

PRACTICAL WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT INFORMATION



# *Wildlife Trends* JOURNAL

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2024

VOLUME 24, ISSUE 5



## INSIDE THIS ISSUE

**Creating Duck Hunting Opportunities – It's Easier Than You May Think**  
By Dave Edwards

**Wild Turkey Conservation Made Simple**  
By Ron Jolly

**Fall and Winter Lake Work**  
By Scott Brown

**Wildlife Trends Journal Management Calendar**  
By Dave Edwards

# The **FIRMINATOR**

By Ranew's Outdoor Equipment®

## MAKE FOOD PLOTS EASY.



G3 MODEL

RT MODEL



### RT MODEL & G3 MODEL

Ranew's Outdoor Equipment offers the ideal equipment to make food plot planting easier and more effective. The Firminator is the best all-around equipment for hunting food plots and deer management. Ranew's is ready to serve all hunting and agriculture needs across the USA and abroad.

THEFIRMINATOR.COM

**MADE IN AMERICA.  
BUILT TO LAST.**

678.544.4400  
WYANCY@RANEWS.COM



## Earl Says...

I don't know what I enjoy better, hunting or the prep work for hunting season. Even with the hot and dry weather, I love being in the seat of a tractor.

It seems the older I get I like doing the management work on our property more than the hunting itself. Experimenting with new seed blends, building shooting houses and everything it takes to improve our habitat is enjoyable. Especially the social aspects involved.

Believe me, all of the folks I deal with on our property our fun to work with and it's unbelievable to me how many other folks are happy to lend a hand. And it never fails. We always end up with some kind of equipment malfunction that makes our planting time seem to double. We need to pay more attention to Dave Edwards when he talks in his *Wildlife Trends Journal* Management Calendar about preventative maintenance in the off season.

Good luck this hunting season and let us know about your successes this year and please be safe.



## Wildlife Trends JOURNAL

P.O. BOX 640596  
PIKE ROAD, ALABAMA 36064  
[www.wildlifetrends.com](http://www.wildlifetrends.com)  
800-441-6826

PUBLISHER/EDITOR  
Andy Whitaker

DESIGN  
Walker360  
2501 East 5th Street  
Montgomery, AL 36107  
(334) 832-4975

### CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS

Dave Edwards  
Dana Johnson  
Brant C. Faircloth  
Wes and Leslie Burger  
Dr. Wes Wood  
Theron Terhune  
Marion Barnes  
Ted DeVos  
Bryan Burhans  
Keith Gauldin  
Rodney Dyer  
Dr. Keith Causey  
Ron Jolly  
Dr. Stephen Ditchkoff  
Tes Randle Jolly  
Kevin Patterson  
Ryan Basinger  
G. Ryan Shurette  
D. Clay Sisson  
Kent Kammermeyer  
Allen Deese  
Scott Brown  
Dr. Larry W. Varner  
Jason R. Snavelly  
Steve Tillmann  
Mark Thomas

For Wildlife Trends editorial,  
advertising, or change of address:  
1-800-441-6826  
[info@wildlifetrends.com](mailto:info@wildlifetrends.com)

Wildlife Trends Journal is published to provide landowners, land managers and wildlife enthusiasts the latest research-based information in wildlife and game management. Article authors are carefully selected for specific expertise in their respective fields. Subscribers receive six bi-monthly issues and a handsome library binder to save their past issues.

Articles may be reprinted with the permission of Wildlife Trends editorial staff.

# Creating Duck Hunting Opportunities – It’s Easier than You May Think

By 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.

## Introduction

Historically, migrating and wintering waterfowl in the Mississippi and Atlantic flyways depended primarily on acorns found in extensive hardwood bottomlands to meet their nutritional needs. As acorn producing forests were cleared, waterfowl began feeding in croplands planted in small grains. Although waterfowl have adjusted their feeding behavior to the loss of forested wetlands, their long-term well-being depends upon continued flooding of the remaining agricultural and natural wetlands. Today, many landowners in the South create and manage duck ponds to provide duck hunting opportunities on their property. Landowners who do not duck hunt often create and maintain duck ponds to generate additional revenue through duck hunting leases. Properly managed duck ponds provide excellent duck hunting opportunities and waterfowl with resting and feeding areas

during their fall and spring migrations. Thanks to the availability of extensively flooded wetlands, agricultural crops, and duck ponds, waterfowl survival rates and body weights have increased over the past several years. Consequently, ducks have been returning to the northern breeding grounds in much better condition, resulting in better nesting success, thereby increasing the number of waterfowl flying south in the fall.

## Types of Waterfowl & Their Requirements

Ducks are generally classified into two categories: **dabbling** and **diving ducks**. **Dabbling ducks** (e.g., mallards, gadwalls, blue-winged teal, green-winged teal, northern pintail, American wigeon, northern shoveler, and black duck) can walk well on

land. They “tip up” to feed rather than dive and take off vertically from land or water. Their preferred feeding habitats are flooded (6-12 inches deep) agricultural lands, forested wetlands, freshwater marshes, and rivers. Although wood ducks are considered perching ducks, they share similar habitats and feeding strategies as dabbling ducks. Dabbling ducks eat about 10% of their body weight in



*GTRs or green tree reservoirs are areas of oak forests that are shallowly flooded to provide ducks access to acorns and other food sources.*

food each day. They commonly feed on small grains (e.g., rice, soybean, millet, corn) and utilize seeds and other parts from various native plants and aquatic invertebrates (e.g., snails, crawfish, and insects). Some dabbling ducks, such as gadwall and wigeon, feed primarily on vegetation.

**Diving ducks** (e.g., lesser scaup, ring-necked duck, bufflehead, canvasback, redhead, goldeneye, and ruddy duck) do not walk well on land, normally dive to feed off the bottom or on submerged plants and run along the surface of the water to become airborne. Diving ducks are often congregated in large flocks and frequent lakes, rivers, coastal estuaries, and deep impoundments. Diving ducks eat a variety of aquatic invertebrates (primarily snails and clams), plants, and seeds to meet their nutritional needs. Lesser scaup, goldeneye, ruddy ducks, and bufflehead feed primarily on animal matter (mollusks and crustaceans), while canvasbacks, redheads, and ringed-neck ducks eat more aquatic plant parts. Private landowners usually do not develop habitats specifically for diving ducks because large, deep impoundments are required. However, diving ducks often visit large fishing lakes and duck ponds with open water. Many duck ponds developed for dabbling ducks often have deeper areas that provide suitable habitats for diving ducks.

### **Enhancing Your Property to Benefit Migrating Waterfowl and Create Duck Hunting Opportunities.**

First, let's learn the lingo and the various types of habitats managed for ducks. Wetland areas being managed for waterfowl are often referred to as "duck ponds," "duck impoundments," "WMAs" (waterfowl management areas), or "moist soil areas." The most common



term I've heard used for them is "duck ponds." There are basically three types of duck ponds - flooded agricultural fields, flooded native plant areas (these are commonly called "Moist Soil Impoundments"), and flooded forests which are commonly managed beaver ponds or flooded timber (often referred to as "GTR's" or "Green Tree Reservoirs"). Each type of duck pond is managed differently to produce quality duck habitat and achieve optimal food and cover production for waterfowl and other wildlife. However, one thing that is common among all these types of duck ponds is that they have the ability to hold and manage water levels. Having the ability to manage water levels within a duck pond significantly improves the success of management. Some ponds/wetlands naturally collect rainwater runoff, while other ponds require a water source such as a well to provide adequate water to fill ponds to desired levels. Water levels within a duck pond can be managed with a wide

variety of water control structures such as culverts, flashboard risers, water gates, or simply busting or damming the pond levees.

