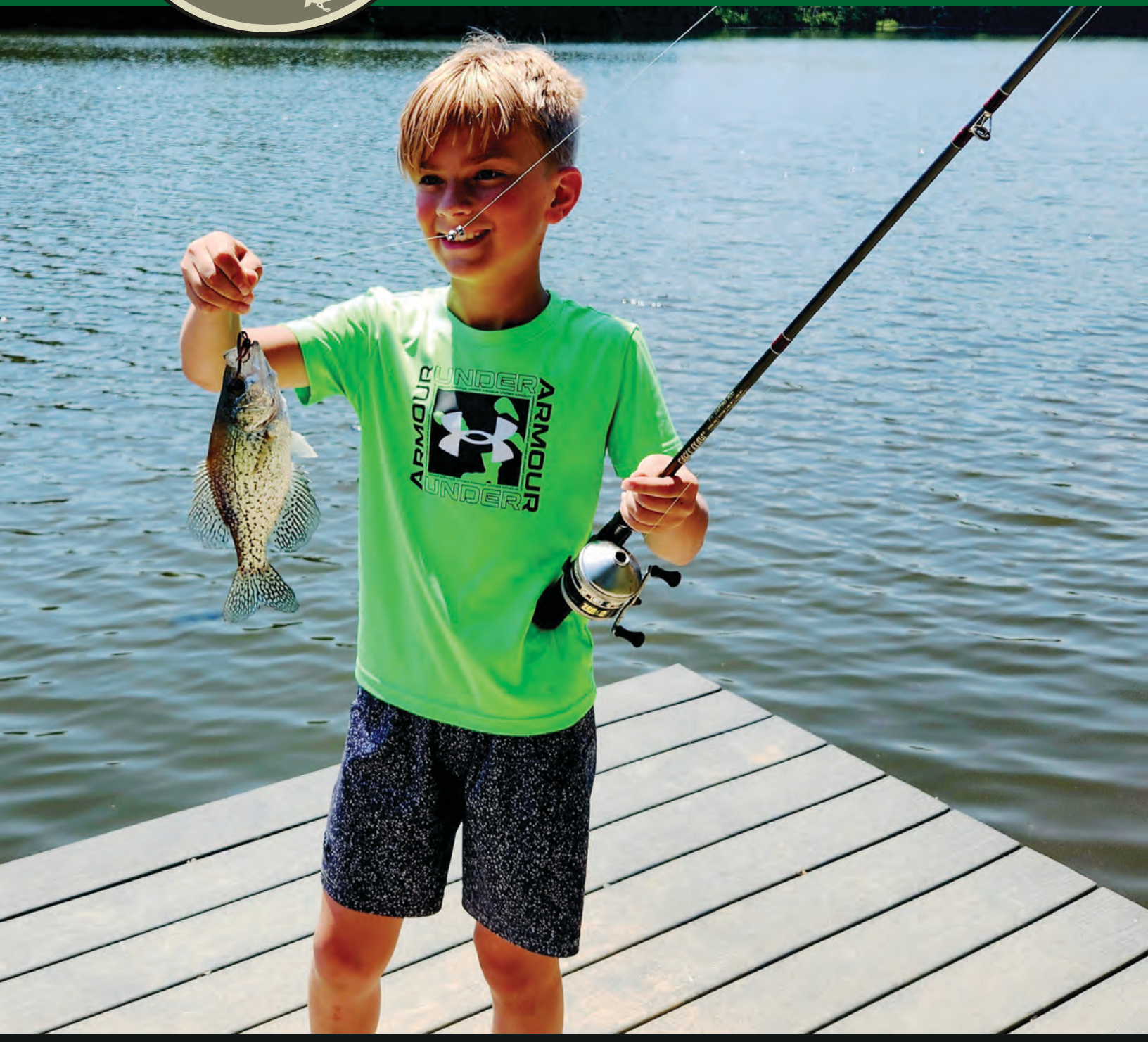
PRACTICAL WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT INFORMATION

Wildlife Trends JOURNAL

MARCH/APRIL 2025 VOLUME 25, ISSUE 2



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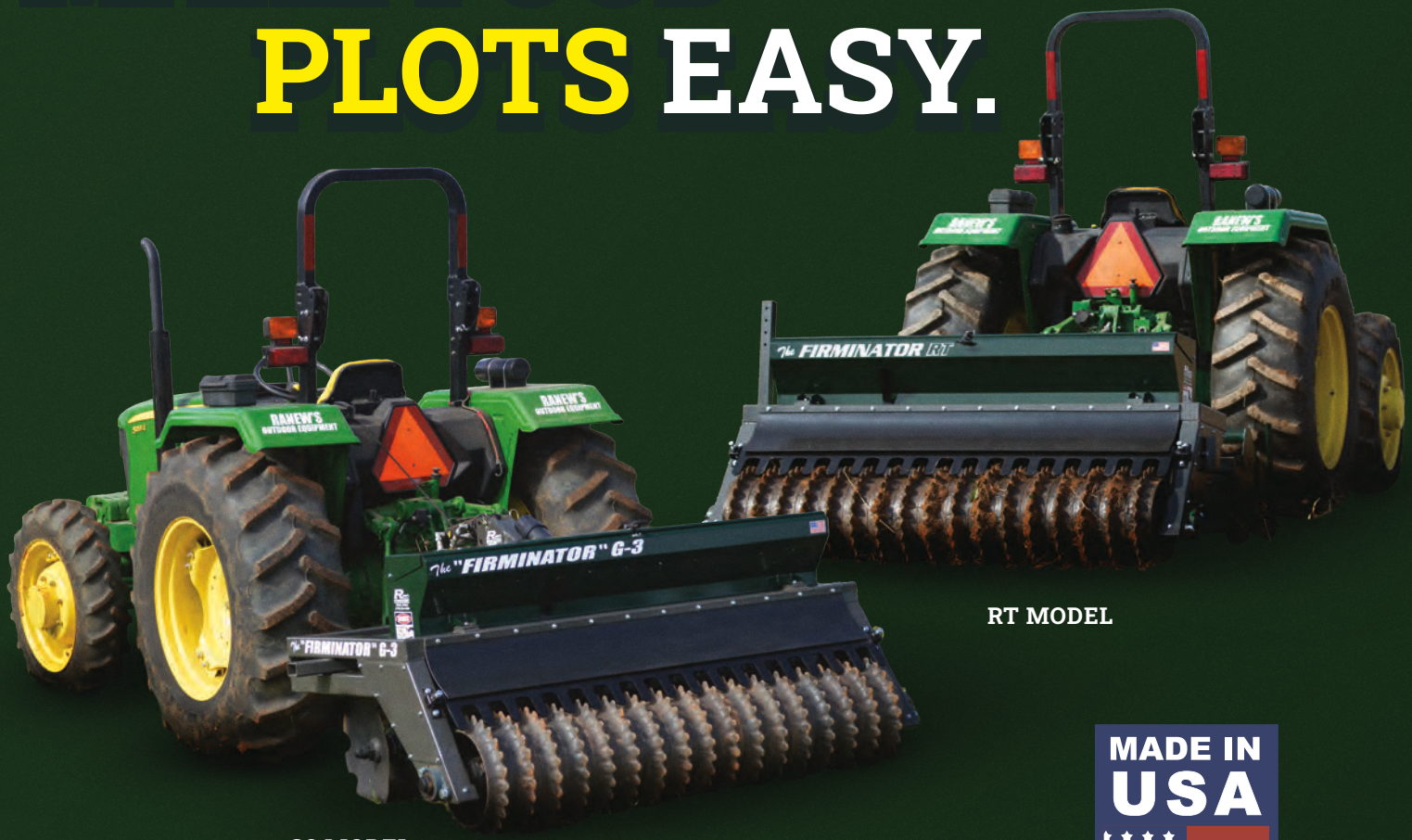

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Earl Says…

It's finally my favorite time of year…Turkey Season! Watching the weather each day, early morning scouting for turkey signs and roosting areas, etc. all make this the best time of the year for me.

Now I try my best to read up on the latest turkey research and I know most turkey numbers are down from past years, but the thrill of the chase is still worth it all. My problem is, why a 20-pound bird with the brain of a peanut can be so smart and difficult to harvest? My guess is those birds know that just about everything in the woods would love a nice turkey meal. That makes them extra sensitive to their surroundings and instinct is their main source for survival. But that doesn't stop us for at least trying!

Also, this is a great time of year to have your ponds checked out through electric fishing surveys with a professional wildlife biologist. **Scott Brown** with **Southern Sportsman Aquatics & Land Management** has been a regular contributor with *Wildlife Trends* for over a decade and I've seen him in action many times. If you're serious about Pond Management, contact him for advice or a survey of your pond. It will be the best money you can spend.

Wildlife Trends
JOURNAL

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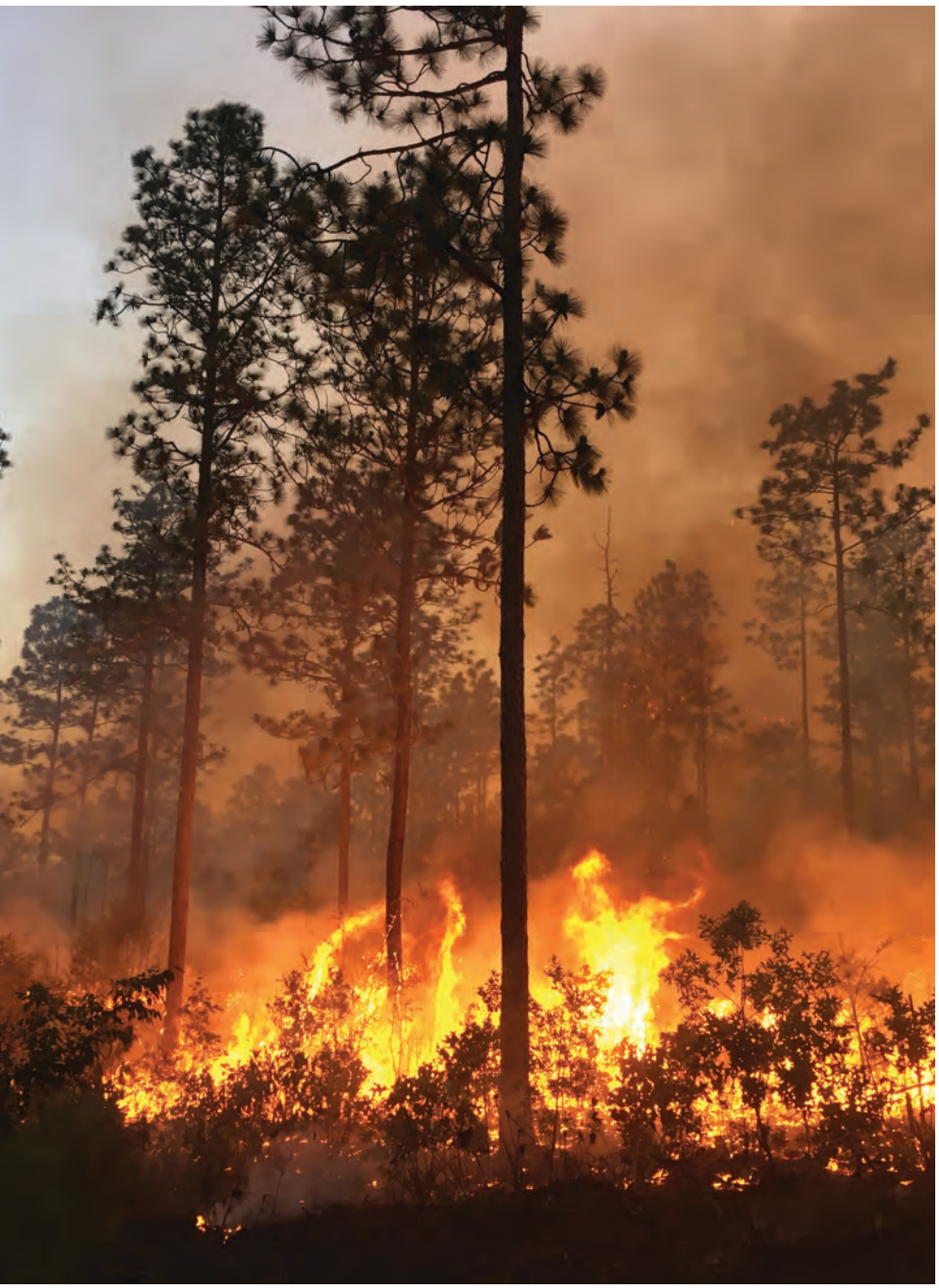
Cover Photo by Scott Brown

SEASONAL FIRE
Prescribed Burning in Winter and Summer

By Ted DeVos

Ted DeVos is a Certified Wildlife Biologist and a Registered Forester. He is also a licensed real estate agent with National Land Realty. Contact him at 334-269-2224.



Growing season fires can still get hot in areas of heavy fuels.

In the last article, we covered many of the basics of prescribed fire or controlled burning including smoke management and other liability issues and basic terminology. In this article, we will cover issues regarding growing season burning.

In reference to burning, "winter" or "dormant season" burns can be considered those fires conducted between Dec – March 31 when the woods start to green up substantially. In the Deep Southeast after April 1st, most trees, shrubs and understory vegetation have started to fully leaf out and shade the ground. This is the time frame when most prescribed burn practitioners consider their burning season at an end. However, there are a lot more burning days available through the remainder of the summer for those willing to try burning under a little different conditions.

Growing season or summer burns, (GS burns) are not that much different and, in a lot of ways, a lot easier to conduct and control than winter burns. Fires tend to be more "well behaved" and are not constantly trying to get out of the burn block, cross firelanes or burn off the neighbors. The basics of burning still apply. Securing downwind sides of burn blocks, burning ridges first, no ring fires, etc. all still need to be considered.

