figuring out what each plot needs based on the soil analysis and trying to locate a store that carries all the different fertilizers recommended.

The simple answer is yes. But why? You can spread all the fertilizer you want over a food plot, but if the soil pH isn't in a specific range, the nutrients simply will not make their way to the plant for it to thrive. Nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium are not in a form available to the plant if the pH is not within a specific range. The cation exchange capacity (CEC) in soil is also important and the lab uses this to calculate recommended fertilizer amounts. Sandy soil holds fertilizer different than that of heavy clays. Sandy loams and light clays are much different than blackbelt clays. The soil analysis takes the soil type into account and allows the lab to make the best recommendations for the contents of fertilizer to be applied. If the plant cannot absorb the nutrients provided, then you have wasted your money purchasing the wrong kind of fertilizer.

Some nutrients may be in amounts that are toxic to plants and the environment. If you have a pH of 5.1, and apply too much nitrogen to the acre, the plant cannot take it up because it's in what is called an unavailable form. Nitrogen also moves easily through soil and can leach into the environment with unintended consequences. For example, nitrogen can move below the root zone with excessive rain and directly impact water quality. This happens much more frequently on sandy soils than on clay.

Phosphorus is another example of a nutrient that can be toxic when not applied appropriately. Phosphorus does not move in soil and if the pH is very acidic or alkaline, phosphorus will also be unavailable to the plant and will remain stagnant until the pH is adjusted to a range that allows it to move. Many wildlife food plots can have excessive phosphorus because it has not been absorbed by the planted crop. Plants will not grow because the excessive phosphorus amount does not allow the plant to absorb nutrients like zinc, copper, and calcium. Extremely high phosphorus levels can even kill plants.

Food plot plants need Potassium for the adenosine triphosphate (ATP) that produces plant energy. This nutrient moves well in a soil solution, but not to the extent of nitrogen. Where nitrogen can move feet in soil, potassium may only move inches. Just like Phosphorus, if the pH is not within a specific range, plants will not absorb Potassium. Continued applications of Potassium can create excessive amounts and lead to toxicity issues. Too much Potassium will prevent plants from taking up much needed micronutrients to thrive such as magnesium, iron, zinc, and calcium.

#### **Conclusion:**

Conducting a soil analysis every two to three years is a cost-effective risk management tool for planting food plots that will thrive and benefit wildlife populations. Collecting and submitting a soil sample for analysis is logical and can save a landowner and hunters a significant amount of money. Deer and other wildlife will choose the most nutritious forage. On the other hand, plants that do not gain nutrients from the soil lose palatability. If you want to draw deer and/or other wildlife to your hunting area, collect a soil sample, send it to an accredited lab, and follow the recommendations; it is well worth the effort. To find a soil analysis lab near you, contact your local extension office for further information.

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## **Creating a Fishing and Dog Training Lake**



By Scott Brown

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Retriever training is both fun and rewarding, whether doing it as a hobby or professionally. Lots of hard work, repetition and being exposed to numerous hunting situations makes for a successful retriever.

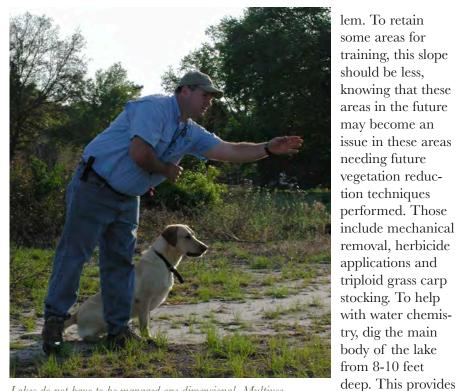
**Physical Features** 

Whether modifying an existing waterbody to accommodate both fishing and retriever training, or building a new waterbody, design and planning are the first step. Things that are decided on during design, planning and construction can help reduce issues in the future with the water chemistry, vegetation and fish.