Waterfowl require several types of habitats and foods to meet their behavioral and nutritional needs during winter. They tend to remain longer in areas with habitat complexes rather than in areas with single habitat types. Ideally, habitat complexes should include:

- Small grain-producing croplands to provide energy-rich food;
- Grassy- weedy wetland areas (Moist Soil Impoundments) with a diversity of water depths and native food plants to provide a nutritionally





*Milletts are a common crop choice in duck ponds because they are hardy and require minimal care.*



*Rice is an excellent crop choice because it tolerates flooding and produces several thousand pounds of seed per acre.*

complete diet of plant and animal foods and

- Forested wetlands (GTRs-flooded oak forests, shrubby swamps, cypress swamps, sloughs, and willow brakes) to provide resting sites and additional foraging areas.

Providing a diversity of habitat types is the key to retaining waterfowl in an area during winter. Properly managing each habitat type can provide excellent duck hunting opportunities and quality wintering habitat for migrating ducks.

### **Flooded Agricultural Crop Management**

Agricultural fields can provide excellent duck hunting opportunities and are important habitat for wintering waterfowl. During the winter, migrating ducks seek out high-carbohydrate foods such as small grains commonly planted in duck ponds (various millets, rice, soybeans, corn, etc.). Carbohydrates help replenish the needed energy and body weight of migrating ducks. One of the benefits of planting agricultural crops in duck ponds is that, if properly

grown, it can produce an abundance of seed that will attract and hold waterfowl in the pond. However, the downfall is that if your crop fails for some reason (insects, disease, etc.), you will be left without an adequate food source to attract ducks. This is one of the reasons it is important to have a diversity of habitats available.

Duck ponds in the Southeast are commonly planted with small grains such as millet, corn, and rice. These plants grow well in this region and are readily eaten by most waterfowl. While ducks readily eat soybeans, they are not recommended for planting in duck ponds due to their quick seed decomposition rate when flooded unless you are managing a complex to increase food diversity and create strategic early-season hunting opportunities (e.g., teal season).

**Milletts** are probably the easiest grain to grow and produce a high yield of seed. Because millets are in the grass family, they are hardy plants and require minimal care. Millets should be planted (either broadcast or drilled) on a well-prepared seedbed for best results. Seeding rates for millets vary

depending on the species being planted and the planting methods used but are typically 20-25 pounds per acre. Most millets cannot establish themselves on a flooded seedbed but can tolerate low flooding after they become established. Japanese millet, however, can be directly broadcasted onto mud flats. Most millets mature (produce seed and are ready for duck consumption) around 60 days after germination. Planting a combination of millets provides a diversity of cover types and seed germination periods. Although browntop millet is commonly planted in wildlife food plots, it is typically not a preferred millet to plant in duck ponds due to its low height, making it susceptible to becoming submerged during flooding.

**Rice** is an excellent crop choice in duck ponds because it tolerates flooding, produces several thousand pounds of seed per acre, and its seeds have a low deterioration rate after flooding. There are basically three seeding options for rice: broadcasting directly into water, onto mud flats, or onto dry ground. Of course, if a pond is dry enough, rice can be drilled into the soil like other crops. To ensure maximum

seed production, rice should only be planted in areas where irrigation or low flooding is possible. Dry ground seeding can be done if you do not have the ability to flood, but your success will be dependent on rain. Preparing a clean seedbed is not as critical when planting rice. If possible, mowing some areas in the pond and scratching or lightly harrowing the ground to 1-2" deep before seeding can enhance germination. The remaining vegetation from last season will hold the seed in place until it pegs down (root attachment to soil). Duck ponds planted this way must be tilled or heavily disked every 4-6 years to loosen the topsoil.

that is being planted on dry ground. Apply dry seed on dry ground, and then irrigate or flush the field with water. Applying 100 lbs./ acre of rice seed is a common seeding rate. If water is >6" deep, increase seeding rate. Deeper water results in lower germination rates. After seeding of dry ground, the field should be shallowly flooded (2-4") for 7-10 days, then drained. Re-flooding that is done for commercial rice production after plants reach 5-7" is not necessary. However, reflooding at this stage will help reduce weed competition which will reduce competition for resources and enhance rice growth and seed production. Rice averages

and more seed production than long-grain rice. When given a choice, ducks prefer medium-grain rice over long-grain rice. Common varieties of rice include Bengal, Mars, and Earl. One of the benefits of using Mars is that it has the best lodging potential (will fall over), making seeds more available to ducks. Of course, there are many commercially available rice blends for duck ponds from prominent wildlife food plot companies. Similar to planting food plots for deer, maintaining the proper pH (by liming) is important and increases plant growth.

### **Moist Soil Units or Natural Areas**

Although landowners frequently plant agricultural crops to attract ducks, small grains do not provide a nutritionally complete diet for waterfowl. Grassy-weedy areas are important because native plants, such as grasses, sedges, and smartweeds, supply essential nutrients. Natural areas usually provide a greater diversity of food than croplands. Also, natural areas often have a greater interspersion of open water, weedy areas, and cover. These areas are important for social interaction and provide cover, isolation, and loafing sites. Natural areas are productive because native plants are adapted to flooding and drought, are less frequently damaged by insects, and usually produce two to three seed crops annually. In the spring, these areas also harbor greater densities of invertebrates than permanently flooded habitats. Invertebrates are important to wintering ducks, especially molting females in preparation for reproduction.

The two most important factors to consider when managing native plants adapted to wet sites are the timing of the annual drawdown in the spring or early summer and the



*Good close up shot of rice seed*

For water seeding rice, the water depth should be 2-4". Seed should be soaked in a burlap bag for 24 hours, drained for 24 hours, then broadcasted or planted onto mud flats or shallowly flooded fields. If planting in flooded conditions, pre-soaking seed before planting enhances seed survival in flooded conditions and accelerates and improves seedling establishment. However, do not plant soaked seed

115-120 days to maturity. Rice is a hardy species that will tolerate harsh conditions once pegged down. If possible, maintaining 2-4" of water on the rice will ensure adequate water for the crop while reducing weed competition through the growing period.

There are many varieties of rice seeds available. Medium-grain rice varieties have better seeding vigor



*Flooded natural wetland areas offer ducks a diversity of food and cover habitats.*

period of time between site disturbance (mowing, disking, burning, etc.). Mid-late spring season drawdowns generally favor grasses such as millets. Total seed production, however, is generally greater when impoundments are drained in early to mid-season. Early drawdowns occur during the first 45 days of the growing season, mid-season drawdowns occur during the second 45 days of the growing season, and late drawdowns occur within the remaining growing season. The first day of the growing season starts after the average last day of frost in your area.

Slow drawdowns (2-4 weeks) typically produce diverse vegetative cover, while fast drawdowns (less than 2 weeks) are more likely to result in a stand of similar vegetation. Thus, slow drawdowns, starting early in the growing season, are recommended for optimal waterfowl habitat.

For maximum seed production, native plant communities must be maintained in an early successional

stage. Succession is the replacement of one plant community by another. For example, an early successional stage would be a clear-cut, and a late successional stage would be a mature forest. The percentage of nonfood-producing plant species generally increases each consecutive year when an area is not disturbed. Disturbances can be disking, burning, or mowing the duck pond. Natural areas should be monitored regularly for undesirable weeds, such as cocklebur and coffee-weed. These species can quickly develop a closed canopy and out-compete desirable plants. Small patches of these weeds (say, areas comprising less than

10% of the pond) can be left as they provide beneficial cover for waterfowl and hunting. If the undesirable weed species invade 50% of the area, they should be controlled with herbicides.

### **Nest Boxes for Wood Ducks**

Regardless of whether your property is in the heart of a migratory flyway or not, wood ducks are a species of waterfowl that any landowner with wetlands, ponds, impoundments, rivers, or creeks can manage for. Wood ducks live year-round in the Southeast and are among the most recognizable birds in the United States. In the summer months, many migrate north to cooler climates. However, many wood ducks are residential (i.e., they do not migrate) and can be seen in every state east of the Rocky Mountains throughout the year. They prefer areas with a mix of wetland habitats and forests.



