



PRACTICAL WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT INFORMATION

# Wildlife Trends JOURNAL

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2026

VOLUME 26, ISSUE 1



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## *Earl Says...*

**S**o, how was your deer season? Are you ready for turkey season? Hope it warms up pretty soon. These are the main questions folks ask this time of year and why not? There's not much to do now that the season is over. Or is there?

There is ALWAYS something to work on or do at our hunting properties. Now that deer season is over it's a great time to do some post-season scouting. Find those hidden trails the big deer are using and plan ahead for next year.

Other items for your lists may be planning a prescribed fire this year, putting out supplemental feed for wildlife during this tough time for them to find reliable food sources and taking down stands for repair.

Whatever your goals are for your property, now is the time to prepare.



## *Wildlife Trends* **JOURNAL**

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

PUBLISHER/EDITOR  
Andy Whitaker

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

### CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS

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

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

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

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Cover Photo by Dave Edwards

# Managing Exotic and Invasive Aquatic Plants

By Scott Brown



*Exotic plants can come in all shapes and sizes. This non-native water hyacinth is often misidentified as pickerelweed. Letting it grow can soon create a nightmare for a lake owner. But leaving the native, pickerelweed will enhance both your waterbody's fish habitat and aesthetics.*

**A**nglers and lake owners have expressed their likes and dislikes for different kinds of aquatic plant species. You can always start an argument at any boat ramp or with a landowner over what's the best aquatic vegetation (aka lake weeds) for largemouth bass. Back in the 80's I met people that moved Hydrilla around from public lake to public lake, and even took it back to their own ponds. They knew it grew big bass, but they didn't know the other issues and expenses it brings. And don't even ask a waterfowl biologist or duck hunter (which I am) about Hydrilla, they both give a resounding "Hydrilla is great!" when talking about waterfowl habitat.

There are Non-Native (exotic) aquatic plant species all over the United States and not just limited to the South. There seems to be

more exotic warm climate plant and animal species than cold, and warm climate plant species also have the benefit of a longer growing season. Some exotic plant species have started becoming immune to traditional herbicides used over decades and show little response to treatment. For example, Sonar (Fluridone) resistant hydrilla. But new herbicides are constantly being developed and old ones improved, and this generally equates to rising costs. Some exotic plant and animal species were deliberately released with a purpose, before testing or long-term effects were thought through. Some were released from pet owners, either the animal itself, or plants used in aquariums for fish and reptiles. Even the first attempt at the grass carp, which is used to reduce unwanted submerged aquatic vegetation, was flawed as it

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

reproduced quickly and could eliminate all aquatic vegetation from an ecosystem hindering fish production, survival, and promotes erosion. That's why it is only legal to stock triploid grass carp, which do not reproduce, and even that has been challenged that not all the fish lack reproduction capabilities.

Some native plant species are classified as invasive. These are native plants that become a problem in fish and and/or wildlife habitat management, or waterway navigation. This category is not as black and white, because a beneficial plant in one ecosystem may be a nuisance in another. There is not a duck painting known without cattails in the background. Cattails are native, and are considered by most an invasive. They can get out of control quickly and be costly to control, however, in certain situa-



*To grow quality largemouth bass, you need some quality vegetation. Allowing native non-invasive plants to grow in and around your lake will greatly help the water chemistry and fish population.*

tions they stay in check and are beneficial. I never use the term eradicate, because it is almost impossible to eradicate an animal or plant species. Once you get an Invasive Exotic plant in your waterbody, keeping it controlled is the objective. Lots of plants disappear for a while, but due to seeds, tubers, roots or upstream re-infestation that continually feeds your waterbody, they eventually come back.