Irregular shorelines and bottom contour are both beneficial in retriever training and creating a quality fishery. Most fish, including bream and largemouth bass, are a shoreline species, so the more shoreline and habitat preferred by those species, the more you will be

Recently I was asked to assess and create a lake that could be used for retriever training and fishing. Many of our clients ask for or need multiuse waterbodies, but this one may be the most difficult of all the multiuse lakes, especially if it's not on a big enough scale. In water dog training you need deep and shallow areas, with a few spots where land and water may be crossed multiple times (re-entries) for quality retriever training. Also, a few spots on shore and in water where logs, brush or vegetation protruding above the water line for dogs to be trained to go through or over the obstacle rather than around them. A lot of these lakes have large shallow areas that create problems for aquatic vegetation

growth. A lake shaped like a hand can be very usable in retriever training, but the open water (palm) needs to be large and deep enough to support the fish population during all four seasons. In the "fingers", it may be impossible to get them deep enough to not harbor and promote vegetation growth and or excessive hot or cold water in summer and winter, respectively. These areas can be kept clean with safe, EPA approved herbicides or mechanical removal with a backhoe or longarm dredge by dragging the vegetation out at the middle and/or end of each growing season, herbicide use and/ or by adding grass carp.



Lakes do not have to be managed one dimensional. Multiuse waterbodies for fishing and irrigation/agriculture and retriever training are possible.

increasing the carrying capacity as opposed to a round, square or rectangular lake with a smooth bathtub like bottom. When creating the shape, we recommend one or two shorelines that can be used for the more advanced training having several different size earthen fingers protruding out into the main waterbody. I recommend if space and budget allows, build nothing less than three acres. If it is less, it is very hard to accomplish a depth that's beneficial for good water quality, minimal vegetation issues and fish. Areas of water between land fingers need to be wide enough to support a depth of at least six feet. How narrow you can make the water pockets between the fingers will be determined by soil makeup and slope of land running down to the lake surface. Under normal lake building conditions, desired shoreline slope is no less than 3:1 to help reduce aquatic vegetation from growing too far out into the lake and becoming a probwater will be cooler in summer and warmer in winter. Once a dog's feet leave the bottom and it begins to swim, it does not matter how the bottom contour is, however, for producing fish, the more irregular with ups and downs, valleys and plateaus the better for fish production, especially bass and bream. If room permits, place one island above the water and/or a shallow underwater plateau to work dogs, while simultaneously adding desirable habitat for fish.

areas for fish where

Fingers can be dug with some father apart and deeper, with an occasional shallow area between to simulate a natural marsh where the dogs will be hunting or competing in field trials. Again, be aware that any shallower areas under three feet that are created may have vegetation issues in the future. Some of these shallow water pockets where vegetation is allowed to grow are acceptable, and can easily be dealt with, but too many shallow areas will create a weed factory and increase the chances of creating water chemistry issues that can stress or even kill fish.

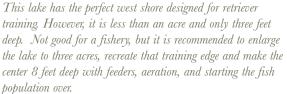
#### Water Chemistry

The addition of a bottom aeration system installed from the beginning is advised. There will me more shallow areas than a traditional lake the same size. Bottom aeration will circulate the water, de-stratifying the water column raising winter and lowering summer water temperatures a few degrees while offering more acre feet for fish to utilize 12 months of the year, which also increases the lake's carrying capacity. It may also reduce summer and winter fish stress, allowing fish to feed all year-long and grow at their full potential instead of slowing growth during those seasons.

#### **Vegetation and Habitat**

Edge and emergent vegetation out into the lake will both benefit fish and enhance your dog training. Select plant species that spread slowly and have a fairly shallow water preference. Small fish will use the vegetation to hide, reproduce and increase numbers compared to bare shorelines. Most waterfowl hunting occurs in marshes and lakes where there are plenty of plants to create blind retrieves, distractions and require good marking skills along with honing depth perception when watching a falling bird. Maybe allow more plants to grow where the slope is steeper and control more aggressively where less slope and not as deep as the main part of the lake. Runs can be cut out into the shallow areas with a weedwhacker to help young dogs stay on lined blind marks, while creating challenges for advanced dogs to follow the marks and not the path.







For retriever training, in the required smaller, less slope and shallower water pockets, vegetation will at some point become an issue. Mechanical removal, herbicide treatments and/or grass carp stocking can be used to combat the issue.