*Installing nest boxes is a great way to benefit wood duck production.*



Besides managing duck pond/wetland areas for food and cover, installing wood duck nest boxes is a great way to increase their use of these areas. Wood ducks are cavity nesters. This means they make their nest and lay eggs in the cavities of older trees. These cavities are normally formed when a limb on a mature tree has died and fallen off. Unfortunately, fewer and fewer mature, cavity-prone hardwood trees exist due to timber harvest and natural dying. Fortunately, wood ducks readily nest in artificial nesting structures. Properly built, located, and maintained nest boxes can effectively increase wood duck production.

Few nesting boxes will be used by ducks the first 2-3 years after nesting boxes are erected. However, with time, more boxes will be utilized by wood ducks. Wood ducks have a strong tendency to return to the vicinity where they were hatched to nest. Nesting boxes should be placed in conspicuous areas near suitable brood rearing habitat to begin with. As wood ducks find and use the boxes, they should be placed in less conspicuous areas to avoid dump nesting by other ducks, such as mergansers. Adequate protective cover near nest boxes is essential for brood survival. Brood habitat should include a stable water source with plenty of shrubs and emergent vegetation for food and cover.

New boxes should be erected before the nesting season (February – April). Nest boxes can be erected on standing trees near a water source or on a pole. Boxes should be at least 6 feet above the water level. Place approximately 4” of nesting material (sawdust or wood shavings) in the bottom of the box. Nesting boxes should be checked annually during late January or February. Old nesting



material should be removed and replaced. Recheck wood duck boxes in early summer to determine wood duck use. Caution should be used when opening the top of a wood duck box. Many other animals will use the nest boxes and may be present when you check the box. Animals commonly using the boxes include gray squirrels, flying squirrels, screech owls, and rat snakes. A small hand gardening rake is very useful for removing squirrel nests. I recommend numbering each box and keeping records of its maintenance and use. This will help you keep track of which boxes are most productive and which ones may need to be relocated to improve use.

### **Conclusion**

Managing your property for waterfowl can be both enjoyable and rewarding. It is important to note that having a floodable impoundment on your property is not a requirement to manage for waterfowl habitat. There are many other opportunities available to enhance waterfowl habitat and duck hunting. Most properties have some type of wetland, such as a small lake, swamp, creek, beaver pond, or areas that flood seasonally. With

some effort, most wetlands can be manipulated and managed to enhance waterfowl habitat and benefit ducks. With proper management, these areas will provide excellent duck hunting opportunities as well as provide wintering ducks with the nutritionally balanced food supply needed for migration. By understanding the diverse needs of various waterfowl species and implementing effective habitat management strategies to meet these needs, landowners, and hunters can contribute to the conservation and well-being of waterfowl populations. These efforts ultimately support the survival of waterfowl and provide opportunities for sustainable hunting and wildlife viewing. I am a life-long hunter who has chased most wildlife species that have a hunting season. The experience of duck hunting, in particular, played a significant role in shaping my career path as a wildlife biologist. There's simply nothing quite like working a flock of ducks that begin circling and descending from the sky, gracefully landing in the decoys with their feet down and toes up.

# Fall and Winter Lake Work

By Scott Brown



Scott Brown is a Biologist and regular contributor to Wildlife Trends Journal with over 35 years experience in research and managing natural resources throughout the Southeast. Scott founded Southern Sportsman Aquatics & Land Management in 2007 and now has clients from Texas to Florida and into the Carolinas. Contact him at [tazmanlabs1@gmail.com](mailto:tazmanlabs1@gmail.com) or 336-941-9056.

*Fall is a good time to have a follow-up or first-time electrofishing survey of your fish population.*

**T**here are plenty of tasks to do in the fall and winter in and around your lake. Most pond owner's minds are on hunting, holidays, watching football and indoor activities during the fall and winter. There are many things you can be doing as a pond manager during these times, and getting wet is not one of them.

Reduce or stop supplemental feeding, and repair or clean fish feeders if water temperatures get below 55o F. If continued cold weather feeding is desired, switch to feeding once per day during the warmest time (2-3 PM), in about 4-6 feet deep water. During fall there may be oxygen present deeper, but the

water may be a little warmer than the surface. In winter, do not dispense feed any deeper, as the dissolved oxygen may be zero at greater depths and fish may not consume it. Feed has a lot of dust and cleaning feeders with a hose or blower can remove the dust and enhance operation next spring. Oil any moving parts that can be oiled. Batteries should be slow charged when pulled and stored at room temperature. Batteries can also be disconnected from timer and motor and left in feeders when connected to a trickle charge solar panel, if winter temperatures are mild. For areas with colder winters, pulling out the batteries is advised.

Stop fertilizing or dyeing lakes when water temperatures get below 70o F. Once water temperatures drop below 60o F planktonic algae growth slows along with most vegetation. In areas with mild winters, this needs to be monitored closely as to not have an explosion of undesirable submerged vegetation growth in late fall or early spring resulting in excessive submerged vegetation being fertilized without an algae bloom shading it out.

If needed, add agricultural lime in late fall so the pH comes up slowly over the winter and aids in vegetation growth or an algae bloom next spring. We recommend one-to-two tons of agricultural lime per acre to

raise the pH one point. For example, if you have a four-acre pond, that needs the pH raised from a 5.0 to 7.0, add 8 - 16 tons (depending on the influences) to achieve a proper pH to start a fertilization program. You should have both the water and surrounding soil sampled and tested for pH before determining the proper amount of lime to apply. Your Pond Manager or County Extension Agent can help you determine how much lime, if any, is needed.

Fountains and aeration systems can be installed or routine maintenance performed without having a great effect on the water quality. Fountains can develop calcium build up on the heads creating an undesirable flow pattern or creating unnecessary pressure built up on the pump. Aeration stones can also become clogged with muck and calcium build up reducing air flow and putting added pressure on the pump. These types of cleaning projects can be done with Muriatic Acid on site or by taking to the barn or garage and replacing when finished. Some aeration systems have air filters and/or carbon veins that occasionally need replacing. When turning a bottom drawing fountain or aeration system that has been off for a week or more back on, or a new install for the first time, follow the manufacturer's start-up procedure to eliminate water quality issues or cause a fish kill is advised. Doing as prescribed does take a few days, but with an established fish population, it is better safe than sorry. We do know landowners that killed their own fish populations by cutting corners and not following the normal start-up procedure in the summer. First day run two hours. Second day four hours. Third day eight hours, etc. until it's running 24/7.

Depending how far south you reside, you may be able to add additional forage or stock forage in a new lake in fall or early winter. As far north as Atlanta, we have stocked 2" forage in early October, 1-2" and largemouth bass the following June. We documented 9" bluegill and 7.5-inch largemouth bass by mid-September. Proper feeding of forage and good habitat blew everything up prior to the bass going in, and once they hit, they were on full feed, which equates to maximum growth rates. In some situations, fall stocking of threadfin shad may get you a spawn shortly after stocking, giving you a double stocking for the price of one load. This doesn't happen every time, but it has, and it greatly benefits the predators, particularly the largemouth bass, black crappie and striped bass hybrids. Those wanting to stock trout or perch, knowing they will perish next spring, will stock those in the fall. These species are added for a high protein winter food for largemouth bass. They go in fall, and will perish by late spring, but during the winter, if it is not too cold, bass will consume them and continue to grow when normally their growth slows. If these species are on feed all winter, they can be harvested in spring for human consumption as opposed to allowing the uneaten ones to go to waste and die naturally.

