



PRACTICAL WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT INFORMATION

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Earl Says...

I'm so proud to know that we have so many great subscribers here at *Wildlife Trends Journal*. I've had the pleasure of meeting many of you through Field Days, Outdoor Shows and chance encounters.

Several weeks ago, I was contacted by a long-time subscriber, Mr. John Long from Maryland. He and his friends and hunting companions have worked tirelessly to bring back the good old days of hunting wild quail on his property. In this issue, Mr. Long tells his story about how they became successful after several years of hard work and research, with the help of a wildlife biologist. This is truly a success story and proof that hard work pays off.

If you have any article ideas for the future, please don't hesitate to contact me any time.



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A Passion for Quail

By John Long



Many of us have a passion for hunting wild bobwhite quail. Unfortunately, for the last 30 years my good friend, farming neighbor, and quail enthusiast Tom Fisher and I have been seeing nothing but declines in the populations and the opportunities to pursue this passion. And we have also tried about

everything humanly possible to stop these declines and, until now, I can tell you the only thing we were able to tell people is “what would not work”.

Now I am anxious to tell the whole world, never, never, never give up as we have experienced some

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recent fascinating successes. While there are a huge number of naysayers, we have found that you can have an early release program that can evolve into a reproducing regenerating population of bobwhite huntable quail.

While I must admit I am overly consumed by my interest in hunting wild quail, I am equally vocal about my dislike for shooting liberated birds. But it seemed like I had no choice if I wanted to hunt quail and have any reason at all to keep a couple of bird dogs. I took trips to Texas and Kansas and lived for those annual treks. But I always returned home yearning for the years gone by when local quail were plentiful. I had never really understood what an “early release program” was. Maybe it referred to a typical “put and take” operation

where you put the birds out early in the morning or maybe it meant something else.

So, in my frustration to reestablish quail on my property, I decided to prove to my hunting buddies that maybe I am one of the dumbest men they know, and if not the dumbest, then surely in the top five on the Eastern shore of Maryland. I hired a quail consultant to come up from the Florida-Georgia area and tell me how to go about getting my dream to come true. I contacted Brad Mueller, who had coauthored a manual entitled **“Bobwhite Quail Management: A Habitat Approach”** for Tall Timbers on increasing quail populations, and I brought him up here. Brad quickly pointed out exactly how a successful early release program worked and why an early release program, which we had already started, was by far my best option. With Brad’s encouragement the real push for the last 15 years has been on a stocking program and the habitat which we continued to refine. And thus begun a project that has blossomed into hunts that very closely emulate a true wild bird hunt. But my dislike for shooting a released bird stuck in my mind. I thought, and still do, that at the end of the day I still only had a “glorified put and take operation.”

But, but, but, like so many other successes, our efforts morphed into something very special. And that result is a program which is now almost a true wild bird hunting experience.

Our hope for this article is that we may share with you our excitement and help you to avoid the myriad of mistakes we have made and so you can be able to move right onto the successes that we are now experiencing. We feel we can now honestly say our current model

works and that you can do it too. And no, you do not have to buy 1000 acres of pristine quail habitat or wait 15 years for hedge rows to grow up and habitat to get well established.

The primary area we hunt consists of approximately 300 acres which we break up into five or six distinct quail courses. The cover is roughly 50% cut over timber and 50% weed fields. We try to hunt the courses on a 10 to 14 day rotation.

The recent success of which I am speaking occurred this past fall when we were able to have roughly 50 hunts of two or three hours each where we found an average of 2 1/2 coveys per hour with coveys varying in size with an average of 15 to 20 birds per covey. On these hunts, we only have two shooters and we average the harvest of approximately eight birds per hunt. Once again, these were hunts not shoots. Our focus is always on the quality of the hunt and not the quantity of the harvest. But I still hate to miss and not kill at least one bird on each covey rise, but it happens way too often that we all miss which I attribute to being way too excited even after all of my many years of hunting. Another real bonus of this success is found in the fact that once again we can justify having our bird dogs and experience the excitement of a true covey flush over a staunchly pointing bird dog.

My personal story with respect to quail hunting starts out like so many others. Yes, my grandfather



took me quail hunting at about the age of 10 years old when we had a lot of birds and a lot of fun. But what happened? Now keep in mind that when someone my age, that is almost 80 years old, tells you that their grandfather taught them how to hunt we are talking about a mentor who was born around 1890. Why should we be surprised the times have changed. Now we can say that maybe just maybe the times have not changed for the worst as we had been thinking.

Our program is an **Early Release Program**. And a true early release to us means releasing a 6 to 10 week old bird around August 15 and letting it grow out to close to full maturity of around 16 weeks before we hunt. During this time our bird becomes wild or gets eaten by a predator. I want to think that this early release is much like stocking a bass pond or a trout stream or a striper into a big lake. The fun that this management can provide along the way to creating a sustainable reproducing population of



bobwhite quail is also amazing and it not only gets you out doors, it also regenerates your ties to man's best friend. Yes, that amazing best dog you ever have had may now be just a season away and without long distance travel and not having enough days afield. Hopefully we will expand on this aspect in a future article but for now let me say one more time that our granddads will be proud of all of us, and their approval is sufficient reason in and of itself to give this program a try.

And like so many others, we had bought into the proposition that these released or stocked birds would never reproduce because they had been incubated into this world and not brooded into this world which has caused them to lose their instinct or ability to brood and reproduce. To me maybe this

explanation is letting our sociologists become our wildlife biologists and just maybe their conclusions are not correct. We have been experiencing over the last 10 to 15 years only finding an average of 1.5 new broods of baby chicks per year; but this past year however, we saw over 15 broods. Very possibly this was a statistical fluke, but we like to think that it was the combination of the many and varied habitat restoration efforts that we have undertaken. And yes, we still feel that habitat is the overwhelmingly most important aspect of our success.

There have been many volumes of books and articles written on habitat, and I won't try to cover many specifics of that element of our success. However, we have always tried to keep in mind that it is abso-

lutely essential to have a substantial number of birds on our property and to do that there must be very good habitat and food. An extreme example is the fact that you will no longer find reason to run your bird dogs in the Walmart parking lot because there just plain ain't no birds there and nothing for a bird to eat. We all know that development has severely reduced much of our good habitat. However, if we keep in mind that we can re-create good habitat, we still must make sure that there is sufficient food and safety for the birds. Just because we want the birds to stay on our properties doesn't mean that they will. The birds stay on the properties because they want to and they only want to if they have plenty to eat and they are safe. There are many ways to insure sufficient food. It can be by way of food plots or by



supplemental feeding. No matter which method you choose it has to be available year around and in ample quantities. And for safety of the birds, it demands that you do not overly disturb them by hunting to the point that they do not return to your habitat and seek shelter on your neighboring properties. Have you ever noticed that when your backyard birdfeeder runs out of seed or that your cat was sitting next to your birdfeeder all of a sudden you had no birds to watch, but the neighbor's birdfeeder and backyard were full of birds. Pretty simple, isn't it?