When vegetation begins to cause issues, the plant will need to be positively identified and a plan to reduce or eliminate it will have to be created. Removal can come in the form of mechanical removal, which between close earthen fingers with a backhoe is very possible for many landowners. Herbicide treatments can be done, just read the label to see when animals can reenter the water, many herbicides have a zero day wait period, and some 7 days or more. READ THE HERBICIDE LABEL. If continuous weed issues occur in the narrow shallower areas, stocking triploid grass carp is recommended.

Brush and logs sticking out of the water also helps with retriever training and provides additional fish habitat, like vegetation. For deeper water (offshore) fish habitat, sink Christmas trees, pallets, culvert pipes (two-to-four feet in diameter), or any of the artificial bottom habitat offered by various companies now on the market. Be sure when placing any brush or manmade materials underwater you mark them (we use a solid foam duck decoy) so no dog ever jumps from shore or a boat and hurts themselves on underwater structure. I recommend no artificial structure above the water surface, only natural, as it provides a more natural look. The decoy markers also provide good distraction and enforces the dog to not mess with them and only retrieve the bumper/dummy or real dead bird.

Install one automatic fish feeder per five acres to help forage fish grow and prosper to feed largemouth bass and bluegill and redear sunfish to get larger for catching and harvesting for table fair. If the lake is long, grossly odd shaped, or like an hourglass with two separate areas, possibly having two feeders even if it is under five acres can be done if you desire and budget allows. This will increase forage carrying capacity even greater and bream growth. Have feeder(s) installed and turn on the day fish go in.

#### The Fish

Creating a traditional, simple fishery with native largemouth bass, bluegill, redear sunfish and catfish is recommended. All these species are hardy and if water chemistry or vegetation issues arise, they have a



For many multiuse lakes, a traditional largemouth bass, bluegill and redear sunfish fishery may be the best and safest.

little higher survival rate than other species options. First, stock 1,000 bluegill/redear sunfish mix (75% bluegill/25% redear sunfish) per acre. At the same time add 1,000 per acre fathead minnows (excellent bass starter forage) and 1,000 per acre mosquitofish (will naturally reproduce and thrive in shallow water). If channel catfish are desired, stock 25 per acre every three years. This method costs a little more, however, there will be multiple year classes present and



Some multiuse lakes can grow huge bass, while others can grow adequate largemouth bass and bream for recreation and table fare.

not a typical boomor-bust situation when they all go in and wait for them to all be caught out or they die before restocking. Six to twelve months after the forage species and channel catfish go in, stock the largemouth bass fingerlings at 25-50 per acre. Once a fishery is established, removing largemouth bass at 20-30 per acre annually is required to keep bass growing and not develop a stunted bass population.

#### Hunting

If you put a fish biologist and duck biologist on the same lake project, they envision the waterbody being managed almost completely opposite of one another. Things like water depth, when should flooding and drought occur, the amount of submerged vegetation present, the species of vegetation present and the amount of certain types of vegetation all are addressed when trying to do both. Also add whether you are trying to attract diver or puddle ducks. It can be very complicated and there has to be compromise on both sides to achieve both objectives.

Another part of training retrievers are agricultural fields and flooded timber. The flooded timber scenario takes many years to develop on a lake construction and a separate place on your property with existing bottomland that naturally floods or water levels can be manipulated is advised. Many waterfowl hunting is done from a Jon boat, having one in the lake to fish and train from is advised. Most dogs are hesitant at first around docks, boats, outboard motors, guns and even some riding in UTV's. Introducing retrievers to all these scenarios and getting them comfortable before their hunts makes for a much smoother and successful day afield for the dog and less aggravation and more enjoyable for the dog handler and his hunting buddies. Another option is along the lake shore whether grass, agriculture, open woods or duck pond prior to flooding, pen reared pheasant, chukar or quail can be purchased to help with live upland bird hunting experiences during the training process.

Planting something like Japanese millet along a shoreline or creating a smaller waterbody below/downhill of the existing lake can be done. With water control structures, water can be let out after the season is over. The ground dried,



Underwater habitat can still be placed around the lake, just make sure its not where dogs are jumping in from shore, off dock or from a boat. Mark with a solid foam decoy and it contributes to your training.