One of the biggest differences between winter and GS burns is that a winter burn will often cover all acres from firelane to firelane and burn down through hardwood bottoms right to the water in creeks. They tend to be "cleaner". GS fires are much more spotty and leave areas unburned where hardwood shade, briar thickets, weedy patches or thick sapling hardwood shade the ground. These fires usually stop at the hardwood edge and rarely burn to the creek bottoms.

Also, certain areas should not be burned with GS fires. Older timber stands, especially old longleaf that has not been burned in the last decade or more should not be burned in the growing season until a couple winter "fuel reduction" burns have been conducted. Heavy fuel buildup near the bases of these older trees allow feeder roots to grow into the lower duff layers and these feeder roots can be damaged in summer with fire and lead to high mortality rates, especially in dry conditions. Also, young longleaf that is less than 15-20' tall are susceptible to high mortality with GS burns. Once young longleaf develop a "candle" on their upper buds and bud extension begins, they are at risk for high mortality from fire. Those buds that are in the heat zone can be severely damaged by fire or intense heat. In any areas of high fuel loads and/or ladder fuels, a couple winter fires to reduce this fuel load are warranted before a GS burn is considered.

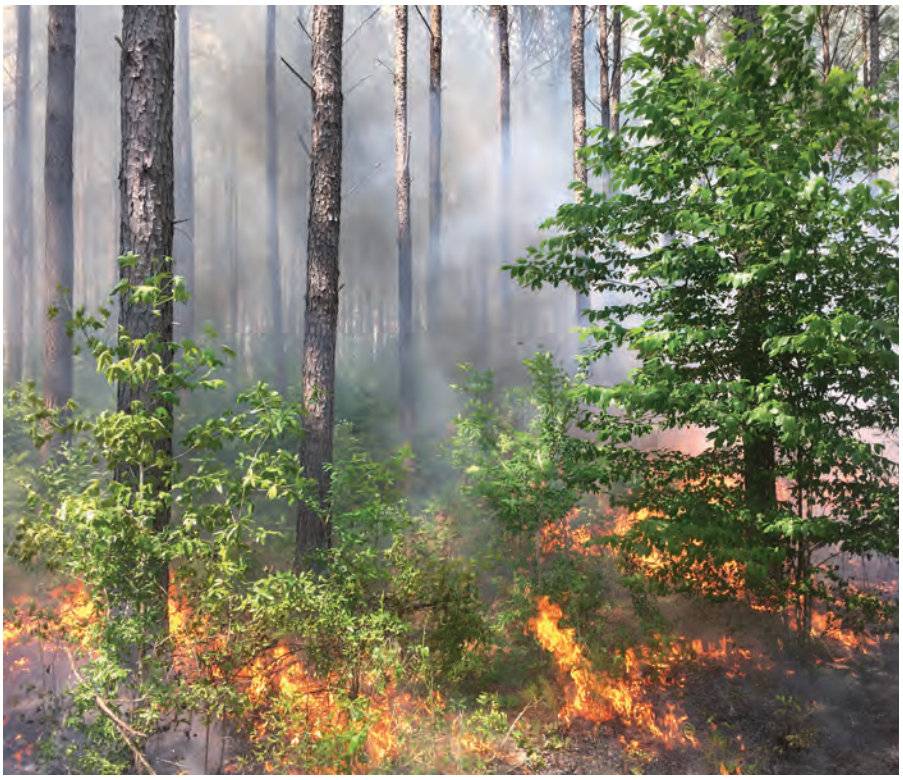
The major benefits of GS burning are 1) extending the burning window allowing a lot more acres to be burned in a season 2) GS burns do a significantly better job of controlling understory hardwoods and shrubs and provide a much higher impact on woody cleanup 3) GS burns change the composition of the understory plants that come back after a fire adding diversity to a woodland. Sweetgum, especially, is a problem in pine stands in the Southeast and GS burning can provide much more "knock down" power than winter burns. Often, gum reaching 4-5" diameter and 20'+ height can be top-killed with a GS burn. While mortality of these hardwoods may still not be significant, the removal of these stems out of the mid-story of a pine stand is substantial. Full kill of the roots of top-killed gum in a winter burn is virtually 0%, mortality in a summer burn may reach 10% on a good burn. So, regardless, you will have a hard time permanently removing gum with fire at any time of year.

The ability to top kill larger sapling gum in the understory is one of the many benefits of growing season fires.

We typically prioritize our annual burning schedule with the following considerations. Young, (<10 yrs old) longleaf plantations are scheduled first in January – March. Maintenance burns in pineywoods that have a minimal amount of hardwood sapling problems and a lot of good nesting cover, (grasses, etc.) are prioritized next (February – April), as are any hardwood burns. Burns with weak fuel conditions, little pine overstory and places that would have a hard time burning later, those with extremely high fuel loads as well as those primarily to attract turkeys for hunting season are next on the list. Finally, burns with good fuel conditions and in need of hardwood mid-story control are scheduled for after April 1.

Good fuels for GS burns are also very similar to winter burns. Even "greened-up" broomstraw still has all the dead grasses from last year available for burning. Pine straw carries a fire nearly all year. The fuels needed to carry a fire are still there even after greenup although the green vegetation tends to suppress fire intensity. Interestingly, hardwood stands are quite fireproof in the GS. If there is no or little pine overstory or little grass growing in a hardwood stand, GS burns will rarely burn through them under normal conditions. Of course, in extremely dry conditions when you should not be burning anyway, fire will enter hardwoods and can result in significant damage and mortality. In the GS,

Quick growth of legumes and other forbs provides high quality food for browsers and plentiful insects for poults and chicks.



Despite folks thinking that once the woods greenup it becomes "too green to burn", growing season still allows for plenty of days of high quality burning.

we tend to be faced with higher humidity and more shade so fire intensity tends to be suppressed and fires tend to simply go out right at the shade line of a hardwood drain. These shady conditions and higher humidity levels under the canopy seem to do a good job of protecting hardwoods in drains and other areas where they dominate the overstory.

Fuel loads do have a major impact in GS burns. Areas with weak fuel coverage, full shade conditions, weedy areas, thin grass coverage or those with light or "flat" pinestraw will often burn poorly or not at all with a GS burn. These burns need good fuel loading to carry well and do a good job. Also, even though GS burns are best for removing gum and other hardwood saplings from a pine stand, if you allow the gum to grow too thick and tall and completely fill in the midstory canopy developing full shade conditions on the ground, you will have a hard time getting the fire to carry.

Concerns about nesting wildlife, especially turkeys and quail, are justified. However, the areas where GS burns are most needed and used, (pine stands choked up with hardwood saplings and other shrubs with little or no grasses available for nesting) are usually poor nesting habitat and rarely selected by turkeys and quail for nesting anyway. In addition, those rare nests that are destroyed in a GS burn are replaced due to strong renesting instinct in these birds. Ideally, one of the objectives of these burns is to create good nesting habitat in future years by removing hardwood midstories and, ultimately, the habitat will be better in years to come, more than making up for an occasional nest loss. In addition, these burned areas become excellent brood habitat for young chicks later in the summer as growing vegetation begins to produce insects and the ground is open enough for young chicks to move through it and find food.

Most studies of turkey nesting indicate that even when turkeys are nesting in a burn block, only a couple percent of these nests are

impacted by fire. Turkeys tend to nest in the spots where shade would stop a fire or along wet drains where the fire doesn't reach anyway so most nests are at little risk even when in a block to be burned. Keep in mind that most GS fires tend to be much more of a mosaic of burned and unburned than winter fires.

Humidity, temperature, and fuel moisture conditions are the usually quite different from winter fires. Ambient air temps are often quite high and can result in uncomfortable conditions for burners as well as making fires a little hotter where they do burn. However, it is these higher air temps that help in killing hardwood saplings. It is a lot easier for a fire to heat the inner cambium of a hardwood sapling to lethal levels when the air temp is already in the 80's and 90's.

Humidity is typically higher during the GS which usually leads to these fires not being as erratic and hard to control as during the winter. Higher humidity leads to higher fuel moisture, especially fine fuels like grasses and pine straw which tend to dry quickly. Commonly, lowest humidity levels at mid-day run 30 - 45% on most summer days. If you have burned much, you have seen those winter days when humidity drops into low 20 percent range and have seen the "furious" way the fire burns in these conditions. These fires tend to send burning brands across firelanes and when the "probability of ignition" is high, they light across the line. In summer, higher humidity tends to suppress the fires and you don't get the number of jumps across the lines.

Slow and cautious is often the word for summer burning. Using creepy backfires, short spots and head fires usually gets the job done. Burning too hot and fast can lead to the heat reaching lethal levels on the pines also. Shifts in the wind can lead to spots of pine mortality as can using ring fires. Don't expect to get all ground to be burned like in a winter fire since there will usually be thickets, hardwood draws and canopied hardwoods with poor or no fuel that will stop the fire. If the burn block is well broken up with hardwood areas and mixed pine hardwood that will stop or slow down a fire, then a lot of fire may be able to be strung throughout all the ridges and allowed to go out on its own.

Summer burns tend to simply go out along drain edges and heavy hardwood shade.

In addition to the better control of hardwood saplings and other shrubs with GS burning, these later fires also promote some variety in plants returning on the site during the following summer months. Later growing legumes like desmo-

Recovery of understory growth is quick with growing season fires.

Even single hardwoods in a pine stand can shade out enough ground to be protected from fire.

dium and lespedezas grow well in summer burn sites with the reduced competition. These plants are excellent deer browse, and increase insect production for turkey and quail chicks. They are also excellent seed producers for various birds who depend on them.

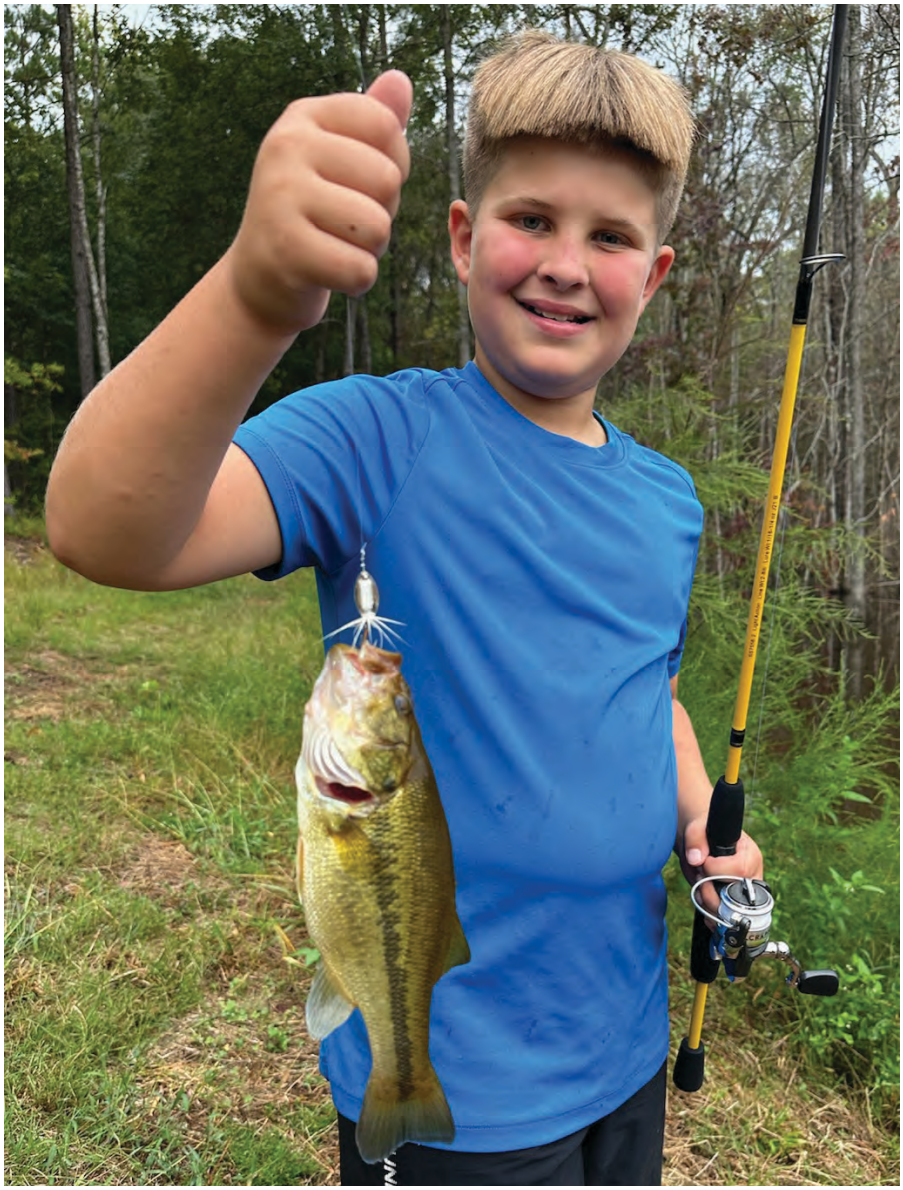
Native grasses like broomstraw that don't do well with competition also come back very well with later burns. Broomstraw and other native grasses are highly important to wildlife for cover and nesting. Quite often, trying to develop a good broomstraw stand in a pine woods can be problematic. Summer burns are an excellent way to encourage broomstraw coverage in these stands. Although they get a late start in growing, they usually do most of their development in late summer anyway and tend to regain full height if burned by July.

While GS burning is certainly not for all areas and takes a little different set of conditions to conduct, it certainly adds another powerful tool to the managers list of options. It extends the annual burning season and certainly is best for removing gum coverage in pine stands. So, once the woods have greened up, don't consider your burning season at a close. Give it a try, you may find it suits your management regime!