Oops, you may think that I have not been closely following what I have been saying because I said above that you must have a substantial number of birds, and then I went on to talk about feeding and safety, but never mentioned how to get a substantial number of birds. This too is an important part of the success equation that I will expand on in future articles. However, no matter how we get those birds, either through natural regeneration or stocking, we still have to make certain that the birds want to stay on our properties and therefore the food and safety



element are always paramount. Yep, build it and feed them and they will come and stay.

Throughout this article I have often mentioned success. And by referring to success, I am generally meaning that we have met our goals. However, in order to determine if you have met your goals, you must express very clearly what those goals are. So, before you read on, I want to make it very clear what our goals are, against which we are measuring to see if we truly have been successful. If these goals do not align with what you might be trying to do with your quail properties maybe you won't want to read on. However, I surely hope that you do want to read on and that you will feel that meeting these goals would be a success to you and that it is a program that you would want to replicate.

Accordingly, our stated goals are as follows:

1. To be able to hunt every other day during the quail season.
2. To have good friends to share our hunts with who appreciate the hunt as much as the harvest.

3. Have good dogs such that we might have two dogs on the ground at a time.
4. Find at least two coveys per hour hunted with covey size being between 5 and 15 birds each.
5. Hunt for 2 to 3 hours per hunt and preferably in the afternoon.
6. Have only two shooters per covey rise, however, we will typically have four in our hunting party with one driving the quail buggy and one handling the dogs and generally watching out for safety. (We would probably walk if we still could but too many miles in the field with too few unreplaced knees have left us no choice).
7. Leave one or more sleepers to encourage the covey to re-gather at or near the location of the cover rise.
8. Generally not to hunt singles. But often in frustration, we do when no one has produced a bird on the covey rise. We have found that by not chasing singles the covey is much more likely to return to the original site of the covey rise and stay on our property.
9. Hope that each shooter will kill one bird per covey rise. Assuming that we found five coveys that would result in a 10-bird harvest for that hunt.
10. To keep a 14-day interval between hunts in a specific area.
11. To find healthy, good flying birds throughout the season. Historically, I have read that the average size of a mature quail in the Southeast would be a little over 6 ounces. However,



fully mature birds harvested by us tend to average about 8 to 8 1/2 ounces.

12. To end each hunt with good stories of the day and a shot of “Bird Dog whiskey.”
13. And finally, to hone our culinary skills on the tastiest of all game birds.

This pretty well defines what we call success and our program has been meeting the standard. And even more importantly, this has provided us with another real reason to be thankful and to have a great desire to pass this success on to others.

We will not know for sure whether this success will continue but we are still very optimistic about it as we are now well into our habitat preparations for this fall. And we want to let others know so that they may share in our success and optimism going forward this year. While it may take much more than a short

article to cover those specific practices that we think have been especially significant to the success, we would like to stress that you cannot have success without partnering with the so many people who now seem to be excited about quail restoration just as we are. We found that there is a wealth of information and help to be found. Some of these players for us are ***Tall Timbers, Quail Forever, Covey Rise Magazine, the State Departments of Natural Resources, Lower Shore Land Trust, the Federal Wildlife Service, Wildlife Trends Journal, University of Maryland, University of Delaware, Washington College,*** and the list goes on. With these corroborative efforts, we will continue to be successful. Quail require a very large area to successfully be restored so we need enough of you who read this article to reach out to us and request to know more about the specifics of what

we have done and how you can do it and then give it a try. If this happens, we will feel that this article has been a great success. While our Creator has created the magnificence of the great outdoors, we want to be good stewards and collectively we can be. I am hoping that you all will reach out to the publisher Andy Whitaker, (info@wildlifetrends.com), so that he might ask us to provide more information with specifics on this successful program. We are anxious to provide any information that you may need. Or maybe you want to wait and see if the miracle continues this year and then hear more. Either way we are anxious for you to join with us so we can take our children and grandchildren and give them that experience that might arouse a passion in them to head outdoors and enjoy one of God’s greatest blessings, the beautiful iconic bobwhite quail. Amen, enough said.

The Power of Doing Nothing

By Matt Petersen



Matt Petersen is a Wildlife Manager and Owner of Petersen's Wildlife Management. Contact him at petersenwildlife@yahoo.com

Not burning can be just as important as burning. I'll take this stand of forbs over bare ground any day!

Something I've come to learn about wildlife management over the years is that it's often more impactful to do nothing versus taking action at the wrong time or in the wrong way. This can pertain to all types of management, whether it be managing people, money, land, or wildlife. Doing nothing can be just as, if not more, important than doing something.

I can think back to many times when I felt like I had to make an immediate decision on an employee or business matter where I made a knee jerk reaction that time proved to be the wrong one. I can remember being in similar situations, and for whatever reason, having to put the decision off, only to have it work itself out or new information arises, allowing the best decision to be made easily. I see the same

scenarios play out all the time in wildlife management. If you're growing a food plot or managing timber or old fields, weather is a huge factor every day. It's amazing how one day you can be looking at a super dry food plot that's struggling needing water but is fairly clean with no real weed and grass competition, only to come back two weeks later after a few big rains to find great stands of planted forage,



This field of cereal grains and annual clovers makes excellent cover for all sorts of wildlife. So much so, this hen chose to nest here.

but also an explosion of weeds and grass. The same can be said about timber land or old fields. I've seen stands that were so wet that I told landowners that they likely wouldn't get burned in the dormant season that year; then out of nowhere you get a week of dry weather with sustained 15-20mph winds that dry out everything. On the other end of the spectrum, we had a really cold and wet January this year in NC that prevented the use of prescribed fire, only to be followed by a burn ban in March

and early April. A burn ban in those months due to dry weather is very unusual for us, and it really reminded me that you never know what the conditions will allow. Often getting a plan in place and preparations made while waiting for conditions to improve is the best bet.