The first thing in exotic weed control is **prevention**. Not getting the plant introduced into a lake or pond is the best defense. If building a new lake, consider aquascaping with native, non-invasive species you know will benefit the water chemistry, fish population and not be a problem in the future. Aquatic plants are transferred most commonly by boat trailers and boats. As a private consultant we always guard against this. We know none of our clients want any of our

other client's problematic vegetation. To prevent the transfer of plants, always pick your trailer clean at the site you are pulling out. Don't go home or to the next lake and pick it clean before launching. The "Hitch Hikers" can be washed down the street drain, off the shoreline or boat ramp into an uninfected waterbody. In some instances, we have pressure washed the boat, trailer, and even sprayed it with herbicide and allowed to dry before the next launching. It does



*Both woody and water primrose (exotic and invasive) can grow in lakes and ponds. It looks attractive, but is hard to control. Continually treating with herbicides early after detection is the best and most economical way to manage it.*



*Properly identifying your plant species, knowing it's biology, and knowing the three methods of control (mechanical, biological and chemical) makes for a much easier time managing the aquatic plants.*

take time, but it does work without transferring plants. One of our client's 160-acre lake, inside a housing development, only 20 miles from a 4,000-acre public lake known for its high-quality bass fishing and infestation of Hydrilla. Anglers would go straight from the public lake, back to the lake at home and launch. Hydrilla first appeared around the boat ramp, then at the two best fishing spots in the lake and continued to spread from there. This is generally the pattern an invasive plant takes that has been introduced to a waterbody by boats and trailers. If the plant was washed in from upstream it first appears at inflows (creeks or drainage ditches) or even drainpipes from nearby property and streets where trailer cleaning may occur. Some plants can easily be transplanted from only stems or leaves to re-establish itself, while others need the root system to move and is a lot harder to accidentally/unintentionally establish. There is some proof that birds (wading and waterfowl) can move small pieces of plants and relocate them, but the biggest culprit is human activity.

Once you get an exotic species, you need to be diligent and thorough with the response/treatment. Identifying the exotic species, researching the treatment options and knowing the plant's biology is important. Miss-identifying a plant or applying an herbicide that does not work on that particular species can be costly. We recommend the Texas A & M University and University of Florida's aquatic plant identification web sites for identification, biology and treatment recommendations. If your lake is in northern climates, check your state university, fish and game department, county extension office, or herbicide distributor for plant ID assistance. Also, we



*Although cattails are native, they are invasive, and need to be managed properly as to not become a major problem.*



*This recently planted area of bullrush and pickerel weed will provide quality fish habitat and probably never need treating with herbicides. They are both highly beneficial and rarely become an issue.*

recommend Google Lens and the Picture This apps to help you identify plants, both aquatic and upland. Plants can be treated with herbicides, biological treatment (bugs or fish) or mechanically removed. Sometimes a combination of two or all three techniques should be implemented. For Submerged vegetation, such as

Hydrilla, herbicide treatment followed by a moderate number per acre stocking of grass carp might be advised. Be aware that some aquatic weed management companies may prescribe a much higher grass carp stocking rate that can cause severe damage to the water chemistry and fish population. To the point where carp removal may



*There are three plants in the photo. Lily, coontail and Hydrilla. The hydrilla needs to be addressed first. The quicker you discover it, the earlier you can treat it and the cheaper the treatment is.*



*This exotic water lettuce is a free-floating exotic plant that grows very quickly. Once identified, research the herbicides that work best and treat as soon as possible.*

be required, which is very difficult, and to remedy the problem they caused.

If mechanical removal is feasible, finding a dump or burial site is required, as to not re-infest the same waterbody, or contaminate nearby waterbodies where the plant does not exist. Knowing the biology

of the particular plant you are dealing with is important. Some plants can be removed by taking just a thin layer off the lake bottom, while others may require a deeper scrape to ensure all seeds, tubers and root fragments are removed. Mechanical removal sometimes requires drawing the water down, and sometimes all

infected areas can be reached from shore. This adds to the expense, time and work factor whether a drawdown is required or not. Again, know your plant, do your homework and read the literature regarding success stories from various states, universities and government agencies working on aquatic exotic plant control.