Removing small largemouth bass in the fall by hook-and-line or electro-

fishing is more successful than summer or hard winter. Bass tend to bite well with cooler temperatures, after a hot summer of possibly not feeding as much during the summer, so they are hungry. Numbers of bass needing removed is a constant, and most lake owners rarely reach the target number, but any removal is better than no removal of small bass.

Using herbicides in fall can help prep for spring. Knock back the



*Early fall stocking of forage fish can benefit the predator population such as largemouth bass, crappie or striped bass hybrids. Occasionally a fall stocking of threadfin shad results in a fall or early spring spawn, which can double your numbers for the same price. Photo Credit: Brian Outz.*

nuisance vegetation in fall when water temperatures are lower and there is a low chance of a fish kill. Reducing certain species in fall will make for fewer plants in the spring. Know your plants and your herbicides to get the most of your dollars being sprayed. A fall treatment of Hydrilla with a slow release Fluridone (Sonar) based herbicide can eliminate all of it by next summer.



*Removing small bass is easier in the spring and fall. Invite friends over, have a fish fry, youth bass clubs are always willing to fish a good lake in exchange for removing small bass.*

Mechanically removing (with machinery or by hand) dead aquatic vegetation that has either become dormant or was left from a fall herbicide treatment reduces its presence in the spring, and reduces the amount of nutrients released into the water and organic material building up on the bottom.

Organic build up can contribute to excessive planktonic algae blooms (green water) or filamentous algae growth (green slime on bottom or floating).

Fall is a good time to have an electrofishing survey done to evaluate a waterbody. Spring is the best, but fall is almost as good. If additional sampling for species not typically collected during electrofishing such as catfish or crappie is desired by using other techniques. Hoop nets and gill nets during winter months typically collect these species that are not observed in great numbers

during spring or fall electrofishing. As with all fish sampling, check your individual state's regulations prior to starting.

Late fall and winter is a good time to try and remove grass carp. This is not an easy task, but they seem more susceptible to electrofishing and hook and line in the fall and warmer winter days. There is less vegetation for them to eat and cold air temperatures may have them deeper, so they are hungry and may be caught on hook-and-line or trotlines.

Mowing or using a weed eater along the pond shoreline

during late winter just prior to green-up is advised to expose plants to sunlight and promote growth. Do not perform this until just

before the growing season starts to help prevent erosion. If done in fall or early winter, the soil is exposed for long periods of time and unnecessary washing of bank sediment could occur. You can also mark areas where you want vegetation to remain short for bank anglers to have access. Throughout the year, come back and periodically mow to keep bank angling access points open. Treating problematic cattails in the fall with a systemic herbicide followed by mowing in winter, then treating with herbicides again in early spring as shoots begin to appear is a good technique for eliminating cattail growth. Be careful not to mow any desirable or recently planted trees.

Planting trees should always be done in late winter just prior to the growing season. Order trees in the fall so yours are secure and they get delivered just before planting. In and around the lake consider hibiscus, red maple, and cypress. These can provide habitat for fish and wildlife, shade for anglers and aesthetics to the lake. When planting cypress in water, make sure all the branches when it greens up are



*Fall and winter are a great time to add offshore habitat, whether natural or artificial materials.*

above the waterline. Also, stake all trees planted in the water, as their first year the trunks are very flexible due to the water intake. After two growing seasons, the stakes can be removed. Plant accordingly to the trees' needs and tolerances to the current and predicted water levels. A must is the use of predator guards on newly planted trees around or in a lake. Protecting the young trees from something that you do not think is there (beaver, muskrat, nutria) is better than not protecting them from the beaver that is there. Beavers will destroy trees both along the shore and in 2-4 feet deep water. Consider planting soft and hard mast trees around your water body. This provides additional food for wildlife including deer and turkey, while adding to the pond aesthetics.

Trim any trees both around the pond and on the property that either needs it for shaping/control, or to promote fruit or nut growth during the upcoming growing season. All trees can benefit from various kinds of pruning. Check the literature for the types of trees you have for trimming and trimming techniques to achieve the greatest benefit. Willows and wax myrtles can become invasive, but if you want to keep them around your pond, they need to be constantly trimmed and surrounding upcoming shoots cut at the ground or below. Also, thinning trees around and in the pond should be done. Where multiple individuals of desirable species are, thin them to improve growth of remaining trees. Hack and squirt larger undesirable trees, in fall, to kill and prevent their spreading. We recommend Garlon 3A for this. It might be a little slower than some of the other herbicide choices, but there is no collateral damage to nearby trees not the target. Garlon 3A also does not jump from differ-



*A quality fishery is not achieved by part time management. Fish management is an all-year job or hobby, depending on how you look at it.*

ent species where roots are intertwined underground. It is not uncommon to hack-and-squirt a sweetgum next to a pine or oak, and only the sweetgum dies. This is

not the case with many other quicker acting woody vegetation herbicides.



*Planting trees in and around your lake is most successful in late winter. For trees near or in the waterbody, use tree guards in case beavers show up, better safe than sorry.*

Having a commercial company build a dock is best done in winter especially if the company is jetting in poles and does not need to enter the cold water. Your activity around your pond is probably reduced and the dock will be complete before spring when you start using your pond more frequently. A feeder can also be added to your dock and turned on in the spring. Brush or artificial material can be placed back under the dock to attract and hold fish.

Winter is the best time to conduct a draw down. Draw downs can be used to improve bottom sediment, kill vegetation, reduce surface acreage for a large-scale herbicide treat-

ment in spring or to conduct repairs to dam or outflow structures. A lake with high organic buildup (muck) on the bottom can greatly benefit from either exposing the bottom to dry up organics or drawing down and scraping and removing organics completely while increasing lake depth. Draining a pond down to expose submerged vegetation to cold temperatures to kill it, slow its growth, and reduce coverage in the spring when the water comes up, which reduces herbicide costs for habitual plants being treated constantly. If a large treatment with an expensive herbicide is planned, drawing a pond down to reduce the acreage and



*Winter is a good time to remove unwanted grass carp. There is less vegetation for them to feed on, so electrofishing and hook-and-line (rod-and-reel or trotline) is more successful than other times of the year.*

amount of herbicide required saves money and improves the treatment by keeping a higher concentration of herbicide on the plant for a longer period of time. This technique is frequently used with a Fluridone (Sonar) treatment. Should repairs be needed to a leaking dam or repair/replace an outflow structure, completing during winter so restocking (if needed) can commence in the spring as it fills up helps expedite the process.

During winter, meet with your pond manager to strategize about what has been working, what has not, and budget for the upcoming year. Has the management plan and implemented techniques improved the fishery and is it to your expectations, and/or achieving your goals and objectives? Have things been prescribed that have not been performed or performed

incorrectly that were not beneficial or detrimental to success? If your pond manager is responsible for everything, then success and failure lies upon him. If you or your staff are supposed to execute the strategy, work closely with the Pond Manager to assure you implement techniques properly and in a timely manner. During these meetings, both the Pond Manager and Landowner/Land Manager need to be open to criticism and prepared to change things to reach the set goals.

Cleaning out or installing new wood duck nesting boxes should be done in early winter. That reduces any chance of wasps or snakes occupying the boxes, and will have them up and ready when wood ducks start searching for adequate nesting cavities in mid to late winter. Annually remove old nesting material and replace with fresh cedar shavings or saw dust. Use predator guards on nesting boxes lower than 10 feet off the ground where feasible. Make sure the inside wall below the opening has adequate roughness for ducklings to climb out when leaving the nest. Also, assure when placing new boxes there will be adequate cover from the nest to the water for ducklings. If no activity has occurred in boxes for 2-3 years, moving them to a new location may be necessary.