Now, to state the obvious, we are always doing something to manage a wildlife property. Just like a cowboy, a wildlife manager's work is never done. This article will

share some stories and things to consider when it comes time for you to choose what you do, what you don't, and when it's best to do nothing.

The first scenario that comes to my mind that I see every year involves food plot planting and selection. I had a customer this spring that wanted me to plant a 1.5-acre field of corn for him. Last fall I planted this same field in perennial white clovers, red clover, and chicory. This farm isn't a farm I manage turnkey and is one I plant as the customer directs me to. I assumed the plot must not have fared well between the heavy browse it receives, last fall's army worm invasion, and this winter's extremely low temperatures. When I got to the plot to plant this spring, I was pleasantly surprised to see a food plot filled with thick and lush clover and chicory. I immediately called the customer and relayed what I was seeing. Even through my protest, he instructed me to kill the clover/chicory and plant the plot in corn. I did so and the few weeks after planting were filled with heavy rain leading to saturated soil. Half of the field was covered in water, leading to poor germination, and the other half was browsed hard by crows, turkeys, and even some deer enjoying the moist young corn sprouts. Moral of the story is don't take away a sure thing such as a thriving clover/chicory plot to roll the dice on a corn planting. In this case, you would have been much better off doing nothing and allowing the clover to persist and provide food for wildlife versus taking the chance of planting corn.

Speaking of corn, another great example of when you can often be better off doing nothing is allowing a corn field to go fallow. Corn is planted in the spring, makes its seed in the summer, and wildlife

enjoy it in the fall until it's completely consumed. A strategy I've used with great success is allowing the corn to mature and seeding back into it standing with a chest spreader or a tractor spreader. The emphasis being on not knocking down any more rows than necessary. I often add annual clovers in the plot with some cereal rye or wheat ahead of a good rain in fall. Where the doing nothing comes into play is the following growing season. The cereal grains and annual clovers will provide excellent forage in combination with the corn grain all fall and winter. It will explode with growth the following spring again, producing great forage and also will supply great cover in tandem with the standing corn. In the spring though, most managers would spray or disc the planting and replant a spring forage there. Depending on the farm and situation, that may be the best plan but, if possible, the good ole do nothing method can be excellent. Let the cereal grains mature to produce more cover at ground level and also be a seed source that can be utilized in mid to late summer. Allow the clover to mature and, depending on varying conditions, continue to produce forage well into late summer. Also, I often see excellent natural colonizing plants pop up in these fallow corn plots. Plants such as ragweed, asters, pokeweed and goldenrod are all highly to medium preferred deer forage and provide excellent cover for fawns and poultts when they are most vulnerable. Other plants that are more of an agricultural pest show up in the plots as well. Maretail, pigweeds, and sickle pod are all common but also provide some forage and cover for wildlife. Always consider that you need to hedge your bets when it comes to being sure you have plenty of

forage and cover on your farm. If you get a super dry or wet growing season that causes spring planted crops to struggle, these fallow fields can carry the weight for you.

This same "let it go" or "fallowing" method is an excellent choice for a mid-summer harvested wheat field. Wheat does an excellent job of suppressing weeds and grass once it's thick and tall at maturity. If the conditions align, it's common practice for farmers in my area to harvest wheat fields in late June and immediately plant soybeans

into the same plot – often not even having to spray an herbicide before the soybean planting due to the weed/grass suppression of the mature wheat crop. It goes without saying that soybeans are excellent deer forage and all sorts of wildlife utilize the food and cover they can produce. What I often see, though, is if the harvested field is allowed to go fallow you get a great response from common ragweed in my area. Common ragweed is a preferred deer forage in the South and does an excellent job of producing cover



This field edge of excellent wildlife plants would have been toast from a future mowing had I not talked the landowner out of cutting it. Scouting areas that are to be mowed before you get on the tractor can save lots of great wildlife habitat.

and seed for all types of game. I love to let the wheat field go fallow, let the ragweed come in, and replant a fall crop in the same field once the ragweed matures.

Clover

Another scenario when doing nothing is better than something is mowing clover plots. There has been controversy over the timing and frequency of mowing perennial clover plots. You have a camp that likes to frequently mow their clover plots to reduce weed pressure and claim to increase forage quality and attractiveness through frequent mowing. You have the other side of the debate that claims you should very rarely mow your clover and promote native beneficial plants in your plots. I tend to land in the middle of the debate and reserve the right to lean one way or the other depending on the situation. In my part of the mid-south, we are more often than not dealing with high deer populations. That said, deer often do a good job of keeping my clover “mowed” down through constant grazing. On the farms where this occurs, I tend to only mow my clover if I have issues with weed pressure. On wet years I may mow the clover three times but, on the average, I’m mowing it once or twice when weeds get high. Horse nettle, mare’s tail, dog fennel, and even pokeweed can get thick in my perennial clover stands and start to shade out and thin the stand. I also don’t want those weeds to go to seed and try to cut them back before they do. That said, all those plants provide excellent cover, and some forage, for fawns, poult, and rabbits, quail, and other game. I’ve also noticed through my trail cam and in-person sightings that game seem to prefer the more “grown up” clover plots versus the manicured fields...especially hens with

poult and does with fawns. The cover provided by the taller plants protects the young deer and turkeys and the moms know this and utilize them more frequently. I have also noticed that the clover plots that have taller plant growth in them fare better in periods of hot and dry weather versus the close cut and groomed plots. The shade and increased organic matter produced by the taller plants help to shade out the ground, reducing ground temperatures and reducing evaporation. This means more moisture for longer periods in between rains and, ultimately, new clover growth. Again, just from my own observations, I see more bug life in the non-mowed plots. These other plants provide more forage for the bugs and the turkeys take advantage of eating the bugs and the increased plant forage. Where I see the other side though is when I do mow my clover and have adequate moisture, I notice deer feeding on the new growth heavily. This does, however, come with risk. I’ve had clients, and myself, mow ahead of forecasted big rain events that didn’t come through, leaving us with a lack of moisture, short-cropped clover, and exposed dirt that heats up in the sun quickly. This leads to rapid evaporation of soil moisture with the end result often leaving us with struggling clover and open ground, ready to be invaded by weeds/grass. Also, we’ve removed the forage that wildlife would be eating and reduced the clover canopy that allows it to shade out weeds/grass. If this is followed by periods of drought you can end up with a failed stand. Often doing nothing and letting the clover grow is the right call.