Questions Lake Owners Commonly Have

By Scott Brown

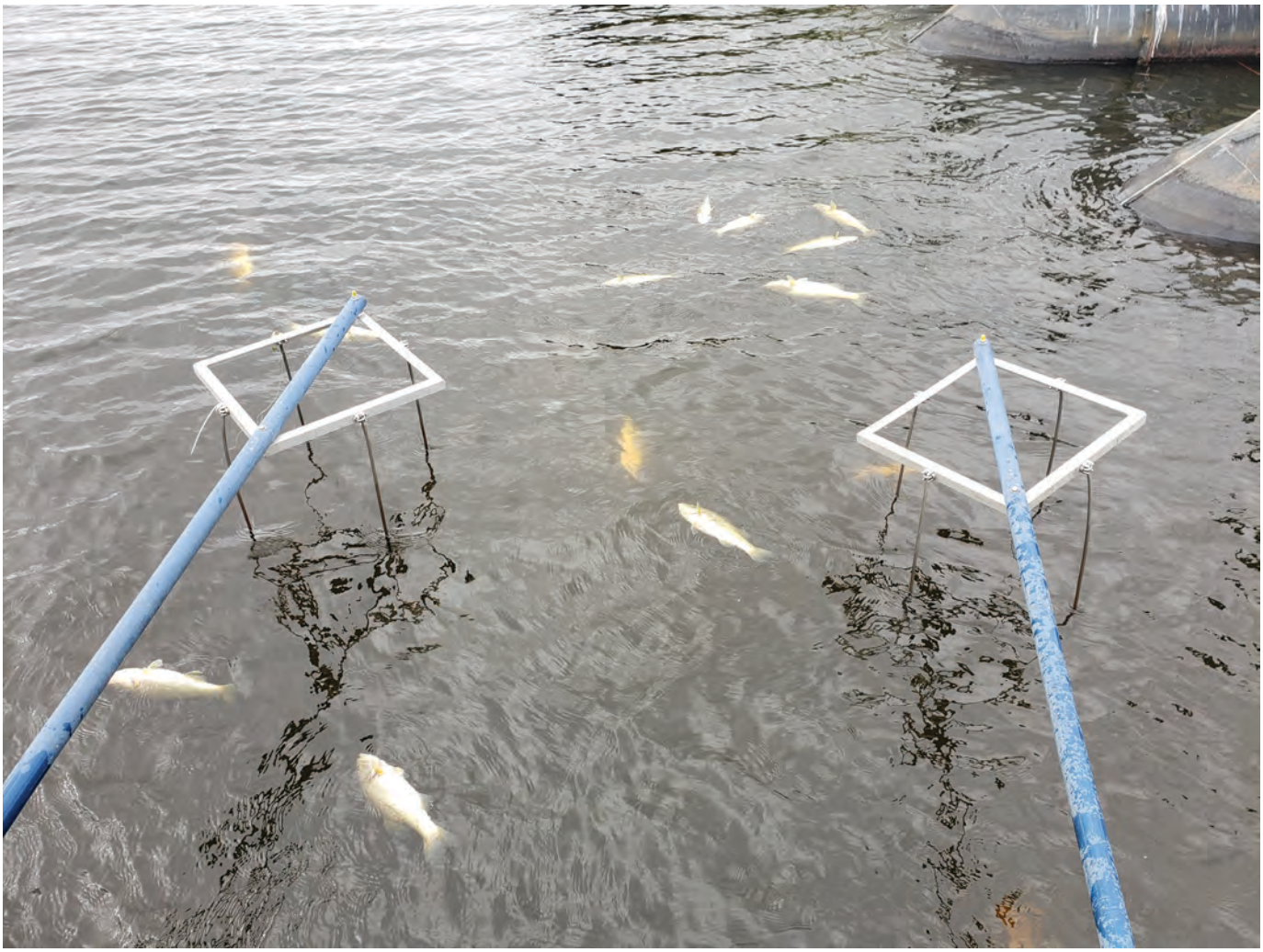
Scott Brown is a Biologist and regular contributor to Wildlife Trends Journal with over 35 years experience in research and managing natural resources throughout the Southeast. Scott founded Southern Sportsman Aquatics & Land Management in 2007 and now has clients from Texas to Florida and into the Carolinas.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



Yes, taking small largemouth bass out, annually is necessary. Youth are a great way to remove small bass throughout the year.

There are a core number of common questions that lake owners always ask. Some are related to the early phases of lake building such as how deep or how large does a pond need to be to grow quality fish? Should I lime and fertilize? Why can't I treat the whole lake of aquatic vegetation with herbicide in the summer? Should I stock shad? Can I stock big fish into my pond? And, probably the most common question asked – Should I, and why do I have to, remove small largemouth bass? Not all the answers are cut and dry, and every lake is unique and has to be looked at individually. For example, just because one of your waterbodies is benefitting from a fertilization program, doesn't mean all the lakes on your property should be fertilized.

How big should my pond be to grow quality largemouth bass? This is one of the first questions property owners ask who are building a new lake. After lake construction is complete, this question is irrelevant. Generally, the heart of this question is - how small of a pond can I build and still have a chance to grow some big bass? A general rule of thumb is bream require a one-acre pond to grow large individuals



It is typical for a bass population to become stunted, if proper management is not performed to control their numbers and allow the remaining individuals to grow at their full genetic potential.

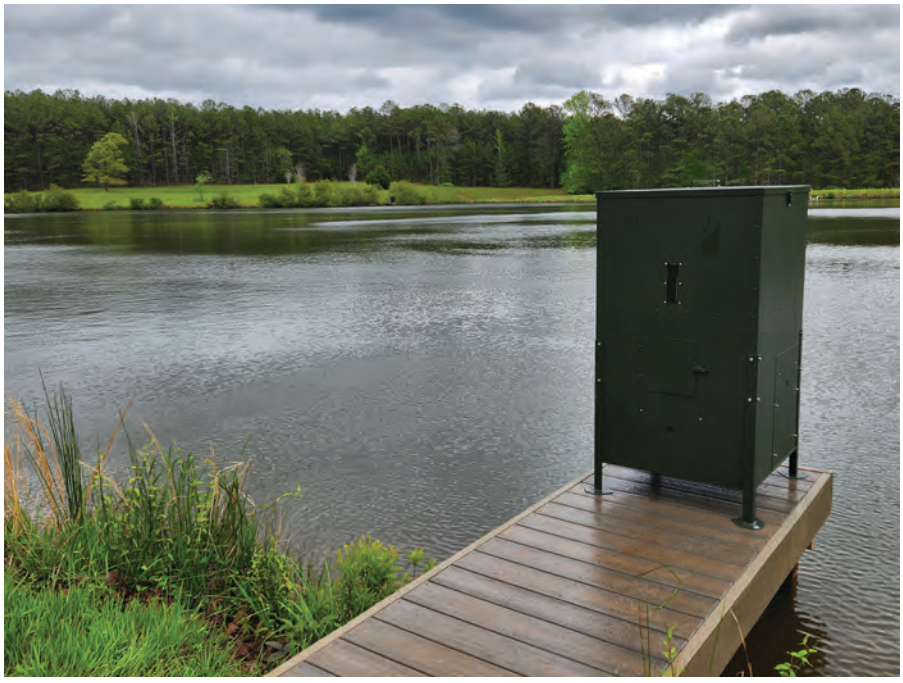
with a well-maintained supplemental feeding program to grow a lot of them to harvest annually. For largemouth bass, we like to see three acres or larger and bigger than five is preferred. For black crappie 15 acres or bigger, and 25 acres or larger is preferred. However, we have seen a few smaller waterbodies offer great crappie fishing, but more often than not they are not a good fishery. How many fish a waterbody can support is not based on the number of fish, but the total weight (biomass) of that particular species. For example, a largemouth bass carrying capacity of 100 pounds can be 100, one-pound individuals, 10, ten-pound individuals, or a combination of weights and sizes totaling 100 pounds. Most desirable fish species are edge species, so shape can make up for lake size. A three-acre pond with irregular shoreline and islands can have more quality habitat and grow more quality fish, than a square or round five-acre pond.

How deep should my pond be? This is another question that needs to be answered before the pond is built. In the North, shallow ponds get too cold, dissolved oxygen levels go down and ponds can freeze solid if not deep enough. In the South, water temperatures become elevated in the summer, pushing Dissolved Oxygen (DO) levels down. Both instances can stress or kill fish. A good rule of thumb is to have the pond at least eight feet deep during drought conditions and no more than 12 feet deep, unless you install a bottom aeration system. Without aeration anything deeper than 15 feet will experience low DO in the deeper holes and fish do not utilize these areas in certain times of the year when DO is below acceptable levels (3 parts per million [ppm]). If you install a bottom aeration system, going deeper is acceptable and will ensure fish will use the entire water column. Many landowners dig to eight feet and stop, only to find out after refilling that the final product is only seven or six feet deep. Once you stop digging the lake starts filling in with sediment immediately as the water comes in, so dig a little

deeper than desired, to compensate for silting in during the filling process and to allow for adequate depths during drought.

Should I lime and fertilize? Liming and fertilizing is a great tool to increase fish production. Several things need to be looked at while considering this option before implementing. Lake size is the first consideration. Lime is approximately $35-$40/ton delivered, and extra for spreading (unless from shore or in lake bottom with delivery trucks in a new lake not yet filled). Two tons per acre in a 30-acre lake can cost as much as $3,200 and you spread yourself. This usually needs to be performed every two-to-five years, depending on natural pH and the rate of inflow/outflow of water. To some, this is not a financial issue, to others it may be a reason not to perform the task. Obviously the less adjusting pH required and the size of the waterbody can greatly influence cost. The price of fertilizer has gone up drastically over the years. Pond fertilizer can run $20-$40/acre and applied three-to-six times per year. Again, the size of the waterbody, pH along with Hardness and Alkalinity levels needs to be considered before you incorporate this management tool. To raise those parameters, liming may be required in your area. To fertilize, assure pH is above 6, and hardness and alkalinity are above 20 milligrams per liter is desired. With so many variables when asked "should I lime and fertilize?" the answer is you need to first look at some the things previously mentioned. Finally, be aware that fertilizing is something that requires constant monitoring to ensure the desired effects occur and undesirable effects are nonexistent or kept to a minimum, and once initiated in the spring, it must be continued until next fall, otherwise undesirable vegetation growth can occur requiring expensive herbicide treatments.

Why can't I treat large areas of vegetation with herbicides in the summer? Many do it yourself lake owners get behind in the spring trying to tend to the uplands and ponds simultaneously. They see a little vegetation growing in the lake and know that we always preach leave some habitat. Then by early to mid-summer the once "looking good" weeds, are now out of control affecting a large part of the lake and need to be treated with herbicide. The majority of herbicides prescribed for aquatic vegetation are not toxic to fish, (a couple are toxic with extreme application rates). Most, (99.9%) fish kills that occur from herbicide use is from a drop in DO caused by dead plants. Living plants put oxygen into the atmosphere and water, but dead, decomposing plants in water are removing oxygen. The act of decomposing requires oxygen. If too much aquatic vegetation is treated with herbicides at once a drop in DO can cause stress or kill fish. To help avoid this, treating partial areas over several weeks needs to be performed when water temperatures are elevated. Warmer water holds less dissolved oxygen than cooler. Warmer water, decomposing plants, more fish present post spawn and less oxygen available means fish will become stressed or perish. Aquatic herbicide labels instruct you on how far apart treatments need to be in summer to defend against a fish kill. Usually, it is 7-14 days between treatments and ¼-1/3 of the area gets treated at one time. For an entire waterbody treatment of contact herbicide, striping the area is better than doing a partial treatment all at one end. Stripe waterbody into six or eight sections, treat an area, then skip one, two or three sections (depending how you have divided the treatments up) and treat. Return after label recommended days and treat another untreated area and skip some sections, same way as the first treatment. After multiple treatments, the