Various habitat around your retriever training lake like grassy areas, agricultural fields, food plots or open woods can be used to train and sharpen skills for upland bird hunting Purchasing pheasant, chukars, or quail will greatly broaden a retriever's experiences and make it a better overall hunter.

then planted in late summer with duck food and reflooded prior to the duck migration is important. This will offer a dog training with live, wild birds and real hunting situations, and enjoyment for the landowner, family and friends. The main lake needs to be at least 15 acres, 20 feet deep with the lower lake being two-to-four acres, only requiring a couple feet of water to flood for the ducks. If the ducks don't come, pen raised mallards can be used in training, just make sure all are collected and not allowed into the wild.

As stated earlier, a retriever training facility creates various issues for also creating a quality fishery. I thoroughly enjoy fishing and retriever training, and both can be accomplished with a little unique fisheries management technique.



For the amateur retriever trainer, the more practice in more various hunting situations, the more ready the retriever is for the season. Then they sit and dream about next season.

## *Wildlife Trends Journal* Management Calendar



#### Dave Edwards

Dave Edwards is a certified wildlife biologist and regular contributor to *Wildlife Trends Journal* and other hunting/wildlife publications. Dave was honored as QDMA's 2007 Deer Manager of the Year and nominated in 2011 as Alabama Wildlife Federation's Wildlife Conservationist of the Year. Dave is President of Tall Tines Wildlife & Hunting Consultants, Inc. Contact him at TallTinesConsulting@gmail. com or 912-464-9328.

If you have not achieved doe harvest goals yet this season, it's time to get to work.

as chasing, rubs or scrapes. We often refer to this as a diluted rut.

By the time you get this issue of *Wildlife Trends* it will be late in the hunting season in most states. If you have not met your doe harvest goals, get to work. If needed, recruit the help of friends. Holding a "doe harvest weekend" is a great way to get participation from club members or friends. Make a big deal out of it by having a cookout at the camp with "awards" for those that harvest the largest doe, oldest doe, or most aggregate weight.

#### Keep notes while hunting to help make adjustments as needed to deer stands

Although everybody makes "mental notes" of improvements needed when sitting/hunting in a particu-

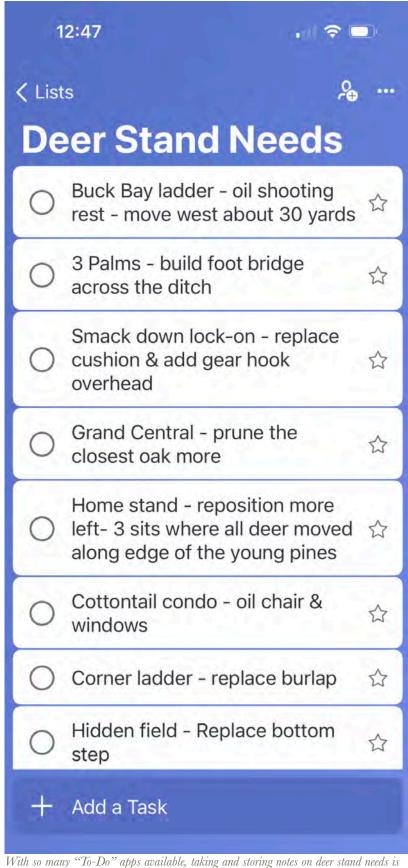
## Ensure doe harvest goals are met

Based on observations during my travels this fall, many areas of the Southeast have experienced another abundant crop of acorns. Deer populations in these areas will have increased fawn production and survival. This means that increased harvest may be needed on some properties to maintain deer populations at desired levels. A very simple law of nature taught in college Wildlife Population Dynamics courses is that Population Growth = Births minus Deaths. Thus, with an increase in "births" (more fawns), some managers will need to increase harvest rates unless growth is desired.