Fish attractors from artificial materials can be built in the warmth of a garage or barn. Christmas trees can be collected from friends, neighbors or tree lots that didn't sell them all (you may get them for free the day after) and put out when air temperatures are more pleasant to work in. Be sure to place in 6-10 feet of water to assure the dissolved oxygen is acceptable all year around and not place in the 20-30 feet deep holes where lack of DO may prevent fish from using

them certain times of the year.

Enjoy the resource! Try some fall and winter fishing, duck hunting or place a deer stand near the pond. Fishing in the fall and winter can be phenomenal for crappie (if you have them) or large-mouth bass, especially after a long cold stretch followed by a couple Indian Summer days in a row, which triggers fish to feed, since they have been eating very little during cold weather with a slower metabolism. Try fishing mid-day when not on the deer stand, its relaxing and usually turns into a friendly competition with your hunting buddies.



*Winterizing in late fall and servicing in late winter keeps batteries fresh and everything working smoothly during the upcoming year.*



*Enjoy your lake(s)! Fish, shoot a couple wood ducks, mallards or resident geese. Usually, the effort is minimal and the peaceful time well spent with family, friends or your hunting dog is well worth it.*

# Wild Turkey Conservation Made Simple

THE SEARCH FOR SOLUTIONS TO POPULATION DECLINES

By Ron Jolly



Ron Jolly (ronjolly22952@mindspring.com) is an award-winning outdoor writer and video producer living with his wife, Tes, on their farm near Tuskegee, Alabama. Tes (www.jollysoutddorvisions.com) is herself an award-winning writer and outdoor photographer. You've seen lots of her work in past issues of *Wildlife Trends Journal*.

*Photos by Ron and Tes Jolly*

**N**oted wild turkey historian and author, Brent Rogers, via a Niche To Meet You Podcast in September, 2024: “When Christopher Columbus landed in what is now known as America in 1492, it is speculated there were ten million wild turkeys on the landscape. In the 1520’s Spanish explorers discovered the Inca and Aztec civilizations had domesticated wild turkeys and some of these domesticated birds were transported

back to Europe. Turkeys were vital to the diet and culture of almost all native American tribes.”

Fast forward 400 years to the early 1900’s. The speculated ten million birds had dwindled to an estimated 30,000. This tragic, almost fatal decline can be attributed to unregulated subsistence and market hunting where harvested animals and birds were sold to the public or consumed as a food source. Very few laws existed to protect wild turkeys, bison, white tailed deer,

waterfowl and other game species. The combination of these circumstances almost led to the extinction of several species including the wild turkey. It did lead to the extinction of species such as the passenger pigeon. In the early 1900’s, concerned hunters banded together and lobbied to prevent the total destruction of these species by bringing attention to the dire circumstances facing all wildlife in America.



In 1900, Iowa Republican John F. Lacy introduced the Lacy Act of 1900 which outlawed market hunting by prohibiting the transportation of illegally harvested game animals across state lines. This legislation was later signed into law by President William McKinley.

Then, on September 2, 1937, president Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Federal Aid in Wildlife Act and it went into effect on July 1 the following year. Better known as the Pittman/Robertson Act for its sponsors, Senator Key Pittman of Nevada and Congressman Absolam Willis Robertson of Virginia, the act imposes an 11% sales tax on firearms, ammunition and archery equipment and distributes the proceeds to state governments for wildlife projects.

Vital funding generated by the Pittman/Robertson Act allowed the creation of state wildlife agencies. State agencies and legislatures worked to create and adopt effective laws and funded the creation of enforcement divisions within the agencies. This marked the beginning of modern wildlife conservation.

In 1959 the first Wild Turkey Symposium was held in Memphis, Tennessee. At this symposium, turkey experts from across the country shared and discussed the situations and circumstances facing wild turkeys and began to formulate possibilities of restoring turkeys to healthy populations across the land. It would be a daunting task.

### **Restoration**

Logically, the task of restoring wild turkeys fell on state agencies. The experimental methods first employed, however, were untried and relied on trial and error. Error was predominant in the early going. One such error was baiting turkeys



*Young-of-year poults are hard to distinguish from adult hens by fall. Juvenile turkeys that survive until fall have far greater chances of reaching maturity.*  
Photo: Ron Jolly

with corn laced with an oral anesthetic alpha-chloralose. Another chemical used was tribromoethanol. Various dosages and delivery methods were tried and eventually a faster acting drug called methoxy-mol was used. In summary, this method proved to be ineffective and often fatal to turkeys and other wildlife.

Another idea was to introduce pen-raised turkeys into the wild. This proved to be a miserable failure. Turkeys raised by humans from poults imprinted on humans and did not develop the characteristics necessary to survive in the wild. They were easy prey for predators and hunters and resulted in universal failure.

“In 1948 H. H. Dill and W. H. Thornsberry invented a cannon net that could be fired over and capture flocks of birds. In 1951 Herman ‘Duff’ Holbrook captured the first flock of wild turkeys in South Carolina. News of his success spread and soon cannon netting turkeys became the go-to method for capturing wild turkeys. Captured birds were released into

suitable habitat void of wild turkeys. By 1958, twenty states with wild turkey populations had a stated turkey season. In 1959 there were an estimated 320,000 turkeys in the United States and 31 states were participating in wild turkey restoration. At that first symposium in Memphis, it was decided that, “introduction of penned raised turkeys was a failure and trapping and relocating wild birds was the future of the restoration effort,” said Brent Rogers, author of the book *Yelp & Gobble, Inc.*

“In 1973 the wild turkey population is estimated to be 1.3 million and Tom Rogers, no relation to Brent, founded the National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTf) as a conservation group to support wild turkeys. The organization brought much needed attention to the restoration and management efforts of the states and galvanized hunters and conservation enthusiasts in support of wild turkey conservation. By the late 1980’s, 47 states had turkey populations and in 1991, for the first time ever, 49 states had turkey populations with Alaska being the exception, all due



*Habitat rich in insects and seed producing plants and grasses are vital to poult rearing success.*

*Photo: Ron Jolly*

to the efforts of state agencies and the success of trap and relocate efforts.”

In 2001 the NWTf announced that turkeys had been reintroduced or expanded into every available suitable habitat in the United States and declared *Mission Accomplished*. At that time there were an estimated 5.5 million turkeys on the landscape in the United States.

### **Warning Signs**

The restoration of the wild turkey is perhaps the greatest success story in the history of conservation in the United States. From an estimated low of 30,000 birds in the late 1920's to the high of 7 million birds in 2017, two and a half million turkey hunters today, seasons in 49 states and an entire industry created to support those hunters are all testaments to the success of wild turkey restoration, management and conservation.

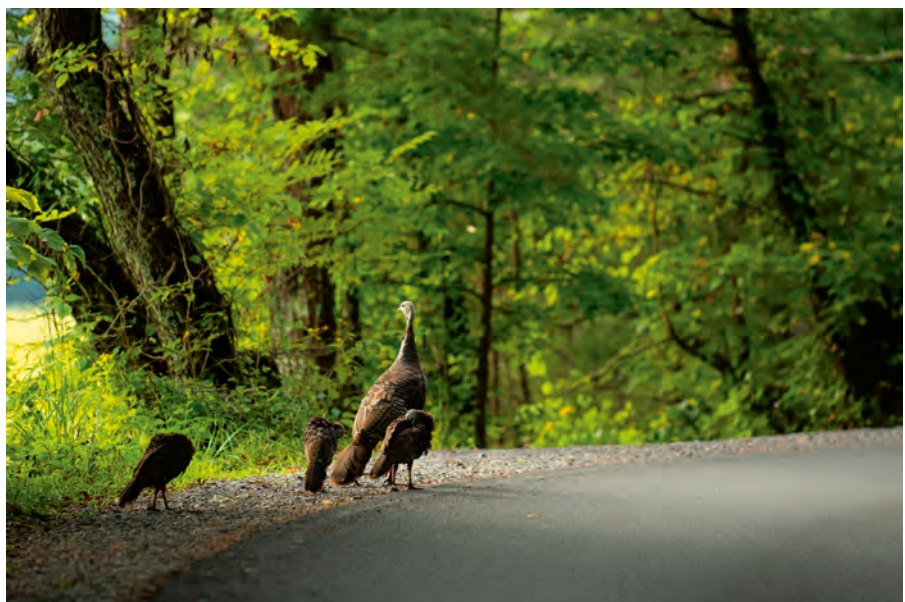
However, in 2008 the first red flag was raised. Despite estimates of wild turkey population levels, some agency biologists and researchers began discussing possible popula-

tion declines and productivity based on data collected in the southeastern and eastern United States. In 2010 at a meeting in Florida, agency biologists representing states throughout the southeastern United States agreed that research was warranted to determine magnitude and severity of the apparent decline in production and recruitment of wild turkeys throughout the region.