While we are on the topic of bush hogging in general, I often see the bush hog destroying prime wildlife habitat on a regular basis. On every wildlife-based podcast, TV show,

magazine, etc. you constantly hear “stop bush hogging everything!”. Even though we hear this statement all the time it is still very tempting for landowners and managers to bush hog areas that should be left alone. Recently I can think of two examples where I had to talk two different landowners out of mowing excellent habitat. The first was a landowner that is fairly new to wildlife management and the creation of habitat. March of 2024, we ran a fire through some old pastureland on his farm that had previously been dominated by cool season grasses. The old fields consisted prominently of tall fescue. We came in with an herbicide application, after a few frosts, in the fall of 2023 to kill the cool season grasses and not harm the native warm season plants. We followed that up with a spot spraying herbicide application in the following January of 2024 to control any escapes or regrowth after the first application. When the conditions allowed, we ran a moderately intensive fire through the fields, removing the old fescue thatch and top killing hardwoods, cedar, and briars. We got an excellent result, and the seed bank quickly responded back with new growth. Recently the landowner called me and wanted me to cruise the old fields with him. He voiced concern that the fields had started getting overgrown and he felt that they needed to be bush hogged to “clean” them up. I hadn’t seen the fields in over a year and was surprised they needed any management at this point but agreed to take a look. Once I got on-site, I was greeted with fleabane, pokeweed, lots of ragweed, Spanish needles, goldenrod briar species, and lots of other excellent wildlife plants. Most were belt to chest high and were providing excellent cover and forage. There were some cedars and hardwoods encroaching

but nothing of any concern. After pointing out all these plants and showing the customer the prevalence of deer browse, beds, turkey tracks and scat, he was quickly convinced to leave the field as it was. He laughingly said it would have been bush hogged the next day had I not been able to come look.

Bush Hogging

The other customer is well-versed in wildlife habitat and has seen his wildlife population explode the past five years due to food plots, prescribed fire, and timber management. He still feels the need to keep the plots and areas around them “clean” by mowing them. This is a prime example of aesthetics trumping wildlife habitat. Fortunately, the landowner asked me to identify the plants growing around some of the perennial clover plots he intended to mow the following week. We had burned the areas around the plots a few years before, and I knew the plants growing there would likely be beneficial. Just as I suspected, the plant life around the plots consisted of partridge pea, goldenrod, pokeweed, ragweed, milkweed, and native grasses. These borders could have been the cover picture of a wildlife management how-to-guide on managing native plants with prescribed fire. They would have met the mower and been cut to the dirt had I not intervened. Sadly, annual grasses would have likely colonized the borders, one of which would likely have been Johnson’s grass. I see this scenario play out so often and think they should have just left it alone.

Before we get off the bush hogging topic, I had another issue with a mowing last fall. I had a field that I was renovating and looking to turn into a productive food plot. It had a super low pH and was suffering from low organic matter. I had the



This photo shows aster that has been browsed by deer. The old field it was growing in looked rough and the landowner thought it needed mowing. To a wildlife manager, it looked perfect!

lime truck put out two tons of lime the previous fall and planted a high organic matter producing blend the following spring. This blend consisted of drought-tolerant and poor soil hardy plants such as grain sorghum, millet, and buckwheat. I also added a few viny plants such as cowpeas and lablab. The idea was to let the plot go without any herbicide and allow it (along with weeds and grass) to produce as much organic matter as possible ahead of a fall planting. By fall the pH would have increased to an acceptable level to plant target crops of clover/wheat/chicory and hopefully the spring crop would have

created enough dead plant material to hold moisture and nutrients for the fall crop. Even though it was a dry growing season that year, the blend did grow well in the spring and produced lots of dead plant material by late summer. We planned on utilizing a no-till planter to cut through the standing spring plot placing the seed in the top 1/4” of the soil and laying down the spring crop at the same time. Unfortunately, without my knowledge, the landowner decided to bush hog the plot right before we planted it. Bush hogs tend to consolidate the dead material into long thick lines as you mow across

the field. That's exactly what happened here. We no-tilled into the plot and have an excellent stand of clover in areas where the dead plant material wasn't compiled and thick. In the thick areas there are still bare spots (10 months later) where the bush hog deposited them there. Once again, had we done nothing and allowed the drill to evenly lay down the material and planted through it, we would have been much better off.

The same principles about proper timing and frequency of bush hogging can and should be used with prescribed fire. I had a land-owner contact me this year about burning a young mixed pine stand for him. It had been burned in spring of 2023, and he felt like it was time for another fire. Before I committed a burn day to the stand I went out and scouted the block. What I saw was a young pine stand (around 15 years old) that had been

thermally thinned with fire a few years before. The fire had done a decent job of fairly evenly killing some of the young pines, increasing sunlight to the ground and, in turn, producing new growth at ground level. That said, the pines were still a touch thick and the vegetation at the ground level appeared not to be too mature and warranting a fire. I also saw very little hardwood encroachment and most of the dead pines were just starting to crumble and hit the ground. For all those reasons I suggested we hold off for another year on the fire. When I came back to the same location this summer, I was glad we waited – the block had exploded with new growth of burnweed, goldenrod, pokeweed, and briars. By leaving it one more year the older root systems were able to take advantage of recent rains and explode with new growth, providing lots of quality cover and forage. Also, some recent thunderstorms

had knocked down more of the thermal thinned pines, further opening up the canopy and allowing for future fire to consume the deadfall. Once again – a perfect example doing nothing winning the day.

As managers and caretakers of land and wildlife we typically are always doing something. Planting plots, bush hogging, killing does to keep populations in check, spraying, fixing roads and equipment, you name it. We are people of action and are used to working hard and staying busy because that's what this life requires. That said, be careful to consider the value of doing nothing and allowing mother nature and the habitat we influence to run their course. Doing nothing can be a game changer and if you look for similar scenarios and examples on your farm, you'll see it too!

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Managing a Multi-Use Lake

By Scott Brown



Most of our clients want us to manage their waterbodies as trophy largemouth bass lakes for their primary use. When in the planning stages of building a new lake, the landowner must decide the primary purpose for the waterbody. Just because a lake is designated as a lake for primarily something other than quality fish doesn't mean it cannot have quality fish and be used for other activities such as irrigation of agricultural crops, dog training, and/or hunting, skiing/jet skiing.

Many lakes and ponds on private and public property have dual purposes. Many are originally built for things like agriculture either for

livestock or crop watering, duck hunting, flood control, temporarily holding runoff and cleaning water before it enters a natural waterway (retention pond), water sports like skiing/jet skiing, or even dog training. Some of these are very compatible with quality fishing, and a few are difficult for that dual-purpose, but can be done, to a certain level.