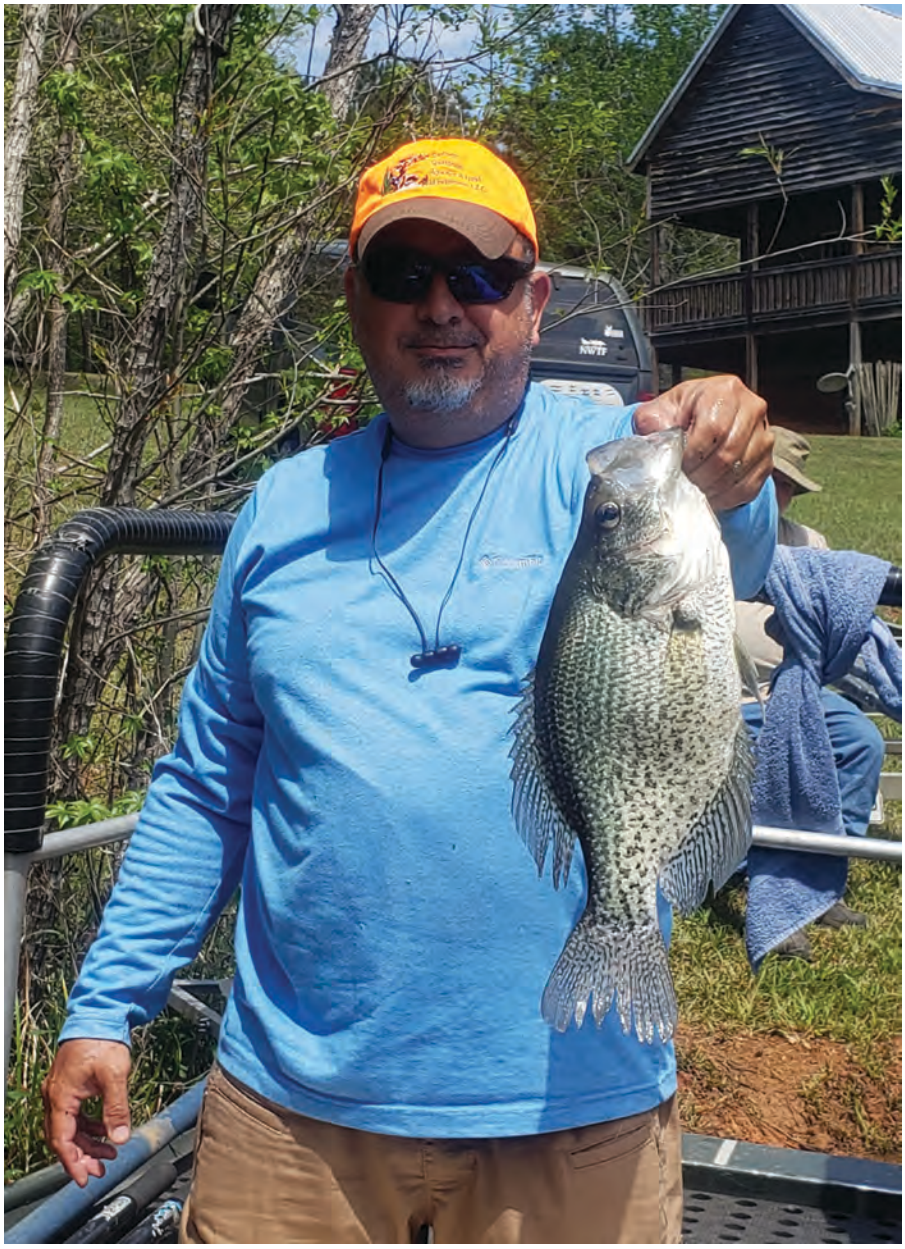
Supplemental feeding might be the greatest thing you can do after good water chemistry and habitat for a fish population. Most forage fish feed on fish food, and this accelerates their growth rate and increases their carrying capacity, which in turn supplies more food for bass.

entire area has been treated. When dealing with severe infestation, it may be better to spot treat access points such as boat ramps, docks, feeders, etc. and then return in early fall when water temperatures are cooler and treat the remaining nuisance vegetation.

Should I stock shad? Shad have always been associated with a quality bass fishery. Several research papers and articles have been written documenting the benefits from threadfin shad, and some managers feel gizzard shad also benefit big bass. The first question we ask is do you get a natural or man-made algae bloom, (green water) every growing season? If not, these fish have nothing to eat, as they live off the planktonic algae and zooplankton in green water. Stocking them in clear water will result in them dying, not reproducing, and only being beneficial to bass for a short period of time. Another note is they are expensive, so stocking without doing your homework is unadvisable. In the Deep South it is unadvisable to stock gizzard shad, as they grow too fast, and many will get larger than even your biggest bass can consume, eventually overpopulating and causing problems. Where winters are longer, gizzard shad growth is much slower and more beneficial to big bass for more years. Threadfin shad can become stressed and die if water temperatures get below 44 degrees F.

I have lots of big bream, why do I not have big bass? Typically, at a new client's, we see lakes with a lot of 4–10-inch forage fish, with a lot of small, (under 14 inch) bass and no or sparse quality bass. There is also no small forage, (under 4 inches) of any species. A stunted bass population has no forage to carry them from the 12–14-inch size to 18 inches and beyond to quality. A bottle neck occurs. The few big bass present have forage but the small-size bass are strug-

Starting a fertilization program requires running some water chemistry tests to see if pH, alkalinity and hardness are correct for creating an algae bloom. If not, liming may be necessary to make it work.

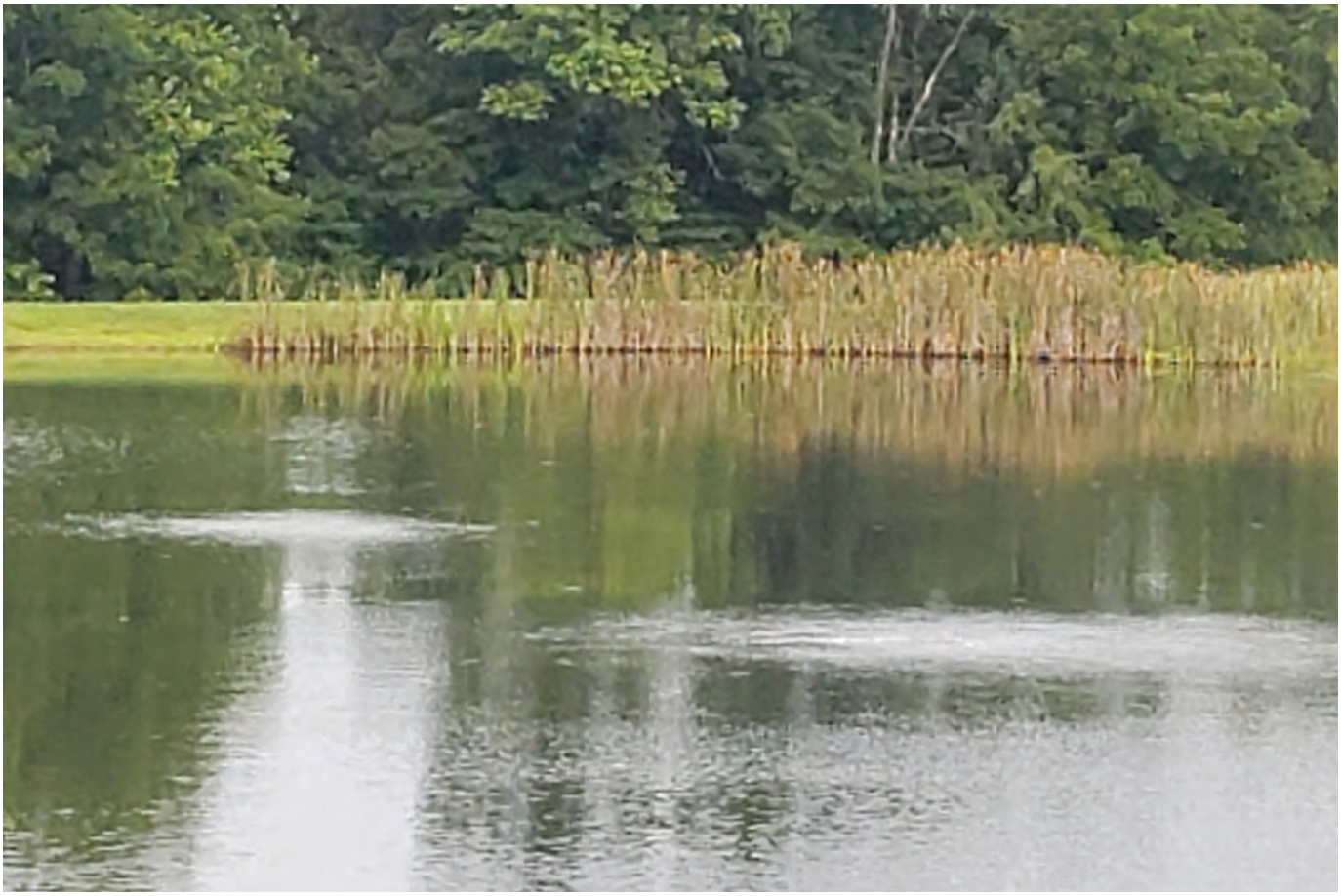


It requires a larger waterbody to have a good crappie fishery, but on rare occasions we see a smaller waterbody that can grow big crappie. These are always full of either threadfin shad, golden shiners and/or silversides, (glass minnows), and may have all three for a forage base.

gling to get to midsize due to no forage present to carry them onto the next sizes of forage. There are too many mouths to feed, and not enough forage for bass that size. You must look at forage make-up. If 1,000 pounds of forage is present, all in the form of four inch or bigger bream and other species, it will not grow those intermediate bass to mid-size so they can start feeding on the larger forage. Various forage sizes are required to grow bass from juveniles to quality or trophy fish. This is another reason to stock or have various species of forage and not rely on one or two species to grow your bass.

What is the one single thing that will improve my fish population the most? After we develop a management strategy, some lake owners want the "silver bullet" to improve their fish population. Some may decide their water chemistry is poor and their lake is too large, (costly) to lime, so the question arises, "of which recommendations will singly most improve things?" This is very difficult to answer but over the years we have seen starting and up-keeping a supplemental feeding program is more times than not, the answer. Keeping feeders full, fully operational and using quality fish feed are all necessary to get the biggest benefit. All fish benefit from a feeding program, including top predators such as largemouth bass that feed on fish that eat fish feed. Quality fish feed accelerates forage growth and increases their carrying capacity.

Why do I have to take small bass out? This is the most asked question and also the most neglected task in bass management. The more food, (forage) present, and fewer individuals feeding, the faster and larger the predators, (largemouth bass) remaining will grow. A desired combination of increased forage and reduced number of bass creates favorable conditions for bass to reach their full growth potential. The number prescribed to be removed may be from 10 – 30 per acre, depending how productive your lake is. Generally, in plankton rich, (green water) lakes, 20-30 bass per acre are prescribed to be removed ANNUALLY. In Clearwater lakes, possibly 10-15 per acre, ANNUALLY, may be prescribed. This is not a once in awhile task, it needs to be performed every year, and every one-to-two-years an evaluation, (electrofishing) should be conducted to adjust the slot to accommodate the needs of the bass population. The more bass present, the more that needs to be removed. This "bottle neck" usually occurs from 10-16 inches, but it can occur throughout the size range. Fish become stunted and skinny, (snake-like, with big head) when there is not enough appropriate size forage



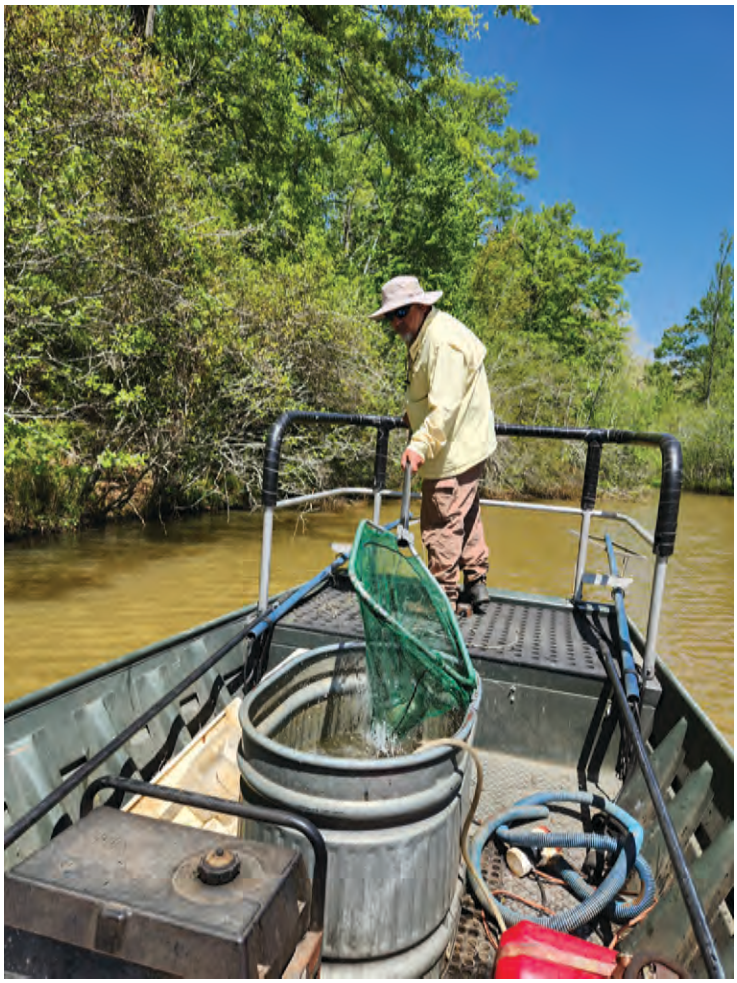
If your pond is over 15 feet deep, or has excessively rich algae blooms, installing bottom aeration may be right for you.

for a particular size predator to keep growing at their full potential. We have seen this bottleneck at three pounds, in which case fewer individuals are removed, because they are each larger than the typical one-pound fish. Instead of 30 one-pound fish per acre being removed, 8-10, three-pound fish per acre may need to be removed. Additionally, forage for bass in this size group is lacking and it needs to be addressed to provide food for those individuals.