In 2019 the population estimate was 6.9 million birds, but behind the scenes, especially in the southeastern United States, there was a growing rumble of population decline by hunters, land owners and private land managers. Habitat loss, fragmentation of the landscape, feral hogs, disease, predators and nest predation were hot topics in this growing concern of population decline. Most of these concerns were dismissed by the experts as natural ebb and flow cycles of ground nesting birds. In 2021 hunters stood up again to demand solutions and Turkeys For Tomorrow was founded as a conservation organization dedicated to identifying the cause and reverse the decline of wild turkeys across the country.

### **Simple Solutions**

The mission statement of Turkeys For Tomorrow, (TFT), is simple and succinct, *We will save wild turkeys with science-based solutions for long term sustainability*. In efforts to accomplish that goal, TFT and its partners are currently funding research projects in Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, Kentucky and Iowa.



*It is estimated that two poults per hen on average are needed to maintain the turkey population year to year.*

*Photo: Ron Jolly*

Five additional projects will be launched in Alabama, Texas, Tennessee, Florida and the Mississippi River Deltas of Arkansas, Mississippi and Louisiana in 2025. Each of these projects are long term studies to better understand concerns such as fertility, disease, predation and habitat.

In an effort to better disseminate information gleaned from the research TFT sponsored, the *Wild Turkey Science Podcast* hosted by Dr. Marcus Lashley, Professor of Wildlife Ecology at the University of Florida and Dr. Will Gulsby, Professor of Wildlife Ecology and Management at Auburn University. The idea is to translate the gobble-dygoon of a peer reviewed study paper into plain speak language the common hunter, land owner or manager, or as we refer to them Citizen Scientists, can understand. As TFT founding member and Chief Operating Officer Kevin Matthews says, “we want to put it where the goats can reach it!”. To date there are 96 episodes and there have been over 600,000 downloads that provide listeners valuable answers and information about wild turkeys and what they need to thrive.

Jason Lupardus has a Masters Degree in wildlife biology and forestry from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. He also serves as Chief Executive Officer of TFT. “One of the huge issues we face as turkey managers is, how do you manage something when you really don’t know how many of them are on the landscape? Throughout this article you will see the word estimated time and again. We really don’t know how many turkeys are on the landscape. State agencies do annual surveys and plug that information into a formula to come up with estimated (there’s that word again), numbers



*There is a brotherhood in the fraternity called turkey hunting and we all want turkeys around for future generations.*

of turkeys in the population. Decisions such as season dates, harvest quotas and limits are based on that number. In reality it’s an educated guess, and we only look at trend data year to year based on harvest,” said Lupardus.

“We estimate that only 25% of hens are successful at nesting. Successful means they hatch at least 1 poult. We estimate that for the population to remain stable we need an average of 1 hen to 2 poults to be recruited into the fall flock. In recent years, surveys are

indicating an average less than the 1:2 ratio, which is indicative of a declining population. What can we do to change that? First, do everything you can to improve your habitat, especially brood and nesting range. Second, where legal, trap or manage intensively for predators such as bobcats, coyotes, raccoons, opossums and skunks the month prior to average nest initiation in your area. This has proven to provide up to a 15% increase in production of waterfowl and quail. Second, don’t mow until July to protect nests and young poults



Where legal, manage nest predators such as raccoons, opossums and skunks by intensively trapping the month prior to average nest initiation. This has proven to provide up to a 15% increase in nesting success.

Photo: Tes Randle Jolly

within the two-week post-hatch stage. In a study by Dr Craig Harper, Professor of Wildlife and Management and Dr Dave Buehler, Professor of Wildlife Science, with the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, 12% of identified turkey nests in the study area were destroyed before hatched by mowing. It is a well known fact that at approximately two-week-old turkey poults are able to flutter off the ground onto low limbs and are more thermo regulated and protected from weather due to having actual feathers. Survival for poults reaching this age goes up dramatically,” said Lupardus.

Previously, the term *Citizen Scientists* was mentioned. Turkeys For Tomorrow wants to share ownership to solving the many issues facing wild turkeys with those who care about them most—hunters! It was hunters that funded the efforts to bring them back from the brink of extinction to today’s population levels. Collaboration with other organizations like the Alabama and Tennessee Wildlife Federations,

state agencies, universities and independent biologists streamline the effort to unite everyone who is concerned and willing to help.

Jason Lupardus—“Nobody knows more about what is happening on your dirt than you and nobody is more willing to do the work that it



State agencies, funded by hunter dollars, were responsible for the highly successful wild turkey restoration programs that brought them back from the brink of extinction.

Photo: Tes Randle Jolly

will take to reverse the downward trend in wild turkey populations. You may say that you don’t manage or own enough land to make a difference but that’s not true. Imagine partnering with your neighbor, then another neighbor,



Prescribed fire is an excellent management tool that promotes plant communities beneficial to wild turkeys.

Photo: Tes Randle Jolly

then their neighbors and adopting self-imposed rules and methods to improve habitat, manage predators and voluntarily limit harvest on these combined properties. We call them *private land cooperatives*. TFT believes these *private land cooperatives* can become *turkey incubators* and facilitate the recruitment of more turkeys onto the landscape. After all, it's a proven model. The Quality Deer Management Association implemented a similar plan for white tailed deer. Look at how the deer hunting culture has changed in the last twenty years. We need to influence changes in the turkey hunting and management world. If we can do that, we can reverse the downward trend in wild turkey populations and hopefully secure the future of these majestic birds and the sport of hunting them. I think all turkey

hunters can buy into that. After all, we are all it for the same reason. We all want turkeys around for future generations, and we shall not have a silent spring. There is a brotherhood in the fraternity called turkey hunters. In no other aspect

of hunting, any game animal or bird, is that kinship so evident. The founders of Turkeys For Tomorrow have said from the beginning, *If turkey hunters don't do this who will? If not you, who?*"

### Author's Note

I would like to acknowledge the help of Wild Turkey historian Brent Rogers in writing this story. His research and input proved invaluable by providing estimated information that, to the best of everyone's ability, support points made with the best data available. His book, *Yelp & Gobble, Inc.* is available on Amazon and signed copies can be ordered by calling Brent at 641-777-2467 or email him at roglodge4@hotmail.com.

I would also like to thank Dr. Will Gulsby, Dr. Marcus Lashley and the NRU podcast network for their outstanding work with the Wild Turkey Science Podcast. We truly believe the knowledge and lessons gleaned from wild turkey research from decades ago until today are available *where the goats can reach it!*

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

— Will Primos



**For signed or inscribed copies send check or money order for \$30 to:  
Jolly's Outdoor Visions, 204 Fast Lane, Tuskegee, AL 36083  
Be sure to state how you want each book signed.**

*You can also purchase the book online at Amazon with free shipping by searching: Memories of Spring*



# Woodland Mulching: It Can Be Addictive!

Land Clearing- Logging Clean-up - Firelanes - Roads  
call us at **334-269-2224**



**Bach & DeVos** operates two woodland mulchers/grinders on forestry based carriers.

Other services include timber sales, forestry/wildlife plans, burning, site preparation and planting, GPS and mapping, land sales.