Agriculture and Quality Fishing

One combination and most frequent encounter for us as the dual use waterbody for agriculture and fishing. The waterbody may be

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Multi-use lakes are possible and quality fish can be grown, despite primary or secondary lake use that is not fish production.

used for watering livestock or crop irrigation. Managing both combinations are difficult and come with their own set of problems unless the lake is large enough to handle the added nutrients or water withdrawals. A small lake used to water cattle is difficult to manage for quality fish. It is not that big fish cannot be grown in such a waterbody, but it may experience a fish kill at any time. Cattle like to walk in water, sometimes lie down to cool off, and almost always expel their waste (nutrients) into the water. These excess nutrients, depending on the number of animals and lake size, can affect water chemistry directly by raising



Certain agricultural practices can be difficult to pair with quality fish production. But usually, they are some of the most productive lakes around.



Livestock waste can grow big fish, but can also kill a pond's entire population. Managing with extreme care is advised.



Many clients incorporate waterfowl hunting on the waterbodies. A few duck or geese hunts a year are always enjoyable for humans and the retrievers.

Ammonia, Nitrogen and other parameter levels detrimental to fish. Some nutrients are good, but excess nutrients promote weed growth either in shoreline vegetation, submerged vegetation, filamentous algae or planktonic algae (green water). Another issue caused from livestock entering a waterbody on a regular basis is erosion. They can expedite a small lake filling in and make the water turbid (muddy) from walking inside the lake basin and getting in and out. This turbidity to some degree will help shade

out sunlight and hinder submerged plant growth, but water too muddy can stress fish causing issues with egg hatching success, fry survival and production of food for upper-level predators, slowing their growth.

When faced with this combination we look at how many animals there are, how large and deep is the waterbody and the current effect the animals are having. If the lake is large enough, there may be no detectable negative effect from the

livestock on the lake. Most often that is not the case, and some alternatives need to be looked at. First, can the livestock be excluded from one waterbody to enhance the water chemistry, vegetation and fish? If one waterbody can be designated for fishing and one for livestock, that is the best solution. Remember, when excluding livestock from a waterbody to plan and prevent excessive runoff from pastures or feed lots. If water sheet flows from livestock areas directly into a waterbody every time it

rains, this is no different than if they are in the lake. Design or add a vegetation buffer zone between livestock and water. As water moves toward a lake it is somewhat filtered prior to entering the fish pond. If feasible, build a small natural area (marsh) between the two to help filter some nutrients out. Can the animals be restricted to a designated area of the lake? This can be done with fencing or by making pond banks too steep for livestock to use directing them to one end or designated area. The excessively steep banks will also detour shoreline vegetation from growing. If in an emergency the animals need to be granted access, then do it. The short term added nutrients may or may not affect the fish population in what will be presumably an already drought-affected lake.

Using a pond for irrigation and developing a quality fishery is also

feasible and very feasible if you have the capability of adding well water should the fish pond become too low from water withdrawals. If your crops need watering that means there is already not enough water in the area. Now you are drawing water from a lake that is probably already low, but if you have the capability to add well water as you make your withdrawals, you can continue to be successful at growing crops and quality fish. It is recommended to continually keep the fish pond water level at a manageable level. Do not draw the water down to critical levels and then refill with pure well water. Well water is not the best water for fish due to low dissolved oxygen, but if gradually and steadily added while withdrawals occur it is acceptable and it will not have any negative impacts. If you replace the pond water at such a rate that the

poor (low dissolved oxygen) well water can stress or kill fish. If feasible, have a secondary lake that water can be added to from a well and withdrawn from, bypassing the fish lake, but the fish lake still maintains the ability to receive well water in an emergency.

Another issue to be aware of with quality fish lakes and agricultural lakes is herbicide use around the lake. The more quality habitat you have the better for fish. Besides ground spraying, many big farms aerial spray and the vegetation around the lake can unintentionally kill desirable vegetation for fish habitat. Vegetation around lakes is a good thing for improving water quality, filters run off from surrounding crop fields and feed lots, and reduces erosion.



Managing for waterfowl and quality fish is tricky, but with the right plan, both can be very successful.

Duck Hunting and Quality Fishing

Another common dual purpose lake combination is fishing and duck hunting. If you put a fish and waterfowl 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 balance both. Also add whether you are trying to attract diver or puddle ducks to your waterbody. It can be very complicated and there has to be compromise on both sides to achieve both objectives.

The best way to achieve this is to have a large waterbody that can handle shallow marsh areas with lots of desirable waterfowl food and cover, but also a lot of steeper sloped banks with some vegetation present and lots of open water to 12 feet deep for fish. If this is not feasible, having a fishing lake above (upstream) from your duck marsh also works well. If you have a well feeding the fish lake it always assures you that things for ducks will be flooded at the right time, while still having plenty of water for fish. A trench can be dug around 75-85% around your duck pond with a control structure at the in and outflow so it can be drained after the season, dried in spring and summer, planted in late summer/early fall and reflooded in late fall early winter just prior to duck season. I have seen first hand with a fish lake of 13 acres averaging 12 feet deep (deepest spot was 20 feet), and a duck marsh below, totaling four acres, averaging two feet deep when full. After drying, the duck marsh can be prepped and planted



A dual purpose waterbody for retriever training and quality fishing can be done. If done correctly you will not be able to tell who enjoys it more, the anglers, trainers or the retrievers.

with various duck foods (we recommend Japanese millet) and small areas of Egyptian wheat for natural hunting blinds. Gradually raise the water 18-24 inches before the first phase of duck season so they find it before the season starts. If you have the ability to partition two areas off, stagger the re-flooding so one area is hunted the first phase and the next area the second phase of duck season. Sometimes this scenario is not possible and the duck marsh has to be located upstream of the fish lake, which is still feasible, but care must be taken when draining the duck marsh into the fish lake as to not introduce excessive low dissolved oxygen water and stress fish or cause a fish kill. A large natural area of vegetation between the two is recommended to help filter the water prior to it dumping into the fish lake. Late winter marsh water usually has low dissolved oxygen levels due to decomposing plant material from winter die off.

Planting waterfowl food plots (Japanese millet, soybeans, corn, etc.) along the shoreline of your lake will draw birds in during the fall and winter, providing hunting opportunities or just to observe. Also, planting native duck food such as wigeon grass and smartweed that also provides fish habitat helps all the target species.