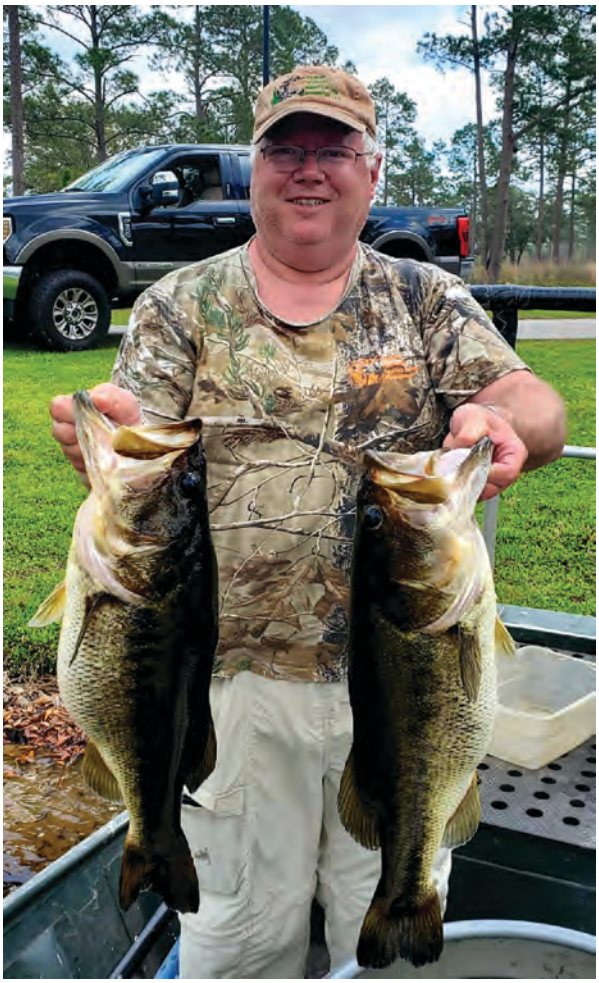
Can I bring in bigger, adult fish caught or bought from somewhere else and stock into my waterbody? Lake owners, understandably, want to expedite the process of having quality fish. More times than not, this does not work! Almost always, there is not enough forage for what is already in the population and now adding more mouths to feed, or there is not the proper size forage for newcomers, and they stop growing, and/or die. Many like to speed up their new lake's progress by adding quality fish bought, or caught from the nearby public waters or a buddy's lake. There are several reasons not to. One, your lake may not have adequate forage to support the new fish. You may introduce a bacteria or fungus to your fish population. Occasionally we hear about lake owners buying big 6-plus pound bass for their already established fish populations. How do you know that fish is not near the end of its life, or even if it does live a few more years, there is no guarantee anyone will ever catch it. Or maybe you are just feeding that new family of otters that just moved into your lake. It may be illegal in your state to transport live sportfish and restock in other waters without a permit.

These are a few of the common questions lake owners have for professional lake managers, but there are a wide range of answers to each one. When I get asked one of these questions, I usually ask a lot of questions back before I can give the best answer for their particular situation.

Establishing a good forage base with various species and sizes will greatly benefit your largemouth bass population. For bass to reach their full potential, they need unlimited forage of all sizes for their entire life cycle, from birth to over eight pounds.



An occasional electrofishing survey should be conducted to make adjustments to the ongoing, ever-changing fish management strategy helping you reach your objectives.

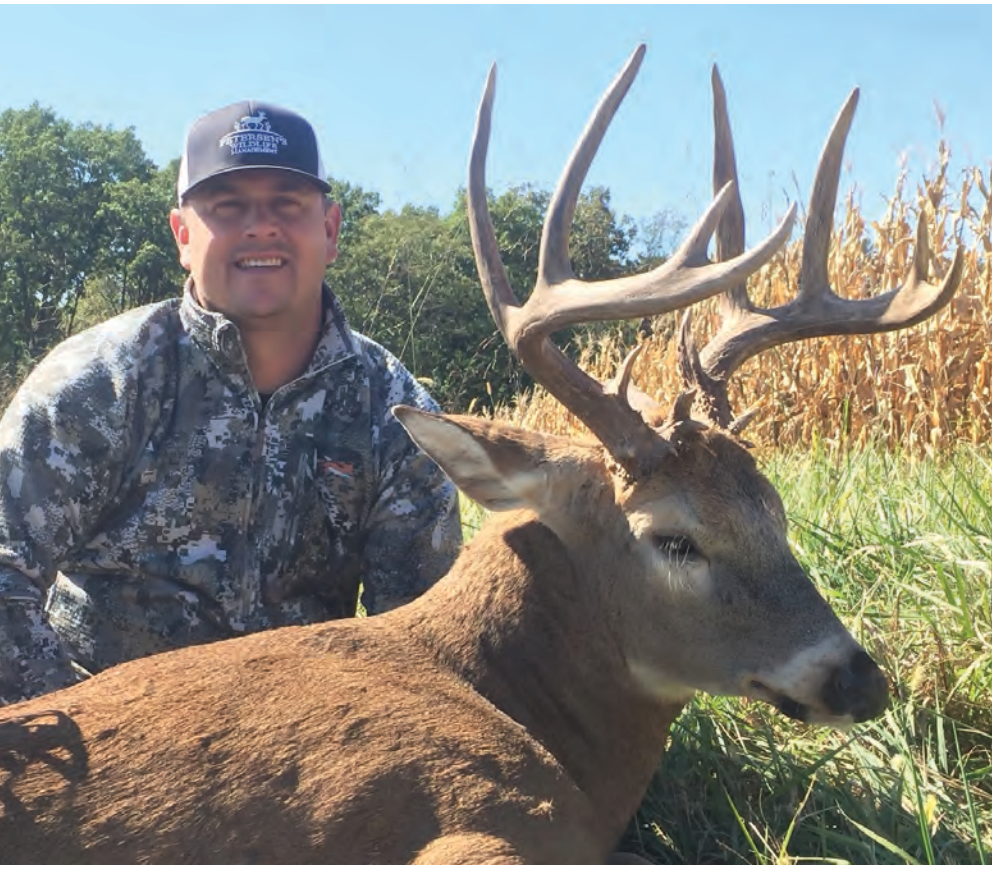


Not using shortcuts, asking your professional manager questions, and sticking to the plan, even when it seems slow, is the way to reach your lake's full fish population potential.

Become a Habitat Doctor for Better Wildlife

By Matt Petersen

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



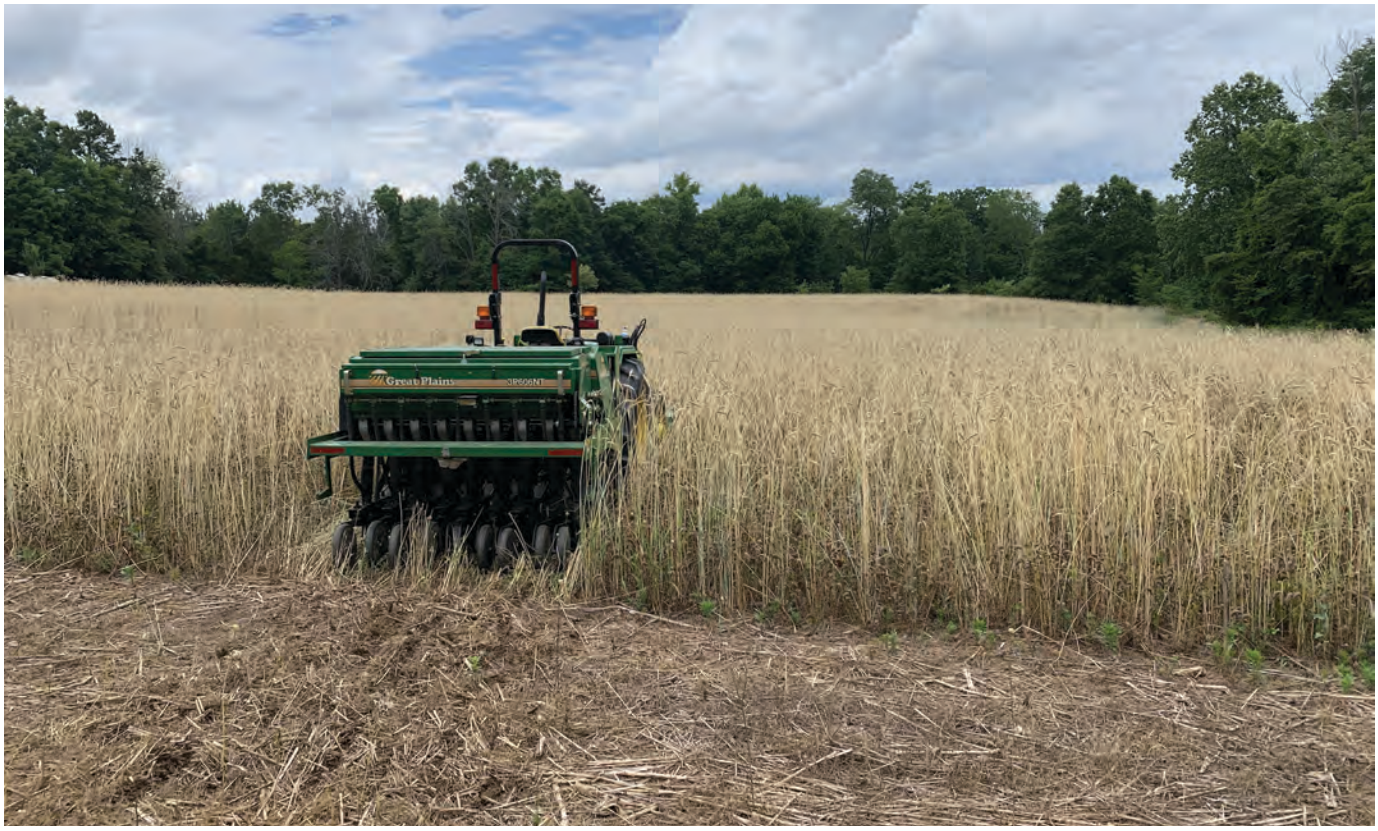
Large antlered mature bucks are just a symptom of good habitat, an abundance of quality forage, and a sound approach to herd management. The same can be said about small antlered mature bucks.

I take calls from land owners on a weekly and at times a daily basis. These calls often resemble a doctor fielding calls from medical patients. The land owner tends to call me with an issue that they have been having on their hunting property. They often are looking for my advice on how to remedy it, much like a doctor would do for a patient. I often rattle off a series of questions and gather as much information as possible, to come up with a likely diagnosis, (or a series of them). I do this in order to come up with a prescription to fix the issue(s). The statements I often hear are, "Matt we just aren't seeing any rabbits on the farm, or man we can't ever get a buck to reach 140". A few other common ones are, "These fields won't grow anything, the dirt here is just helping to hold the earth together". Or even, "The turkeys will be here in the fall, but as soon as it gets close to the hunting season, they are gone."

What I've learned after all of my years of consulting and managing properties, is that you can almost always answer the ultimate question of "Why?", after hearing statements like that, if you know how to read the signs and analyze all the symptoms that the property and wildlife lay out in front of you. More often than not, a simple cruise of the property can reveal those key signs that will allow you to put on your "habitat doctor" hat. Then you can diagnose the key symptoms that will lead to the proper prescription of habitat management techniques. These techniques will ultimately lead to the "the cure" of more wildlife, in both quality and quantity.

One great aspect of managing a wildlife farm is that management tactics that are great for certain species, such as deer, can often benefit many other species, such as rabbits, turkeys, and other non-game animals. This article will walk you through some commonly seen symptoms and help you get in the mindset of a habitat doctor. You then will be able to diagnose problems on your farm, in effort to increase its ability to hold and produce quality wildlife.

A common statement I hear is that land owners aren't seeing good amounts of rabbits on their farms. More often than not, the lack of



Planting via no-till drill coupled with high organic matter producing crops is a great way to battle poor soil conditions, erosion and low fertility.

decent rabbit numbers is merely a symptom of lack of quality cover on the property. If I end up taking a look at the farm, I can normally find scenarios that include blocks of mature hardwood timber that have little to no vegetation growing at ground level, or even thick stands of pines that are blocking out the vast majority of the sunlight and have covered the forest floor with a thick mat of pine needles. Both of these ultimately lead to a lack of plant growth on the forest floor. I also often see fields of mowed, cool season grasses or other mixed grass and weed fields that are mowed regularly and would have a hard time hiding a mouse, much less a rabbit. In areas of Ag country, it's common to see vast fields of wheat, corn, soybeans, or even tobacco. Depending on what stage of growth these are in, they often provide very little cover for rabbits, and certainly do not do so year-round. Having a good balance of briars, brush piles, young regenerating forest, warm season grasses, and even older timber, makes perfect areas for rabbits to hide. Add in some year-round green food sources, such as perineal clover plots, and you will provide an ideal habitat for rabbits to thrive.

Speaking of hiding, the next potential issue I look to diagnose is do we have a predator problem? With small game and rabbits in particular, that's often a land owner or new wildlife manager's first instinct to blame predation for a lack of small game. Predation is certainly an issue, and I've seen many cases where it can become extreme. This can be due to completely unchecked populations of predators. More often than not though, if we address the cover aspect of the habitat, and provide small games, like rabbits, plenty of places to avoid predation, we will always have a great population. A population that will continue to regenerate and even outpace predation. A couple of quick stories to further support this point of view, I experienced this this past rabbit season. Every year the NC rabbit season goes out on the last day of February. For the past 6-7 years a group of friends that are mainly retired, all get together on my small 36-acre home farm to rabbit hunt on the last Saturday of the season. I take my two young daughters, family, and some of my wildlife guys and we have a day full of fellowship. This fellowship is made of listening to a pack of beagles run rabbits, eating deer burgers, telling old stories, and picking on each other for missing. It is always a day that we look forward to each year. The older retired guys in the group get to hunt 30-40 days each season, and they tell me that my little place is the best hunt of the season year after year. They always talk about how many rabbits are concentrated in such a small area

A seclusion cage can be an excellent tool for the habitat manager/habitat Dr. to be able to diagnose a high deer population or lack of sufficient footage being available on a property.

and how we can hunt all day, and kill 10 rabbits each year while never stepping foot off my small place. They mentioned this year how they had gotten permission on a 300-acre farm, and could hardly jump a rabbit on the whole property. I know the farm they are referring to and it's mainly composed of mature hardwoods, having very little vegetation at ground level. Conversely, my farm consists of young pines, mature timber along the creek banks, thinned mature timber, and areas of naturally regentering forest. It's managed with fire and TSI methods to maximize sunlight's ability to reach the forest floor. This creates plentiful vegetation at ground level. My farm has roughly 10% of the acreage of the large property but provides almost 1000% more rabbits in a day's hunt, versus what was yielded from that larger farm. The reason is simply because it was managed to produce cover that's excellent small game habitat for rabbits to thrive.