**We are a full service lake and land management company with over 60 years combined experience researching and managing natural resources throughout the southeast. We offer high quality service and proven products to help you achieve your fish and wildlife management goals.**

Visit us on the Web:  
[southernsportsmanaquaticsandland.com](http://southernsportsmanaquaticsandland.com)



**“Creating quality fish & wildlife habitat from Texas to Florida”**

North Carolina: Scott Brown  
(336) 941-9056

Florida: Steve Lopez  
(904) 484-6773

**WHEN A PASTIME  
BECOMES A PASSION.  
SOME DON'T GET IT, BUT WE DO.**

Looking for your own place to hunt, fish, enjoy 4-wheeling—even a building site for a cabin or home? Alabama Ag Credit is the original land lender and your local expert in recreational real estate financing. We understand the unique requirements of long-term rural real estate lending, and can custom build loan packages with competitive rates and flexible terms. So you can enjoy the great outdoors for years to come!



**AlabamaAgCredit.com**  
**Call 800.579.5471**



# Wildlife Trends Journal Management Calendar

By 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](mailto:TallTinesConsulting@gmail.com) or 912-464-9328.

---

*Harvesting an adequate number of deer each year is essential to keep the deer herd and habitat healthy.*

## **Keep disturbances on your hunting property to a minimum**

**W**hile many things need to be done on a hunting property during early fall (like activities included in this calendar), minimizing seasonal disturbances on the property before and during hunting season will result in better hunting experiences. By seasonal, I am referring to disturbances that do not happen throughout the year or disturbances that deer are used to, such as tractors performing routine work. Human activity significantly increases on most properties before

and during hunting season. These activities may include things such as UTV or 4-wheeler action, joyriding, full-scale scouting missions, hunting stand preparations, repeated checking of dove fields or duck ponds, or constantly checking trail cameras. As you would expect, most wildlife responds negatively to excessive or uncommon disturbance. If you are actively managing your property, there are things you must do that will add "disturbance." But if you want to maximize hunting experiences, make efforts to minimize the impact of these disturbances.

## **Coordinate food plot planting with good soil moisture**

October through early November is often the best period to plant fall food plots in the Southeast. The goal is to plant when conditions are favorable for maximum seed germination and plant growth. Do not fall into the trap of planting too early. Unfortunately, many landowners and hunters plant in early-mid September. Some hunters, particularly hunting clubs, even pick a specific weekend that food plots will be planted well ahead of time and do not have any idea of what the soil conditions will be





*Minimizing seasonal disturbances on a property before and during hunting season will result in better hunting experiences.*



*Plant fall food plots under favorable germination and growth conditions, which included good soil moisture and rain in the forecast.*

like....but they plant anyway because “that’s when we plant every year”. This is often a very dry period across the Southeast, which could lead to food plot failure. If planted in September and you are lucky enough to receive adequate rainfall, food plots may grow rapidly, resulting in over-mature (i.e., high/tall) food plots that are less attractive to deer by the time hunting season arrives. If an abundance of acorns are present during this time, plots receive less browsing pressure by deer which allows the plots to grow even more. I commonly get calls from hunters in November asking why deer are not really using their food plots. The most common reason is the crops were planted 2 months ago and the crop/food plot plants are mature, not vigorously growing, and “hardened” up making them less palatable. There are also increased chances of armyworm problems in September when temperatures are warm. In most areas of the Southeast, more consistent rainfall events begin in October as cold fronts push across the South. Planting “later” (meaning in October-November) will also result in young, tender food plots that are extremely attractive to deer and other wildlife during hunting

season. When planted under the right conditions (adequate soil moisture), plots germinate quickly and deer will begin using them within two weeks after planting. My point is not to feel rushed to get seed in the ground. Focus more on planting under favorable conditions. There have been several articles related to food plots and planting strategies in past issues of *Wildlife Trends*. Refer to these articles for more detailed information.

### **Conduct a camera survey to assess the status of your deer herd**

Monitoring the status of a deer herd is the backbone of the success of a deer management program. Collecting and recording harvest data (weights, measurements, ages, etc), hunter observation data (number, sex, and quality of deer you see

while hunting), as well as population surveys provide information about the deer herd that will allow you to make sound deer management decisions and adjustments in strategies where needed to accomplish your goals. Without this information, you are simply guessing. If you are like me, you spend way too much time, money, and energy managing your property to just guess how many and which deer to harvest. I want to know. Conducting a camera survey is the best tool available to assess the status of your deer herd (number of deer, buck quality, fawn recruitment, sex ratio, etc.) and make



*Monitoring the status of a deer herd enables informed harvest decisions and is the backbone of a successful deer management program.*

buck harvest decisions before you head to the woods. The best times of the year to conduct a deer survey is when natural food availability is at its lowest which is generally late summer/early fall and late winter before spring green up. Most managers conduct fall surveys (September through early November) because they also use the photographs to make buck harvest decisions before hunting season. The ideal time to conduct a fall survey is soon after bucks shed velvet but before an abundance of acorns drops.

Regardless of whether you conduct a full-scale survey or simply use cameras to scout, photographs from trail cameras are a great tool to assess buck quality and make buck harvest decisions before the moment of truth in a deer stand. I have seen many young bucks with great potential make it another year because they were placed on a “do not shoot” list that came from a trail camera photo. If you use the trail camera photographs to make buck harvest decisions, they should be deployed in late summer or early fall.

### **Make final equipment and gear preparations for duck season**

Flooding strategies on managed duck ponds should be well underway by early November. Teal are generally the first to arrive in September, followed by the fall migration of other waterfowl in October and November. In most areas, the general duck season opens in November. Outside of managing the water levels and ponds themselves, now is a good time to make final preparations of things related to the hunt itself. There is nothing worse than looking forward to the first duck hunt and, before daylight of opening morning, realizing that your waders

have dry rotted or that your duck blind is full of fire ants! Make preparations now to ensure you are ready to have a fun and successful hunt. While everyone’s situation is different, a few items I recommend checking include waders or rubber boots, boats (lots of things to check here), paddles or push poles, lights, decoys and rigging, obstacles along paths to and from duck hunting blinds, the blinds themselves, platforms for dogs, and shotguns...to name a few. I say all these things from experience!

### **Save leftover seeds from fall food plots**

If you have food plot seed leftover after planting this fall, save it. Some seeds can remain viable for a long time and can be used next year, particularly if it is stored in a dry/cool place (I often store seeds in a walk-in cooler to prevent problems with rats and bugs). When planting time comes around next year, simply conduct an easy germination test to determine if the seed is still good. Take 50 seeds and place them on a moist paper towel in a windowsill that receives sunlight. Monitor and keep the paper towel damp over the next week to 10 days. The number of seeds that germinate will tell you how much of the seed is still viable. If 30 of the 50 seeds germinate, then your germination rate is roughly 60%. Adjust planting rates accordingly to ensure adequate coverage is obtained. If the seed is bad, say only 30% germination, I simply use it to feed birds such as quail, turkeys, and dove. Don’t toss that old seed out – planting old seed can save you money.