Flood Control or Runoff Retention and Quality Fishing

Retention ponds are common along the coastal states for collecting runoff and filtering it or preventing nearby property from flooding prior to allowing it to flow into a nearby creek, river or natural lake. The water comes from streets, parking lots, lawns and golf courses. Just because they are primarily designed to hold poor quality water does not mean they cannot grow quality fish. We have seen double digit largemouth bass in these ponds as small as three acres, and we have seen during a tropical storm or hurricane ponds



All retrievers like to train off the dock on a hot summer day.

roll over and the entire fish population wiped out or displaced down stream. With a flood, your fish population species composition may change after waters recede, with new species being trapped in your lake from other nearby waterbodies. You have to be aware that at some point, water quality, drought or flooding may become an issue and have a negative impact on the fish population.

When the pond is built, it needs to be dug 10-12 ft. deep with steeper sloped banks so it does not silt in

quickly or grow weeds that constantly need herbicide, which fills in the waterbody that much quicker. If possible, not developing around 100 percent of the pond leaving natural areas is advised, but not always feasible. A retention pond is designed to have some vegetation in or around it, which is what helps filter nutrients and other impurities prior to it being discharged into the environment. Retention ponds work and last a long time when built and managed correctly, and can grow big fish for many years. These waterbodies

however, do require digging or dredging out more frequently than natural lakes either due to washing in sediment or filling up with dead plant matter. These are great places for artificial structure (fish attractors) that can be removed should deepening be required in the future and put back out. Natural structure material will only add nutrients as it decays and expedite filling in the pond especially if you refurbish them often. Adding a fountain(s) for aesthetics, or a bottom aeration system to oxygenate water at all depths, and/or to slow algae

growth down can be done. The fountain is mostly for aesthetics, but aeration can make a big difference deterring filamentous algae growth and de-stratifying and oxygenating the lake water to support more fish in the waterbody.

Water Sports and Quality Fishing

There are little or no natural resource issues between jet skiing or skiing, and quality fishing. This is generally a user conflict issue and if there is one lake owner who decides when and where water sports can be done, or if not at all. We recommend placing artificial material

underwater structure deep enough not to cause injury to water sport participants even during drought. The other recommendation is to make sure the areas are large enough for safe operation and that shore erosion is not excessive from wave activity. A band of quality vegetation around the shore should be planted where wave action will occur to reduce erosion and provide habitat for fish.

Dog Training Facility and Quality Fishing

This one may be the most difficult of the others previously mentioned if it's not on a big enough scale. In

dog training you need deep and shallow areas, with a few spots where land and water may be crossed multiple times for quality retriever training. Also, a few spots on shore and in water where logs, brush or vegetation protruding above the water line are placed for dogs to be trained to go through or over the obstacle rather than around them. A lake shaped like a hand can be very usable, but the open water (palm) needs to be large and deep enough to support the fish population. In the "fingers", expect some vegetation issues, because it will be impossible to get them deep enough to not harbor



Whether retrieving bumpers or birds, your lake can be designed and maintained to accommodate both, plus filled with quality fish.

and promote vegetation growth. These areas can be kept clean with herbicide or mechanical removal with a long arm dredge dragging the vegetation out at the end of each growing season.

All these scenarios are manageable, but you must keep in mind that at any time, conflicts between managing the fish population and the waterbody's other purpose will arise and have to be dealt with. I have seen firsthand with all these scenarios quality fishing last for decades before any issues arose. That is many years of enjoying quality angling before having a setback or having to start over. Depending on the setback, like drought, it may be beneficial to the fishery in the long run and just continue the quality angling you have grown to expect. Routinely checking water chemistry and once every few years having an electrofishing sample conducted to monitor things is advised. Always have an electrofishing survey conducted after a catastrophic event such as drought, flood, or die off prior to restocking.

This bass came from a small lake in Florida used for fishing, dog training, waterfowl hunting and agriculture.



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Wildlife Trends Journal Management Calendar

By Dave Edwards



Start preparations for fall food plots.

Establishing successful food plots takes more than just tossing out seed and hoping for the best. It requires planning, patience, and proper soil preparation. The process spans several months—not just a weekend—and involves multiple factors that contribute to a successful and valuable food plot for wildlife.

Some of the most critical components include:

- Developing a thoughtful food plot plan

- Ensuring proper soil fertility and pH balance
- Addressing potential soil compaction (hardpan)
- Preparing a smooth, firm seedbed
- Planting only under favorable conditions
- Effective weed control

Each of these steps plays a vital role in your food plot's performance. Below are a few key tips to help you get the most out of your fall planting:

Test Soil Early & Apply Lime in Advance

Conduct soil tests well ahead of planting—ideally in late winter or

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spring. Apply lime at least six months in advance to give it time to adjust the soil pH. If you missed spring or early summer, go ahead and apply now—late is better than not at all.

Customize Your Fertilizer

Use your soil test results to create a fertilizer blend tailored to your soil's specific needs. While balanced fertilizers like 13-13-13 are convenient, they often result in over-applying certain nutrients while under-delivering others—leading to waste and added cost.

Order Supplies Early

Secure your seed and fertilizer ahead of time. Fall planting season is busy, and supplies can run short when demand spikes.

Smooth & Prep Your Plots in Advance

A well-prepared seedbed is critical, especially for broadcast seeding. Prior to planting, drag the field to loosen the soil for better seed-to-soil



Establishing successful food plots is more than a weekend event. It involves a process that spans several months.

contact. After broadcasting, cultipack the area to gently press seed into the soil. (If you haven't used a cultipacker, consider adding one to your toolkit—it's invaluable for food plot success.)

Note: Avoid dragging plots that are rough or if you're planting small seeds like clover, as this can bury them too deep.

Don't Plant Too Early

Patience pays off. September is often dry in the Southeast, making mid-October the ideal window for planting. This aligns with the arrival of rain-bearing cold fronts. Planting too early increases the risk of armyworms, poor germination, or plots peaking before hunting season begins.

Include Reseeding Annual Clovers

Adding clovers such as crimson or arrowleaf boosts your plot's nutrition and longevity. With proper care, these clovers will feed wildlife into summer and naturally reseed for next fall—saving you time and money.

Monitor with Exclusion Cages

Install exclusion cages—small fenced-in areas within your plot—to track growth and deer usage. These cages (typically 2–3 feet wide and 3–4 feet tall) protect a portion of the crop, allowing you to see how much is being eaten versus how much is actually growing. Often, what seems like crop failure is simply heavy browsing.