Another experience I had this year at my place was with common predators of rabbits. Specifically, a grey fox and a pair of coyotes. When you have a property that has the right conditions to create large numbers of game you are always going to have predators on the landscape. Even if you are trapping regularly, new populations of predators will be constantly looking to colonize and prey on the game that is there. I can often drive from the start of the property on the main trail to the back of the farm and see 6-10 rabbits in the plots and paths on a consistent basis. This fall I noticed a grey fox and coyote pair cruising the same path surely hunting the rabbits I was used to seeing. I noticed my rabbit sightings starting to slow and called one of my friends that traps, and another that hunts predators. I put them both to work. They ended up catching one of the coyotes, (the female) but the male coyote and grey fox proved to be elusive. They still use the farm regularly. What I noticed this year while rabbit hunting is that we only jumped rabbits in areas well off the paths and in the thick areas of cover. The areas of thinner cover, smaller patches of cover, or areas closest to paths, held fewer rabbits this year compared to years past. What I attribute this to was the coyotes and foxes regularly cruising these paths and preying on the rabbits that frequented them, and likely also having better success catching rabbits in that thinner cover. It could also be that the rabbits seek out the heavier cover in order to avoid this predation. Regardless of which one I noticed a measurable reduction in the overall total of rabbits, and a shift in where we found them. The only variable that I singled out were the coyotes and foxes using the farm regularly, and our inability to remove them quickly this year.

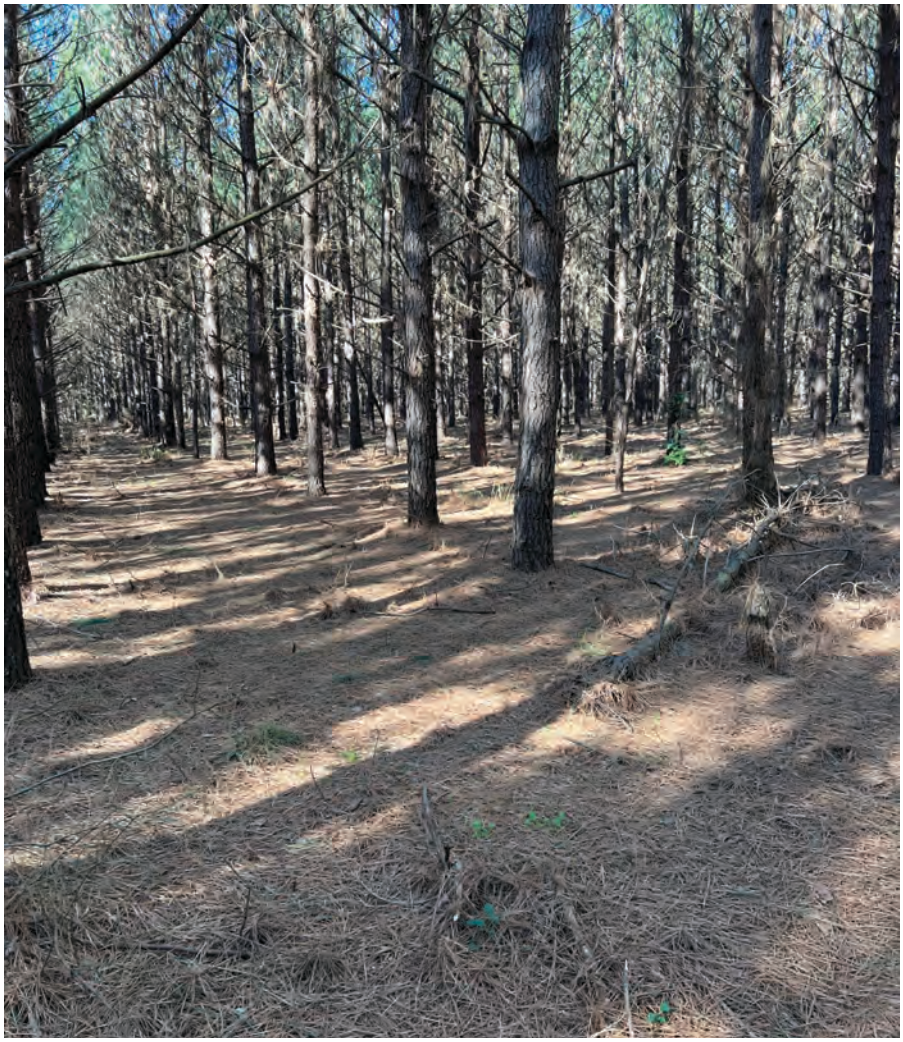
Ok so why all the time spent on rabbits and not on more prestigious wildlife species like quail, deer or even turkeys? The reason being, is that rabbits can be a great measuring stick for habitat quality. Chances are if you can produce and retain lots of rabbits then you have the proper habitat for both game and non-game species alike. If I see a farm with great rabbit cover and populations it means I have great fawning cover, great nesting cover for turkeys, and often

brooding cover as well. If the farm is kept in a consistent state of early succession, I can often have excellent conditions for quail also. So just by putting our habitat doctor hat on and looking at the symptom of "No rabbits", we can diagnose the issue as lack of cover or predation, (among others) and come up with a prescription of a timber harvest, prescribed fire, TSI, trapping, etc. Ultimately curing the issue and alleviating the symptom.

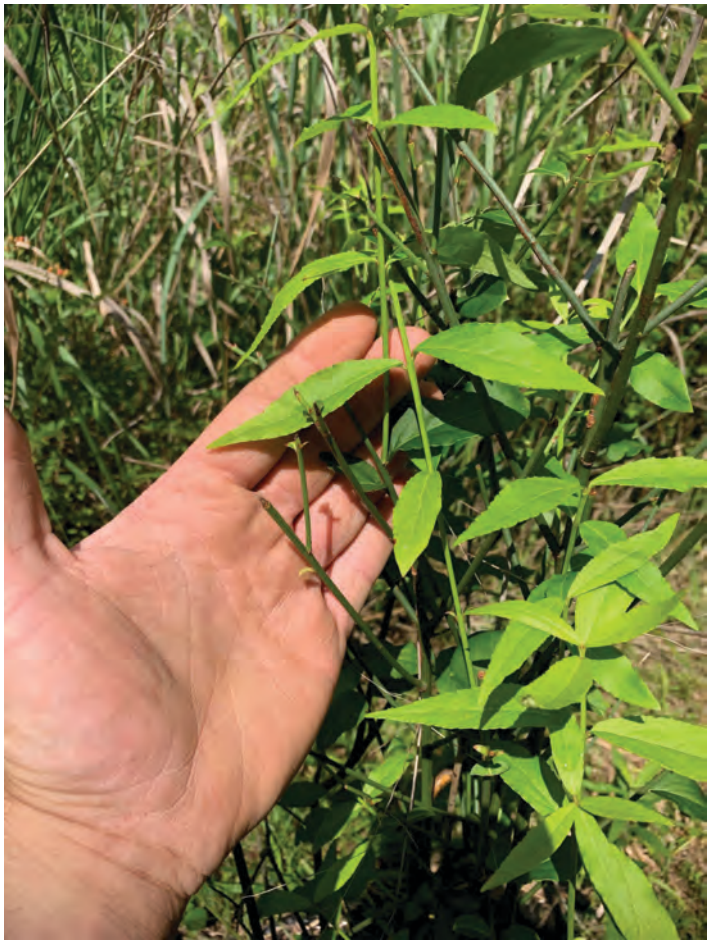
Another common statement I hear is, "We can't get anything to grow in this plot". Don't get me wrong, not all soil is created equal. Some soil simply performs better than others. For example, I will take a nice bottomland field adjacent to a large river or creek any day over a high ground field of sandrock/clay to plant a food plot in. The bottom land dirt tends to be loamy organic matter, rich soil that holds moisture and nutrients well. These soils tend to have great fertility naturally due to years of periodic flooding and years of dead plant material build up. On the other hand, a high ground sandrock/clay soil can often be very droughty in the growing season, becomes compacted easily, and can suffer from lower percentages of organic matter.

When it comes to diagnosing the symptoms of poor food plot growth, the first step in my play book is to consider the field site. Is it an area that is full sun and well drained? How about a shaded bottomland area that always holds moisture a bit too well? From there I'm checking the soil type. Heavy clay? Sand? What am I working with? I will typically then take a soil sample and interpret the results to see if there is an issue with low Ph or poor fertility. From all the information gathered I then figure out a planting strategy to then build up the soil and get in its proper condition to grow healthy "target" crops that benefit wildlife.

Let's say I had the sandrock/clay soil, in full sun to deal with. It's on a hill that has a fair slope to it, and between the slope and the nature of the ground, it doesn't hold moisture well. I've sent off my soil test and it's come back as a 5.3 Ph. The test is calling for two tons of lime per ace to hit the 6.5-7.0 Ph range and is requiring a fair amount of nutrients to grow any crop. Let's say I'm coming into spring and want to get this plot dialed in for a food plot in the fall. The first thing I will do is get my lime out. If the land is super compacted, I will incorporate the lime through tillage in an effort to alleviate compaction, and get a crop growing there. If the land is not too compacted I will no-till a crop with the planter, and simply apply the lime on top of the ground. A crop of grain sorghum, buck wheat, cowpeas, and sunflowers is perfect for poor land like this. Especially grain sorghum, it does a great job of plunging roots into compacted soil, handling low Ph, and creating lots of organic matter that helps with moisture and nutrient retention. I would follow that up with a heavy dose of cereal rye, turnips, radishes, and annual clover that fall to help to continue to break up the compactions with brassicas. Add the organic with rye and fix nitrogens with the clovers.



Often a symptom of poor habitat such as these thick pines will allow very few rabbits on the landscape. A prescription of thinning the pines can bring sunlight back to the forest floor and greatly increase plant growth at ground level leading to many more rabbits on the farm.



When a highly deer selected plant such as the strawberry bush pictured here are being allowed to mature and reproduce it's an excellent sign that quality forage is abundant and the deer population is in balance with the land.

After the first year, I will test soil again, assess my past crops performance, and see if the field is ready for a more sensitive crop. Or if it might require more time in the soil building planting. A perfect example of this was a farm I grew up hunting as a kid. It had a sandrock/sandy type soil on it that tended to yield poor crops and overall wildlife. All the bucks taken on the farm were always spindly racked and tended to have 7 points or less, often with no brow tines. The farmer that farmed this place often complained of "poor soil" and eventually gave up on planting it. My good friend got the farm to hunt and called me to see if the fields were even worth planting knowing the history of poor crops. I followed my normal routine of soil testing and soil building plantings the first 1.5 years and planted clover the second fall. I have managed the farm for 5 years now and have some of the best-looking clover plots on this farm of any of the farms I manage. What I found was, these fields had super low Ph and very low organic matter due to constant tillage. I limed the plots, planted the soil builder planting to address low organic matter, kept the crops in no-till planting, and added nutrients to the soil fixing the low fertility issues. Two years later, we had excellent food plot crops. Coupling this with managing deer density, timber, and succession through fire, and we have quality deer there now. My buddy killed a high 130's 3.5-year-old buck there last season that could have easily broken the 150" mark had he made it another year. The old timers couldn't believe that buck came from the "poor soil" farm of the past! By looking at the symptom of "We can't grow anything here", diagnosing the issue of low Ph, low organic matter, constant tillage, and low fertility, we came up with a prescription of adding lime, fertilizer, planting soil building blends, (to address to organic matter issue), and found the cure which led to great plantings.

One I hear all the time is that, "We have never had a buck over 140" on the farm". This can be a more complex symptom but I start with looking at deer density. I've seen so many farms that have great habitat and even great food plot programs that have low quality mature bucks. More often than not you can attribute this to super high deer numbers. In areas with great habitat and food sources, deer populations can explode in growth over the course of a few short years. Unlimited food coupled with great fawning cover allows does to produce 2-3 fawns each spring and enjoy great success getting them into the adult deer population. In my area of the Mid South, 50 deer per square mile is considered a medium deer density. If the buck to doe ratio is 1:4 (let's just say they are all adult and breeding age deer) then the forty does are all going to have at least 2 fawns and produce 80 more deer in the spring/early summer, increasing the deer population to 130 deer that fall. When you allow for 20 of these fawns to be predated on, or just killed in general, that still leaves 110 deer to deal with in the fall. If you figure that half of those remaining are 60 fawns or does, and let's say fifty percent of those get bred their first fall and produce one fawn the next year, along with the original 40 does producing 2 fawns, you will get an additional 95 fawns the following fawning season. Obviously, there are a ton of variables to consider here. Will the doe fawns get bred, how many of the original does will get killed, etc., etc. But you can see how quickly the population can get out of control. With super high deer numbers you will see highly selected native plants vanish from the landscape. Plants such as straw-

berry bush almost cease to exist on these sites. Plants such as common ragweed often don't get over a foot tall and rarely reseed due to extreme browse pressure. Deer preferred trees such as white oaks, black gums, or even maples tend to be browsed hard. Regeneration of these trees is limited and often non-existent due to high numbers of deer combing the landscape looking to fill their bellies. It becomes very difficult to establish food plot plantings, especially those that don't handle browse well. Crops such as soybeans, sunflowers, cowpeas, or even alfalfa become nearly impossible to get to maturity with the consistent heavy browse that they receive. There are many other factors here but ultimately the high deer density equals less food to go around to each deer. This typically leads to poor antlered mature bucks.