Ideally, it is best to harvest does early in the season and/or before the rut. Doing so will save food resources for remaining deer and immediately improve the sex ratio for the upcoming breeding season which will conserve energy for your deer herd. An unbalanced sex ratio will result in an extended breeding season where bucks can lose up to 30% of their body weight from excessive breeding activities. Consequently, under these conditions, bucks enter spring needing to recover. The highly nutritious spring food then goes towards body maintenance verses body/antler growth for the following year. The extended breeding season associated with an unbalanced sex ratio also results in poor hunting due to the lack of breeding competition. That is, there are so many does that bucks do not need to compete. In this case, hunters generally do not see much breeding activity such lar deer stand, these needs are often forgotten when the time comes to work on stands. I find it extremely helpful to physically keep a running list of repairs or improvements needed to deer stands. At our property, we used to record deer stand notes in a spiral notebook that is kept at the camp. This allowed everybody to add their notes right after the hunt while it is fresh on their minds. We have now upgraded to using a "to-do" app on our phones where the list can be accessed and edited by the group. Stand repairs and improvements range from fixing a squeaky board to relocating the stand altogether. This is also where we record notes of new areas identified that need a stand. Once hunting season is over, we check our notes and go to work making repairs and adjustments as needed. Our goal is to do this work before spring green up - which also includes full-scale scouting missions to find (and install) new stand locations. By doing this work in late winter we significantly reduce the disturbance/pressure applied in preparing for the season next fall.

#### Perform preventative maintenance and calibrate sprayers in preparation for burning and early summer uses

Although you probably won't use them for a couple months, late winter is a good time to overhaul sprayers. By overhaul I mean check all hoses, tubes, connections, filters, nozzles, etc. This is also a good time to calibrate sprayers so that everything is ready when early summer weeds become a problem in food plots. We commonly use the pistol nozzle of our sprayers to assist in prescribed burns. Be sure to check all parts and test the pistol nozzle, hoses, etc. if you plan to use it this winter during burning activities. Working on sprayers is a great



With so many "Io-Do" apps available, taking and storing notes on deer stand needs is as easily done on a mobile phone. The list can be shared as well so that everyone in your group can add to the list as needed.



Even in the South, winter can be a nutritionally stressful period for deer. To ensure deer enter spring in good condition, provide high-quality supplemental feed during the post-rut and winter period.

mid-day activity while hanging out at the camp during a weekend of hunting. Erect new wood duck boxes and/or clean out existing boxes in preparation for the nesting season The first step in preparing existing duck boxes for this nesting season is to clean all the old nesting debris out. A good nest box design allows an easy way to clean the old nesting debris out. Common designs may include a drop floor or a side

door where debris can be pulled out. Once clean, place 4"-6" of sawdust or wood shavings in the bottom of the box for nesting material. I prefer shavings verses sawdust because they do not absorb moisture as easily which causes rotting and mold – check with a wood shop that uses a planer for shavings. Cedar chips that are used for dog bedding can be good nesting material as well and can be purchased at pet stores. Erect new boxes before February in highly visible areas near good brood rearing habitat. Adequate protective cover is essential for brood survival. Brood habitat should include a dependable source of water with plenty of shrubs and emergent vegetation for food and cover. These areas are generally along the perimeter of a pond or swamp. Wood duck boxes should be cleaned out and inspected every year just before nesting season. Word of caution - always be careful when opening wood duck nest boxes. Many other animals use the boxes. Animals that are commonly found in wood duck boxes include gray squirrel, flying squirrel, rat snakes, screech owls, wasps, bees, and spiders. Building wood duck boxes, putting them out, and checking them after nesting season to monitor use is always an adventure and gratifying. This is also a great project to include children. Managing wood duck boxes provides lots of hand on work and makes them feel good about helping animals...plus it teaches them good stewardship.

## Provide supplemental feed for deer.

Even in the South, late winter can be a nutritionally stressful period for deer. They have endured the rigors of breeding season and natural food sources can be limited. Providing supplemental feed during this time can boost energy and



Although you may have to give up a couple hunts, scouting ducks from a distance will lead to more successful hunts later.