If you added annual clovers to your food plots last fall, September is the time to apply management to regenerate the food plots.

Incorporating reseeding annual clovers into your fall food plots is a simple yet powerful way to extend the nutritional value of your plots well into early summer. While cool-season grains like winter wheat and oats perform well in fall and early winter, they often decline in productivity by early spring—leaving wildlife with limited forage during a critical transition period. By including annual clovers such as crimson or arrowleaf, you can

maintain high-quality forage later into the year. These clovers typically flower and seed out between April and June, depending on your region and growing zone. Allowing clovers to reach full bloom and go to seed is essential—not just for reseeding purposes, but also for supporting game birds like quail and turkeys. Clover flowers attract insects, which are a vital source of protein for young turkeys (poults) in the spring.

After clover has flowered and dropped seed, plots often become weedy. Don't worry—this isn't necessarily a bad thing. In fact, it's best to leave these plots alone throughout the summer. Then, three to four weeks before fall planting, follow this simple process to maximize success:

- Mow the plot as low as possible to reduce weed height.
- Wait 7–10 days to allow any regrowth, then apply glyphosate (RoundUp) to kill off the weeds and prep the site for planting.
- If weeds are thick or thatch is heavy, consider a controlled burn to expose bare ground—this also helps stimulate clover germination.
- Once the vegetation has died back or been burned off, apply fertilizer as needed.
- Lightly disk or drag the plot to stir up the topsoil and expose residual clover seed from the previous year.
- Plant the fall annual small grains (such as wheat and oats) into the prepped seedbed.

Key Tip: Light disking is critical. Deep tillage can bury clover seeds too far below the surface, reducing their chance of germination. The goal is to scratch the surface just enough to mix in the seed and expose some bare soil. Once established, this method allows clovers to

reseed themselves each year, reducing your need to buy seed annually while increasing forage quality and plot longevity. You'll not only extend the wildlife value of your plots into spring and summer, but also save money and reduce maintenance over time. With proper timing and minimal effort, reseeding clovers can become one of the most cost-effective and wildlife-friendly strategies in your food plot program.

Manage mid-rotation pine stands with herbicides to improve food and cover for wildlife.

Thinning pine plantations is a well-established practice for enhancing wildlife habitat. It increases sunlight penetration, encouraging the growth of understory vegetation that provides both food and bedding/escape cover. However, this regrowth often includes undesirable woody species such as sweetgum, wax myrtle, and gallberry. Over time, these species can outcompete and shade out more beneficial forage plants, ultimately reducing the habitat quality for deer and other wildlife.

A highly effective strategy to address this issue—and significantly improve both wildlife habitat and timber production—is the application of herbicides such as imazapyr (e.g., Arsenal™). A single treatment of imazapyr helps control undesirable hardwood competition, allowing more sunlight to reach the forest floor. This encourages the growth of higher-quality forage species and enhances cover for wildlife.

While imazapyr can be applied throughout the growing season, it is most effective when applied in late summer through leaf drop in the fall. In addition to wildlife benefits, research has shown that this mid-



With proper management, mid-rotation treatments create a win-win scenario for both wildlife management and timber production.

rotation treatment can lead to increased pine growth and timber yields by the time of final harvest—often producing a return that far exceeds the cost of application.

From a timber management perspective, treating entire stands may be ideal. However, from a wildlife perspective, a more targeted approach is often sufficient. For example, in a thinned pine plantation, applying herbicide down pull-out rows and into adjacent pine rows can create significant improvements in the quality and quantity of deer browse. This technique raises the nutritional carrying capacity of the habitat without requiring treatment of the entire stand.

Once treated, it's important to incorporate a rotation of prescribed burning to maintain open conditions and stimulate fresh regrowth. I frequently use this method—herbicide application followed by fire—to create natural “food plots” within mid-aged pine stands. These treated zones provide excellent forage and cover, making them prime locations for hunting. With proper planning and execution, this approach creates a win-win

scenario for both wildlife management and timber production.

Mow under and around fruit trees and orchards.

Regular mowing around fruit and nut trees offers multiple benefits. Not only does it reduce competition from surrounding vegetation—allowing the trees to grow more vigorously—but it also improves the overall appearance of your property. By keeping the understory clean, mowing helps wildlife more easily locate fallen fruit such as acorns, persimmons, apples, and other mast during the fall.

These open, maintained areas become prime spots for wildlife activity as the fruit begins to drop. They're excellent locations to hang trail cameras for capturing photos of deer and other game, and they can double as ideal stand sites for hunting. A little maintenance goes a long way in turning these tree zones into productive wildlife hotspots.

“Limb up”/prune roadsides.

With the growing season winding down, early fall is the perfect time to trim overhanging limbs along



Mowing and/or spraying under fruit trees helps wildlife find fruit such as acorns, persimmons, and apples as they fall.

your property's interior roads. Without regular maintenance, these secondary roads can quickly become overgrown—turning into a jungle in just a single season.

If you've ever had an exhaust pipe ripped off your tractor by a low-hanging limb, or caught a branch across the face while driving a golf cart, you know how frustrating—and dangerous—overgrown roads can be. Trimming back limbs improves visibility, reduces the risk of equipment damage and personal injury, and makes navigating your property safer and more enjoyable. Clearing overhang also allows more sunlight and airflow to reach the road surface, helping it dry out faster after rain. In some areas, this added light can even stimulate the growth of natural wildlife forage along the roadsides. There are several ways to tackle this job. On our property, we place someone in the back of a side-by-side equipped with loppers or a gas-powered pole saw. They cut limbs as we drive,

followed by a couple of folks on foot who drag or toss the debris into the woods. It's surprisingly efficient—depending on how thick the growth is. While safety is always the top priority, I'll admit that lifting someone in the bucket of a tractor to reach higher limbs can be an effective (though not officially recommended) method when done carefully. A little trimming each year prevents this from becoming an overwhelming chore.

Stay ahead of the

growth, and your roads will stay clear, safer, and more wildlife-friendly all season long.

Check food plots for hardpan and subsoil if needed.

If your food plots tend to dry out quickly or stay wetter than expected—despite normal rainfall—or if you've been planting the same plot for years, you may be dealing with a hardpan. Also known as soil compaction, a hardpan can severely limit forage growth and plant survival by restricting root penetration, water infiltration, and oxygen movement. A hardpan is a densely compacted layer of soil that forms between the topsoil and the subsoil, typically 4 to 12 inches below the surface. It's most commonly caused by years of repeated disking and the weight of tractors and equipment pressing down on the soil. Over time, fine soil particles—especially clay—migrate downward, accumulating and binding tightly to form what is

essentially a subsurface layer of concrete.