Also, are we high-grading the bucks we are harvesting? Meaning, are we killing the bucks with the best set of antlers at 2 or 3 years old before they reach maturity? Therefore, leaving the poorest antlered deer of the same ages to mature and be sub-par antlered mature bucks? I see this constantly with my neighbors, on some of my farms. They kill 110" - 2 .5-year-olds that have 10 points, but will pass the same age buck that is 70"and has 6-8 points. All they have done is allowed the low-quality genetic buck to live for another season which often ends up being a lower quality mature buck. Not always mind you but often. On my farm we end up with a poor antlered mature buck every few years that the neighbors have passed over the past few seasons because he was low scoring. That buck figures them out, and ends up being very hard for them to kill. He has learned their hunting approach over the years. This buck tends to become a problem for us because he will often spend time on the neighbor's place in daylight where he is safe but comes on to our farms at night taking advantage of our food resources and does. We had a buck doing just that this year and we eventually ended up killing him. He scores in the high 120's which is the average score of a 3.5-year-old on our farm, even though this buck was 5.5 years old.

Also, does the farm just not have enough food in general? Whether it be in the form of food plots or even native browse. Is there no quality forage during the growing season when bucks are growing their antlers and when does are nursing fawns? Is there no winter time food when bucks are coming into their antler growing season in super poor body condition affecting their antler growth? Identify the poor antler quality in mature bucks as a symptom, diagnose the problem or variations of such, and come up with a habitat and or herd management prescription that will lead to the cure and ultimately better mature bucks.

On a recent consulting visit I was dealing with another common concern from one of my clients. He has very few mature bucks using his property. The farm is situated in an excellent area and comprises a few well-placed fields that could be used as food plots with some mature timber running through them. The back half of the farm is completely made up of mature hardwood timber. I was quick to diagnose the issues here after cruising the property and listening to how the landowners hunted the farm. The first big issue was that the food plots were suffering from low Ph and low fertility. I could easily spot this by the looks of both the planted crops and native plants in the fields. This was later confirmed by the results of the soil test. Secondly, you would have a hard time hiding a 3 lb. rabbit on the farm much less a mature buck. The third issue was that they were walking across the whole farm to reach the back corner of the farm to reach the neighbor's tract that the deer were using heavily. The prescription was to get the fertility and Ph up by adding lime and fertilizer and planting quality food plots that overlap in production. This would provide year-round food for the deer thus giving bucks and does alike a reason to be in the plots and bedding close by. Do some TSI and selective timber harvesting to thicken up portions of the farm allowing deer to bed there, and the ability to move across the farm undetected. Mature bucks often don't move far from their beds in daylight and it's important that we provide them proper bedding cover on our land in order to have the ability to harvest them. Lastly, hunt the property properly in the front half and leave the back half of the farm as a sanctuary allowing mature bucks to feel safe there. Also allowing them to feel safe heading to the food plots in daylight.

Approach the wildlife management habitat issues on your farm as a habitat/wildlife doctor, and you will realize greater success. The more that you look at the symptoms and learn to read the signs the better you will be at diagnosing the issues, coming up with prescriptions, and implementing them. As hunters we all grew up reading signs that the game left behind for us and addressing habitat issues is very similar! Get out there today and be a habitat M.D. for your farm and it will be better for it.

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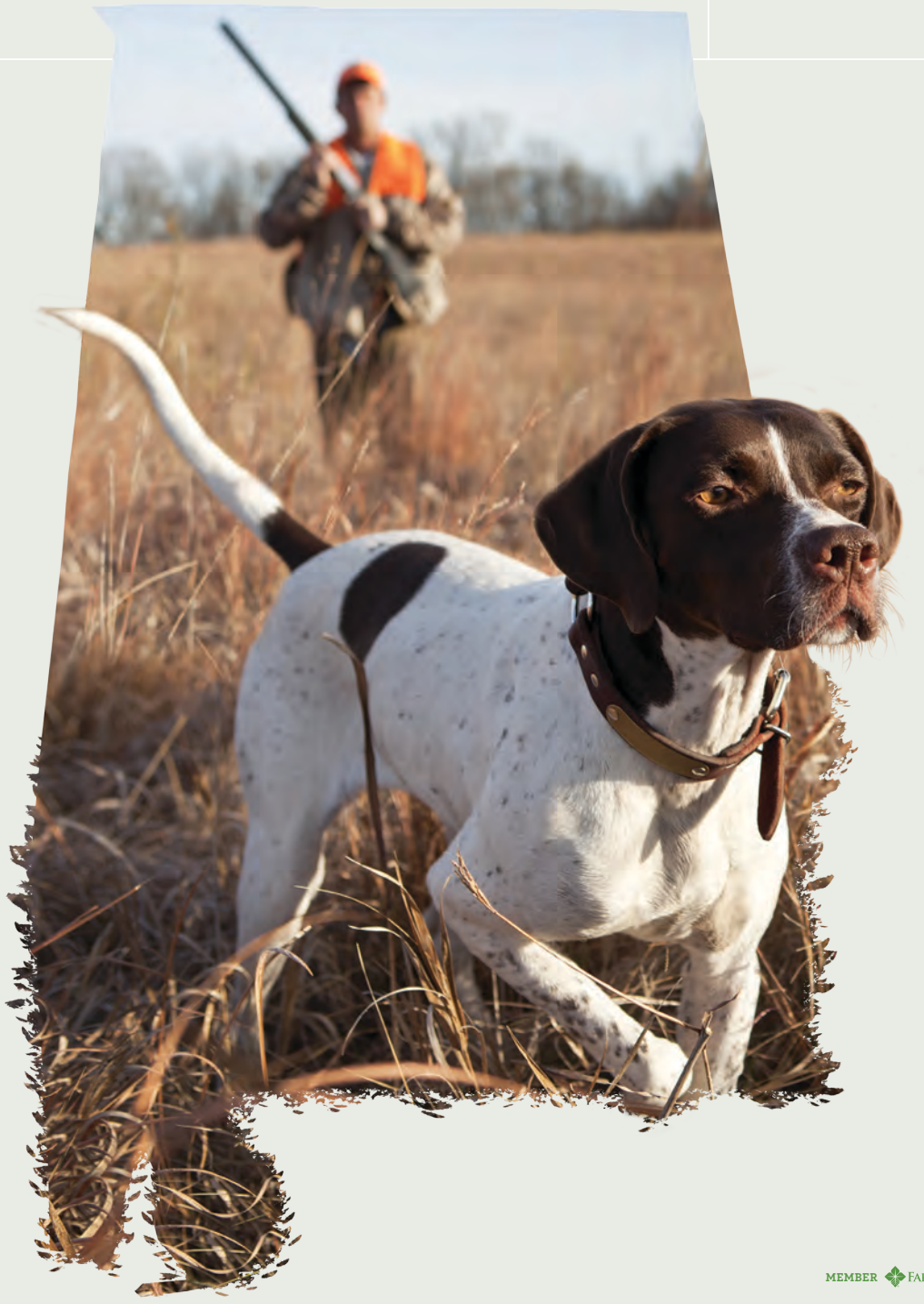
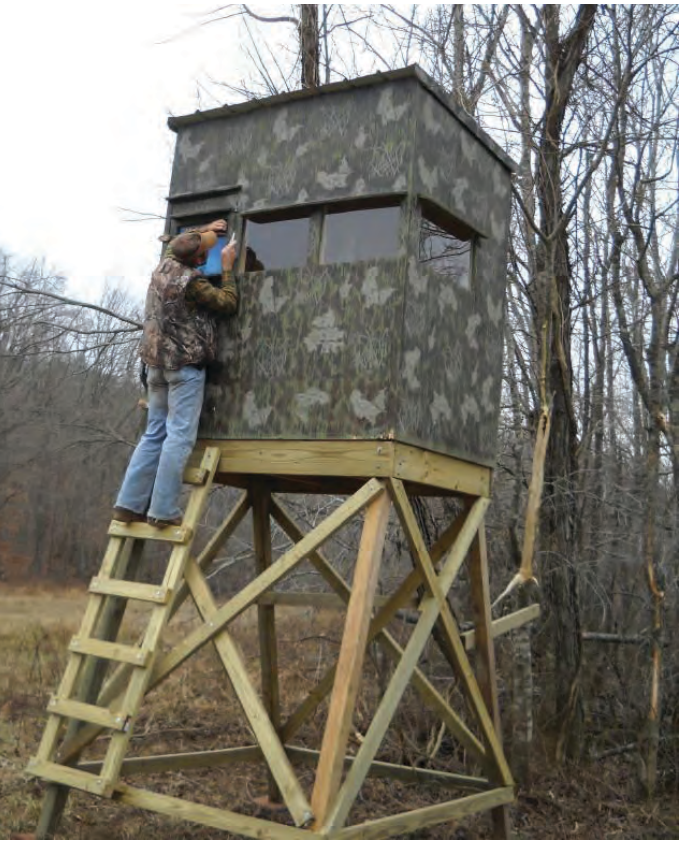


MEMBER FARM CREDIT

Wildlife Trends Journal Management Calendar

By Dave Edwards



Taking time now to seal and close up shooting houses will keep water and pests out which will help stands last longer.

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.

Clean and store prescribed burning equipment.

Now that the winter burning season is over, take time to clean and properly store equipment used so that it is in good working order the next time you burn. Burn fuel should be properly labeled and stored in a dry/cool place – if possible, try to use up all burn fuel during the burning season if possible so that you do not have to worry about storing flammable material. Take firepots apart and clean nipples and replace wicks if needed. Ensure the rubber seal on the lid is in good shape and replace any parts that show excessive wear. Clean and inspect handles, parts, and screws of fire rakes, flappers, etc. Although I use my herbicide tank/sprayer for fire suppression (water), I generally take time in late spring/early summer to clean it up and do general maintenance because I know I will be using it a good bit for herbicide applications throughout the summer. Without proper care and preventative maintenance, you are sure to have problems with prescribed fire equipment the next time you need it, (I'm speaking from experience).

Secure shooting houses.

Most landowners/hunting club members invest a good bit of time, money and energy into building shooting houses, (a.k.a box blinds, deer stands, condos, etc.) for deer hunting. However, once deer season is over, few hunters think about maintenance of these stands until next season. Animals such as owls, squirrels, raccoons, mice, wasps, dirt dobbers, etc. can make a mess of and/or destroy the inside of a shooting house and its contents such as chairs or curtains. Taking a little bit of time to seal/close up stands now will prevent animals from using these structures over the summer and reduce the amount of work needed to get stands ready next fall. Another benefit of sealing stands is keeping water out which will rot wood over time. While all shooting houses are different, the goal is to seal the inside as best you can to keep unwanted critters and rain out. In some cases, it's simply a matter of ensuring all doors and windows are closed. On stands without closeable windows, simply cut out and screw pieces of plywood over the windows. Expanding spray foam used for insulation can be handy in sealing areas between walls and the roof where corrugated tin is used. By making this part of your annual activities each spring, your stands will last longer and you will have more time in fall that can be devoted to scouting or other activities that will benefit wildlife on your property.

If minerals are lacking in the soil, deer will readily utilize mineral licks throughout the growing season.

Create and/or recharge mineral licks for deer.

If minerals are lacking in the native habitat, meaning they are lacking in the soils, deer will readily use mineral licks throughout the growing season, (spring/summer). There are many commercial products available to use in mineral licks that are pre-mixed or you can create your own. A recipe I often use is mixing 50# Dicalcium Phosphate, 50# Calcium Carbonate, and 50# Trace Mineral Salt. These ingredients can be found at most farmers' cooperative or feed & seed stores. To mix the minerals simply add each to a wheelbarrow or 3-point spreader and mix well using a shovel. This mix will be enough to create about 3-4 mineral licks. A good rule of thumb is to establish 1 lick per 200 acres. Rather than simply stirring minerals into bare ground, I prefer to create mineral lick sites using a small stack of half rotten logs and pour the minerals over the pile. Using this method, rain will leach the minerals into the logs. It is also a good idea to dig a small trench around the stacked logs to contain the minerals and prevent run-off. Deer will simply eat the rotten wood that is saturated in minerals. As the pile deteriorates due to deer use, simply add a few more logs and re-apply more mineral mix to the pile. If deer on your property do not use the licks, don't worry. This probably means that they are acquiring adequate minerals from native plants and do not need supplemental minerals.

Lime and fertilize roadsides.

Many landowners concentrate their efforts in the woods or food plots but overlook roadsides when managing a property. Roadsides can account for a great deal of acreage across a property. Liming and fertilizing natural areas along roads during spring/early summer will enhance plant growth, attraction and nutrition of these areas for wildlife. These areas not only provide quality browse for deer but create ideal nesting and escape cover for turkeys and quail. Because wildlife is attracted to these areas it also increases wildlife viewing opportunities while riding around the property. This strategy is well suited for widened roadsides that are currently being managed, (by mowing, disking, fire, roller chopping, etc.) for early successional habitats. It may be worth noting that this is a "fine-tuning" strategy to enhance wildlife habitat once other "big picture" items such as woods, fields, etc. are being actively and properly managed. If you have undesirable vegetation or exotic plants along roadsides such as sweetgum trees, privet, cogon grass, etc., a consulting wildlife biologist or forester may be useful in helping to determine the appropriate mechanical and or chemical strategies to apply to remove these and promote more desirable wildlife friendly plants.

Plant screenings to hide hunting stands and hunter access areas.