### **Record and utilize deer hunting observations**

Quality deer management involves more than producing quality bucks. It should create quality hunting

experiences as well. Collecting hunter observation data (where hunters record the number of deer and quality of deer they see while hunting) allows you to monitor the hunting quality of the property. Adjustments in management and/or hunting strategies can be implemented accordingly to promote better-quality hunting if needed. Additionally, hunter observation data is a great (and cheap) method to help assess some parameters of the deer herd. Although a camera census is, by far, the most accurate way to collect information regarding the deer herd, trends in population parameters such as the adult sex ratio, buck age structure, and fawn recruitment can be monitored through hunter observation data. However, for this data to be meaningful, it must be collected accurately each year to track trends in the data. Hunter observation data is also a good way to assess hunting strategy success. When recording this information, hunters generally record when and where they were hunting (e.g., PM-food plot, AM-woods, AM-clear cut, etc.) and what they saw. When the data is analyzed, it provides insight into which hunting methods and areas are most productive for the property. For example, through hunter observation data collected throughout the season, you may find that hunters saw more mature bucks per hunt in thinned pine stands in the morning versus the afternoon. Thus, you can adjust your hunting strategies to enhance the productivity of your hunting time.

### **Prune and clear hunter access trails to deer stands**

Hunters that consistently experience successful hunts “micromanage” how they navigate a property and their access trails. That is, these trails are pruned and established during the initial setup (which often takes place right after



*Clearing access trails, particularly to food plot stands, is something that needs to be done periodically throughout the season.*

hunting season), but as the season approaches, they take time to prune and completely clear the path of all debris, including leaves. The goal of clearing the path is to remove vegetation that may rub against a hunter walking in or out on the trail (scent management) and provide a silent walking path. Clearing the trail is done with a leaf rake or even a leaf blower. The result is often a bare dirt trail that allows hunters to silently sneak to and from stands. Clearing access trails, particularly to food plot stands, is something that needs to be done periodically throughout the season. When providing hunting guidance to clients, I often describe it this way – if there were 8 deer already on the food plot when you arrived, you should be able to sneak in and slip into the stand undetected. If you can do this, you will apply significantly less disturbance (particularly when leaving a stand at dark with a field full of deer) and will have better hunts throughout the season.



*October is a great time to identify areas needing fire and develop winter prescribed burn.*

### **Develop a winter burn plan**

Because most landowners and/or hunters will be spending a lot of time on their property this time of year, October is a great time to identify areas needing fire and develop winter prescribed burn plans. Burn plans do not have to be super complicated. However, the details required in the plan will depend on whether you will be burning yourself or if you are hiring a contractor to conduct the burns. If you are hiring someone, like the Division of Forestry or a private forestry consultant, your goal is merely to identify the areas you think need to be burned. Once you have a rough idea of areas to burn, I recommend spending some time touring the property with the contractor to further discuss each area and ultimately to get aligned on specific areas to burn this winter. Once each area is identified, a more detailed burn plan can be

developed. Such a plan would include prioritizing areas to burn, what type of management is required before burning (such as installing or refreshing fire breaks), which burning techniques or strategies to use to achieve desired results, and the range of fire weather that would allow safe burning of each burn area. A burn plan is a written prescription for conducting a prescribed fire, including critical elements such as the weather conditions under which the burn will be conducted, the number of personnel and duties of each, and the type, amount, and placement of equipment needed to safely conduct the burn. As most know, fire is an exceptional tool for creating and managing quality wildlife habitat. Developing a prescribed burn plan will provide a guide to ensuring burns are conducted under favorable and safe conditions. Developing burn plans

from the summer crops that will provide additional food sources for turkeys and quail during the winter. Standing dead summer crops such as grain sorghum, corn and millets provide additional edge habitat and can be used to create “soft edges” along areas where food plots or fields abruptly meet mature forests. Soft edges can provide areas where deer feel safe and comfortable as they enter a food plot. Deer will often emerge from the woods and stand in the soft edge habitat as they check the field for danger. This allows hunters to observe and judge deer before entering the field. Depending on the size of the food plot, I typically leave 10-15 feet of standing dead summer crops to create the soft edge.

### Harvest deer

Although biologists provide guidance on how many and which deer

to harvest, hunters are the real deer managers. Remember that you are making a deer management decision each time you pull the trigger. In fact, not harvesting a deer is a management decision.

Unfortunately, I see many landowners with goals of producing high-quality or trophy bucks that allow the deer herd to overpopulate because they like seeing 20+ deer when they go to a stand. This situation often results in a poor-quality deer herd with significant dispersal of deer to surrounding properties, less reproduction and fawn recruitment, and ultimately poor-quality antlers. If your goal is to manage for a quality or trophy deer herd, harvesting an adequate number of deer each year is essential to keep the deer herd and habitat healthy. In addition to maintaining a desirable deer density, harvest is the primary tool used to manage the

adult sex ratio of a herd. Maintaining a balanced sex ratio will result in a much healthier deer herd, better quality bucks, increased fawn survival, and exciting hunting. Balancing the adult sex ratio is also one of the tools I use to increase breeding competition and get mature bucks on their feet so that my clients can see or harvest them (which is always more challenging than growing them!). When harvesting does, especially early in the season, make attempts to do so in a way that minimizes hunting pressure and preserves hunting quality on the property. Avoid harvesting lots of does on food plots before the rut if you plan to hunt the food plots for mature bucks later. There are always “low impact” options for taking does. Places such as woods stands, powerlines/gas lines, or clearcuts are great choices.

## EARL SAYS:

Give your friends, family and neighbors the perfect gift this year, a subscription to Wildlife Trends Journal!

Call us at 800-441-6826 to order and we will send your friend a binder filled with two years of back issues as well as include a Gift Card announcing your generous gift.

This is the perfect gift for the person who has everything!



# Gotcha Covered™

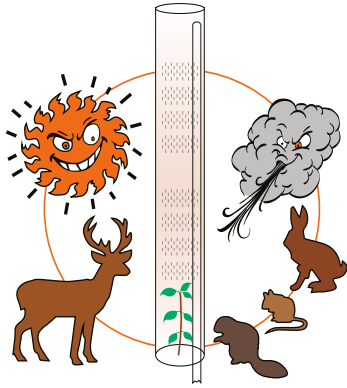


HEAR BETTER.  
BREATHE BETTER.  
HUNT BETTER.



# “It’s a Tough World Out There!”

**STOP** Wildlife, Wind and Weeds from Killing your Habitat Seedlings



**Choose Plantra® to  
make sure they  
Survive, Thrive, Succeed!™**

**Grow Tubes • Tree Bark Guards • Mesh Tubes  
Mulch Mats • Fertilizer Packets • Animal Repellents**



[www.plantra.com](http://www.plantra.com)  
**800-951-3806**

©2016 Plantra, Inc.

## IMPROVING WILDLIFE HABITAT ONE TREE AT A TIME!



Late drop Chestnuts, Persimmons,  
Pears, Apples, & Crabapples!

Hard mast Trees including early  
producing Chinkapin & Dwarf  
Chinquapin oak!



SEE US ON FACEBOOK!

**THE WILDLIFE GROUP**

2858 COUNTY ROAD 53 | TUSKEGEE, AL 36083 | 800-221-9703  
[WWW.WILDLIFEGROUP.COM](http://WWW.WILDLIFEGROUP.COM) | [ALLEN@WILDLIFEGROUP.COM](mailto:ALLEN@WILDLIFEGROUP.COM)



We Finance

Land | Land Improvements | Hunting & Fishing | Recreational Tracts | Country Homes



# First South is how you buy land.



**First South**  
*Farm Credit*

Contact the office nearest you

Albertville	Birmingham
Andalusia	Cullman
Anniston/Oxford	Demopolis
Athens	Enterprise
Auburn/Opelika	Luverne
Bay Minette	Montgomery

Moulton  
Muscle Shoals  
Northport  
Ozark

800-955-1722

[FirstSouthLand.com](http://FirstSouthLand.com)





# Why Westervelt?



Lifelong memories and experiences have been created on Westervelt lands for over 50 years.

Why would you look anywhere else?



[www.westerveltwildlife.com](http://www.westerveltwildlife.com)

Follow us @ Westervelt Wildlife Services & @lifeonthehunt