This layer acts as a physical barrier:

- During wet periods, water pools on the surface and evaporates before soaking in.
- During dry periods, topsoil dries out quickly because plants can't access moisture stored deeper in the subsoil.
- The result? Stressed, underperforming food plots.

Hardpans are easy to diagnose with a soil probe—a 2- to 4-foot metal rod with a sharpened tip and a handle for leverage. Push the probe into the soil; the pressure should remain fairly consistent until you reach the hardpan, where it suddenly becomes much harder to push. In most food plots, hardpans form at disking depth (around 4–6 inches) and may be 2 to 10 inches thick, depending on soil type and how long the field has been in use. The process of breaking up a hardpan is called subsoiling. This involves using a chisel plow or subsoiler equipped with 1 to 5 deep-shanked tines spaced 9–12 inches apart. When pulled through the field by a tractor, these tines penetrate 6 to 12 inches deep, fracturing the compacted soil and restoring the soil structure below the surface.

Subsoiling:

- Improves root penetration
- Enhances water infiltration and retention
- Allows better oxygen movement
- Leads to stronger, healthier plant growth

For best results, subsoil every 2–3 years, particularly in fields that are regularly disked. If you don't own a subsoiler, many equipment rental companies offer them. However, if you manage a bunch of food plots,



Studying trail camera photos will help you make informed harvest decisions and identify management priorities.

investing in one is highly worthwhile.

Install trail cameras to capture photos of deer.

Depending on where your property lies within the whitetail's range, antler hardening (velvet shedding) has either just occurred or is about to. Late August through early September is an ideal time to start setting out trail cameras across your property to capture photos of bucks. During this period, bucks typically travel in loose bachelor groups, making it easier to photograph multiple individuals in a single location. The key to effective camera placement is understanding current food sources and deer movement patterns.

Best Trail Camera Locations for Late Summer:

- **Feeders** – One of the most reliable locations for consistent deer activity.
- **Mineral sites** – Especially productive if established earlier in the year and if late summer has been wet.
- **Field edges and entry trails** – Look for trails entering large agricultural fields or connecting smaller perennial food plots.

- **Summer food plots** – Deer may still be using these heavily in late summer.
- **Water sources** – Small ponds, creeks, or manmade water holes can be hotspots during warm, dry spells.

Let's face it—most of us are eager to pop the SD card into a computer and scroll through the photos to see what kind of bucks are out there. That's part of the fun. But after the excitement, take time to analyze the data you're collecting. Two of the most valuable pieces of information you can easily gain from trail camera photos includes an estimate of the adult sex ratio and buck age age structure of your herd. While a structured camera survey (with bait, grid placement, and specific timing) is the most accurate method for assessing your deer population, even "random" trail camera photos can reveal valuable insights about the local herd. Every image you collect tells part of the story. By studying your trail camera data now, you'll be better equipped to make informed harvest decisions, identify management priorities, and ultimately move your deer herd closer to your long-term goals. The information is there—you just have to look beyond the antlers.

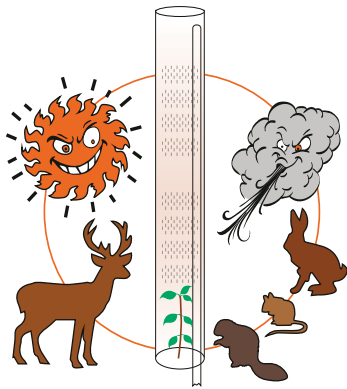
Develop a pre-season deer harvest plan that will maintain or improve your deer management program.

As hunting season approaches, now is the time to establish clear deer harvest plans and goals. At the heart of any successful deer management program is monitoring the status of your herd. Ideally, you've been collecting and reviewing data such as harvest records (weights, ages, antler measurements), hunter observation logs, and trail camera survey results. Together, this information forms the foundation for informed, science-based management decisions that can improve both the quality of your herd and your hunting experience. Without this information, you're essentially guessing—or hoping—that hunting will improve. And while gathering data may not be the most thrilling part of deer management (neither is cleaning and repairing shooting houses), it's absolutely essential. Informed decisions lead to better management of the herd, and ultimately, better hunting opportunities.

If you haven't already, now is a great time to consult with a professional—either your state agency wildlife biologist or a private wildlife consultant. A trained deer biologist can evaluate your data, analyze trail camera images, and provide customized harvest recommendations before the season begins. For professional biologists, assessing deer herds and habitat is more than a passion—it's what they do for a living. Their experience, combined with your data, can often lead to practical, impactful recommendations that significantly improve the effectiveness of your deer management efforts.

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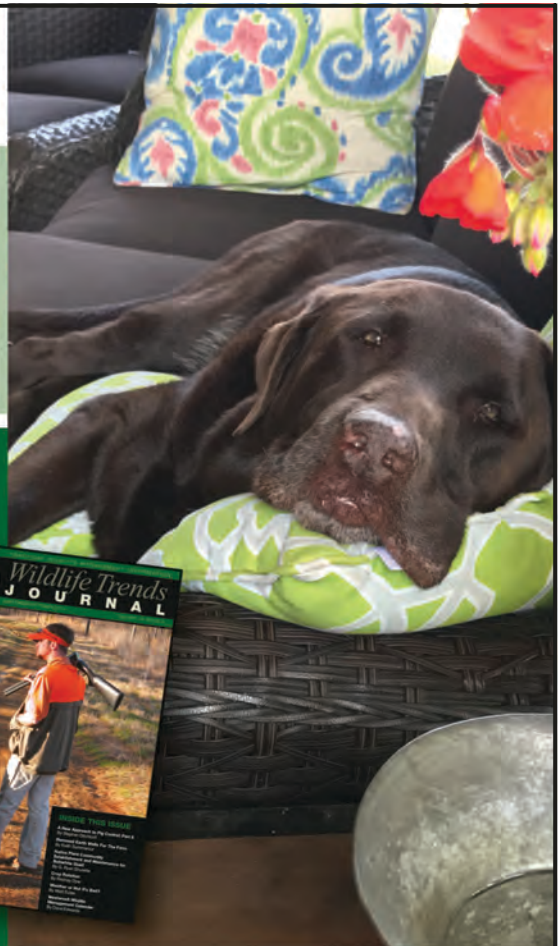
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