To provide great nesting locations, wood duck nest boxes should be cleaned out and prepared with new nesting material before February.

nutrition. This recommendation/ activity is directed towards landowners or managers that have done a good job managing the natural habitat, food plots, and deer herd conditions. That is, before thinking about starting a supplemental feeding program for deer on your property, you need to take care of foundational things first. In other words, you cannot hang shutters if you do not have a house – and you will not grow big bucks and a healthy herd with supplemental feed alone. It is a supplement to other management strategies and activities. However, when done in combination with other core management practices, supplemental feeding can be valuable for deer. Be sure to check your local game laws before providing feed on your property. Many states do not allow the use of feed during hunting season. Ideally, providing supplemental feed throughout the year is best, but supplemental feed will be most used and most valuable for deer in late winter and summer. These are periods when natural food availability is at its lowest. So if you have a limited budget and cannot or do not want to feed throughout the year, provide it during the periods deer need it most.

## Scout now for next duck season

Doing a little homework this season, even if it means missing a hunt or two, will help you have better duck hunts next year. By this I mean take time to watch and glass wetlands, moist soil impoundments, beaver ponds, lakes, and flooded fields to find new areas to hunt. While food sources and water can change from year to year, in most cases ducks will be attracted to the same areas each year. Simply stage yourself somewhere that you can see the area you are scouting without spooking ducks. In most cases, a high vantage point that offers a landscape view is best as it often allows you to see where ducks are coming from as they approach and which direction they go when they leave. Good vantage points are often hills, highways, bridges, barns, and sometimes deer stands. The point is to get as high as you can so that you can see the sky where ducks are flying. I can't tell you how many times I have set up and scouted like this and found an even better spot by being able to see flocks from a landscape level verses getting into the actual area (tight) where I thought ducks would be. In some cases, you may not see ducks go down but notice that lots of flocks headed in a certain direction. Relocating closer to the area you saw ducks headed on the next scouting mission will often reveal a new honey hole. As you begin to pinpoint areas ducks are using, close in tighter and start learning exactly where ducks want to be and how they approach when coming in. If it is still duck season, this is when I like to hunt the spot a couple times. Doing so will help you identify exactly where to build a blind this summer. So, by next season, you will be sipping coffee after putting out your spread of decoys while waiting on daylight and ducks to start flying.

#### Strip disk areas to promote food and desirable habitat for wildlife.

Strip disking is simply one of the easiest, cheapest, and most effective management practices to implement to create high quality food and cover for wildlife. Strip disking is as simple as it sounds. To strip disk, you merely drop the disk far enough into the soil to lightly break the surface of the ground. Lightly disking the ground will provide enough disturbance to stimulate the natural seed bank of wildlife friendly "weeds" the following spring and summer. Heavy disking like you were preparing a clean seedbed for planting a food plot is not needed. One pass is generally enough to stir the ground up and expose bare soils that will promote germination of desirable weeds. While not necessary, I often mow areas I plan to strip disk ahead of time. This makes disking more effective if vegetation is relatively thick or tall. It also knocks back/ reduces competition of the undesirable or overgrown plants I am trying to replace. Strip disking can be done in thinned pine plantations, relatively open mature pine stands, roadsides, along the edges of food plots, or in open fields.

Basically, anywhere sunlight can reach the ground will work. To optimize the benefit of strip disking, avoid disking straight lines. A serpentine pattern that winds through the habitat will provide the most edge and diversity. However, consider following the contour of the land to avoid creating potential erosion issues. Make the strips 8 -25 feet wide, and separate them by undisked strips 60 to 100 feet wide. Make the strips as long as possible. These strips can be thought of as a rest-rotation system. After a year, disk another swath next to the previously disked strip. This develops a mosaic of vegetation that is one to three years old. Strip disking at different times of the year will result in different plant communities. While disking can be conducted any time of year, it is normally done in spring or fall. Fall/winter disking normally results in a broadleaf plant response, while spring/summer disking promotes native grasses. Altering the season in which you strip disk will add diversity to your property that will benefit various wildlife species.

## Identify roads on your property that need attention.

Winter is often very wet in the Mid-South which makes this a great time to identify and assess problem areas along roads where work will be needed next summer. Make notes or identify areas on maps that you can refer back to when you start to repair roads next spring or summer. You will be glad you did. Once your property dries out, it can be difficult to remember and/or find the areas that were bad during the hunting season. Although many landowners/hunters access properties during hunting season on 4-wheelers, electric carts, or other gas-powered ATV's that will certainly get through wet and slippery roads, roads are an

important part of managing a property. If you are actively managing your property, you will need to be able to drive or transport large equipment such as spreader trucks, tractors, and agriculture buggies throughout the property. Thus, having good roads is essential.