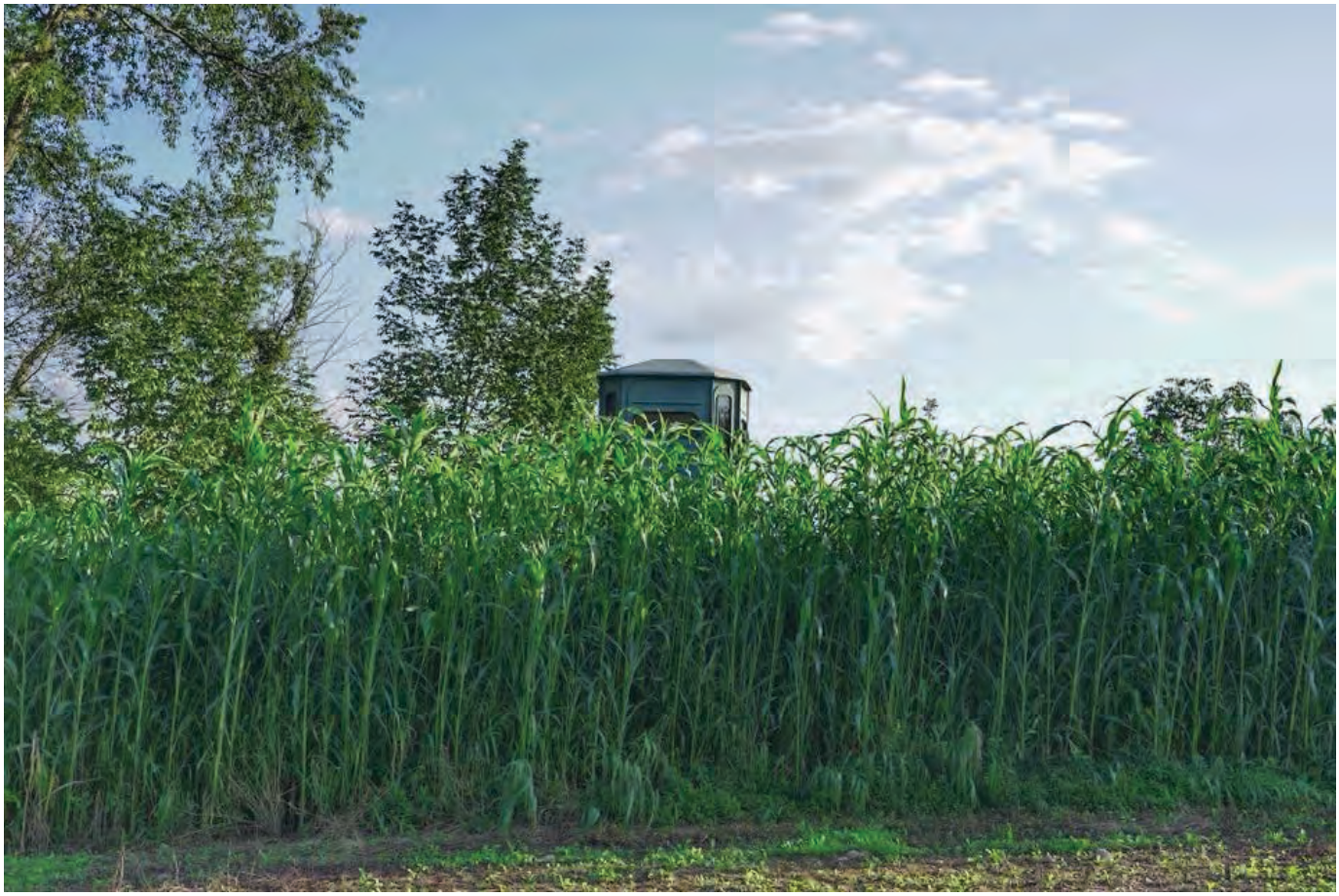
When it comes to deer hunting, hunting pressure plays a significant role in the hunting quality, (number and quality of deer seen while hunting) of your property. Hunting pressure does not necessarily mean a lot of shooting that is spooking deer. Most hunting pressure is often applied when hunters do not shoot at all. Examples of this include making full-scale scouting trips through a property during the season, spooking deer while entering or exiting a hunting stand, and hunting stands during unfavorable wind conditions. Most hunting clubs and clients managed by Tall Tines Wildlife Consultants collect hunter observation data where they record the number and quality of deer they see while hunting. This helps us assess hunting quality which plays a role in our deer harvest decisions and hunting strategy recommendations. Years of hunter observation data from our clients shows that deer sightings, particularly mature buck sightings, decrease as hunting pressure

increases. Therefore, you should make efforts to keep hunting pressure to a minimum. One way to decrease hunting pressure is to screen hunting stands and hunter access areas with evergreen trees or other plantings to allow hunters to enter or exit the stand without impacting deer in the area. While evergreen trees work well for this application, we often plant tall standing crops such as corn or Egyptian wheat where needed to hide hunters. Because these are spring/summer plantings, you need to think ahead. That is, identify hunting stands now that need screening next fall. Strips of Egyptian wheat or tall millet varieties need to be at least 10 yards wide to be effective since some of the crop plants will fall over after heavy frosts. Obviously wider strips will better conceal hunters.

Establish or create field borders where possible.

Field borders are just as the name implies – the areas around the perimeter of fields where they meet woods. This area is biologically referred to as an ecotone, (where two different habitats join). The areas where fields meet mature woods can be significantly enhanced for wildlife by creating a "soft edge". Soft edges can be created using a variety of strategies. The goal is to gradually taper the abrupt edge of a mature forest along a field which increases "edge habitat" and results in an abundance of food and cover for wildlife. A 40–60-foot field border can be established by planting crops such as sorghum and millets and/or managing for brush/shrub species along field edges. As you may know, most game species thrive and depend on edge habitat. These areas provide food, travel lanes, nesting, brood-rearing, loafing, and escape cover for many wildlife species. Field borders can be managed in native grass/shrub species as well. Simply leave these areas fallow and maintain them by periodically mowing, burning, or light disking to prevent trees from encroaching. Strategically creating field borders on food plots can enhance bow hunting opportunities as well. For example, creating an hourglass shaped planting area on a rectangular food plot, by allowing the middle edges to grow up naturally, will "funnel" deer through the

Spring and summer are great times to apply full-on hog trapping and removing efforts.



Screening deer stands to allow hunters to access and exit stands without disturbing deer will help reduce hunting pressure next year. Now is the time to plant these screenings.

pinched portion of the planted area offering bow hunters a close shot. I encourage you to check with your local NRCS office to see if you qualify for a Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). These programs often offer incentives for landowners to install field borders. In most cases, the cost share initiative would pay for this work.

Control feral hog populations.

Feral hogs are very destructive and a nuisance on many properties throughout the Southeast. While hogs add additional hunting opportunities for landowners, they are difficult to control. I often hear, "I'd like to have a few hogs on my property to hunt". I agree and enjoy hunting hogs from time to time. However, if you've ever had hogs, you know this is not possible…you cannot have a "few" hogs. A property normally has no hogs or an overabundance of them. The reproductive potential of hogs is extremely high in good habitats. With pregnancies lasting only 115 days, hogs generally produce 2 litters of 1-13 piglets per year, with the potential to have 3 litters! So needless to say, extreme/aggressive control is needed to simply keep up with or stabilize a hog population. There are many ways to remove hogs. Some of the most common methods include trapping, recreational hunting, and professional hunting/trapping or a combination of all. There have been many articles in Wildlife Trends dedicated to successful trapping methods. Hog control should be applied throughout the year or when needed. However, many landowners increase efforts during the summer to reduce disturbance and "hunting pressure" during hunting season. Besides their destructive nature on wildlife habitat, hogs can destroy roads, food plots, pond dams and many other structures on your property. They can do several thousands of dollars worth of damage in a short period of time. Controlling hogs will save you time, money, and frustration. A word of caution for those that have hogs but don't think they are a problem yet – the key word is "yet". Once they are a problem, it is very difficult to remove enough to control the population.

Screen property lines where needed to prevent or reduce poaching.

Landowners or hunting clubs that are aggressively managing their

property for wildlife have many resources invested into developing, managing, and/or maintaining their property. Regardless of where your property is, efforts should be made to reduce or eliminate poaching. This includes properly posting your property, having secure gates, and fencing if needed. These activities relay the message that you are serious about trespassing and will curtail most trespassing. Something that many landowners or hunting clubs often overlook is using crops, shrubs, or other plants to provide natural barriers or screens to keep people from seeing into your property. Obstructing the view of your property from adjacent landowners, hunting clubs, or along highways or roads may not eliminate poaching, but will reduce the temptation. Most properties only have a few key areas along their border that need to be screened. Some of my favorite "natural screens" include evergreen trees such as cypress, cedars, or pines. These species grow well in many soils and climates and because they are evergreen, they provide good screen during the winter months. Unless you are planting containerized trees, such as 25-gallon potted trees, most trees should be planted in the winter. An alternative, and something I often do, is to plant strips of spring/summer crops that will grow tall enough to do the job. Many of these crops can be planted in April and May depending on your location. Corn, Egyptian wheat, sorghum Sudan, switchgrass, or some of the taller native warm season grasses not only make good screens but add wildlife value to your property. If you choose this route, ensure the strip is wide enough to provide a good screen once crops mature and brown up during fall. I often make these strips 25 feet wide if the situation allows.

Make repairs to deer stands.

Don't wait until you get the "fall bug" in September to start repairing deer stands. How many times have you made significant repairs including painting of stands right before hunting season started? Me too! Although fixing or performing general maintenance to deer stands is not what most hunters are thinking about during or just after turkey season, now is a great time to tackle this task. In many cases these repairs require oiling moving parts, replacing parts, and/or painting. Whether you need to use WD40 to quiet squeaks, add new tie wraps or pipe insulation, screening material, seat cushions, weld new pieces in place, or simply repaint shooting houses or ladder stands to prevent rust, most repairs result in "stinky" results. That is, maintaining and repairing stands results in lots of foreign scents. By completing these repairs in early summer stands have several months to air out before being placed in the woods for another hunting season. Because I primarily bow hunt, I even purchase and air out tie down straps used to fasten stick ladders and lock on bow stands this time of year so that they are "scent free" by fall. Doing this work now also reduces unnecessary scrambling to get things ready as the season approaches.

Check and send trail cams in for repairs.

Late spring is a great time to perform normal maintenance to trail cameras. Generally speaking, this is the period I use my cameras the least. Taking care of cameras now will ensure they are ready to be deployed in late summer to begin assessing bucks or conducting camera surveys in early fall. With over 25 years of experience using trail cameras and currently owning roughly 150 cameras, I can assure you that giving them a little TLC goes a long way in extending their life. I normally clean each camera in detail. Focus deep cleaning efforts on the user panel, (where you adjust settings), battery compartment, lens, and flash areas. I use an electronics spray duster, (can of compressed air or liquid gas) often used to dust/clean computer keyboards. A toothbrush is a good tool to clean small debris from these areas as well. Never store cameras with batteries in them. If your camera has a rubber seal around access compartment doors, (most do), pull them and clean them well. I often wipe them down with Vaseline to lubricate/condition them which gives them a better seal. If the rubber seal is dry rotted, simply order a new one from the manufacturer. This is also a great time to send "broken" cameras back to the manufacturer for repair if needed. Obviously, there are many things that can break in trail cameras. Although we all try to handle them carefully, we are taking them into rough and bumpy environments so occasional issues will occur. By sending them in for repair now, you will avoid delayed service times later due to the typical "fall rush" in late summer/fall when most hunters start thinking about deploying cameras and remember or realize they have issues. A few of the more common problems I've encountered include flash not working properly, photos having a halo around white-out areas, (like reflective deer eyes), and being out of focus. These are problems that only the manufacturer can fix.

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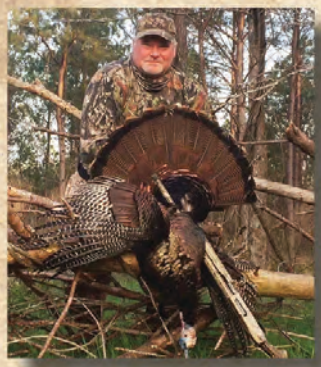

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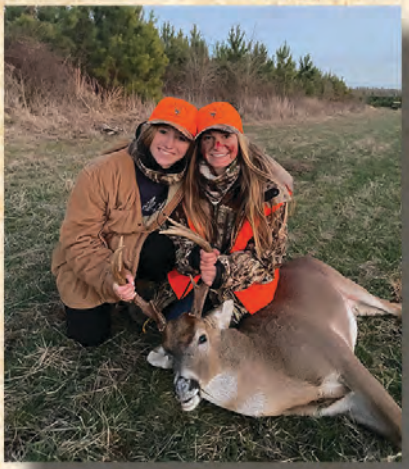

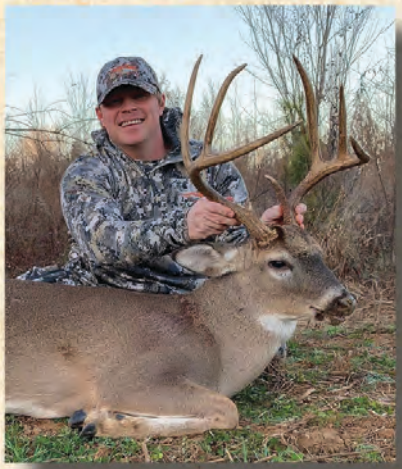

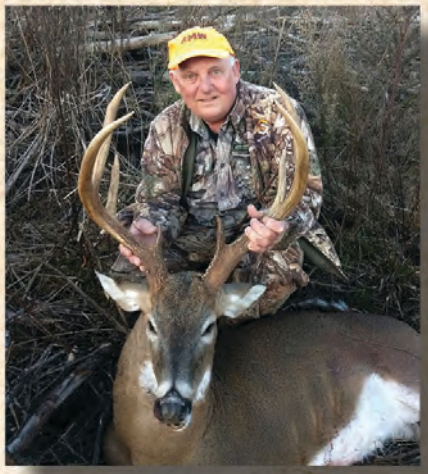

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