## Trap and remove nest predators

If managing for wild turkeys and quail are goals on the property you hunt, don't overlook the value of removing nest predators such as raccoons and opossums. Having said this, attempting to control predators should not be a priority if you are not actively managing the land to promote quality turkey and quail habitat. Creating and maintaining quality habitat should be the highest strategy on the list for managing game birds. Wild turkey is a species that responds quickly to good habitat management such as thinning timber, burning, understory control, food plots, roadside management, etc. However, research has clearly demonstrated that nest predators, particularly raccoons, can significantly impact nesting success rates and thus turkey population growth. Not only will they eat the eggs, but they may even kill the vulnerable hen turkey while incubating the nest. Winter is a great time to trap and remove nest predators. This is also when hunters spend the most time at a property. Trapping offers a great mid-day management activity during a weekend at the camp. The key in being successful and efficient is to pick good trap locations. Water sources, feeders, and food plots can be good places to start. There are many effective traps available. The most common

are live traps (cage traps) and steel traps (leg hold traps). If you use leg hold traps, I recommend "softcatch" or offset jaw traps. These traps do not damage the foot of the trapped animal in the event that you catch a dog or other non-target critter. If you have never trapped before, you will learn a lot by trial and error. I recommend doing a little homework by surfing the web and YouTube to learn effective techniques. One more thing to know is that nest predators are prolific and have relatively high reproductive rates. This means that populations can rebound quickly. To be effective in controlling nest predators and helping turkeys and quail, you must significantly reduce nest predator populations and continue to aggressively remove them each year.



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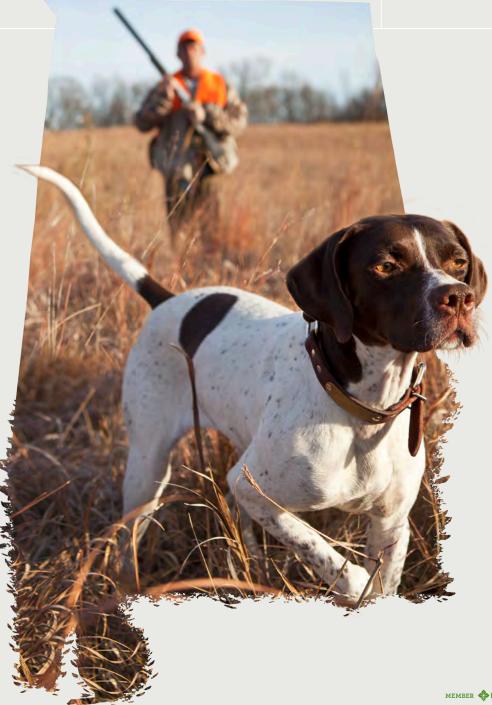
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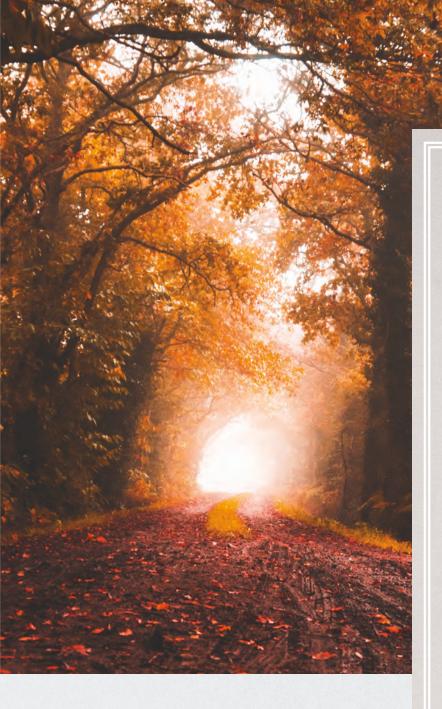
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