The second technique is **biological control**. The most common is the stocking of Triploid Grass Carp. These fish have been widely studied for decades. Stocking numbers range from 3-15 per acre, depending on your location, the plant you are targeting, and depending which biologist, lake manager or hatchery worker you talk to. First, check with your state fish and game agency for stocking rate recommendations and if any permitting is required. Then talk to your pond manager. Grass carp do have a plant preference and identifying where your target plant species rank on that list is important. Near the top of that list is Hydrilla and near the bottom filamentous algae. We use a grass carp food preference paper by Dr. Martin W. Brunson from Mississippi to determine if grass carp will work on a particular species. We like to use a combination of herbicide, followed by a low number stocking of grass carp to maintain and control the plant after chemical treatment. We have witnessed exotics disappear from waterbodies for as long as seven years after chemical treatment, only to come back after years of dormancy.

The final and most common technique used on exotic and invasive plant species is **chemical (herbicide) treatment**. Some exotic and invasive plants are fairly inexpensive to treat (\$100/acre), and others are very expensive (\$1,700/



*Ducks and geese love vegetation! There are plenty of high-quality native plants to establish in your waterbody and not allow exotic or invasive species to take hold.*

acre) for herbicide only, not including application. There are state and federal programs that assist landowners with costs to treat exotic and invasive plants. If your waterbody experiences an exotic infestation and it drains into uninfected public waters, some funding may be available through your state's agricultural or environmental protection agency. It only takes a few minutes to call, and it could help defer costs. When performing an

herbicide treatment, always follow the label. When herbicide like Sonar (Fluridone) is used, the manufacturers offer a water test several weeks after treatment to see if the concentration levels remain acceptable. It's advised to pay for this service as it may save on herbicide costs by not requiring a follow-up treatment or tells you more herbicide is needed so the first application is not wasted and doesn't under perform. Another

issue occurring with some exotic plants is they are becoming resistant to particular herbicides successfully used in the past. There is now a genetic test for hydrilla, to be done prior to treating with Sonar. If you have heard of Sonar resistant hydrilla in your state, it is advisable to have this test done prior to not wasting money if it turns out your hydrilla has this genetic make-up. There are tricks to reduce herbicide costs such as

drawing the water down during or prior to treatment, which reduces the amount of herbicide needed. Plants may be susceptible to more than one herbicide, with the long-term results being different. A contact will kill the plant it touches, but if it doesn't touch it, the plant survives. A systemic herbicide is throughout the water and is absorbed into the plant over a long period of time. This treatment is generally more expensive, but has longer lasting benefits. This type of herbicide application can be less selective and may kill non-target, desirable plant species in or around the waterbody. Here is where the combination of all three techniques could be applied with a fall herbicide treatment (chemical) and drawdown, followed by scraping (mechanical) and stocking of grass carp (biological) later on after refilling to help maintain.

There are too many exotic aquatic plant species to mention here. You or your lake manager need to check with your state Game and Fish, Agriculture and Environmental Protection Departments, local universities for exotic plant identification and treatment, and possible supplemental funding sources. Some of the more common exotic plant species we have seen include hydrilla, water primrose, alligatorweed, water hyacinth, Brazilian Elodea, Eurasian watermilfoil, Brazilian pepper, water lettuce, Salvinia and torpedograss. As stated earlier, each state has its own lists of exotic and/or invasive plant lists. Knowing what plants are good and bad before purposely or unintentionally relocating is required. If you are faced with removing a large area of exotics, trying to replace them with more desirable native species is advised.

Native invasive plant species are more difficult to identify. Not to

species, but if it will become a nuisance (invasive). Invasive species in one waterbody may be the only fish and wildlife habitat in another or the waterbody where it is successful and remains in check may be due to different lake bottom topography, length of growing season, and water and/or soil chemistry which causes the plant to grow at an extremely slow rate and provides excellent fish and wildlife habitat. Too much of a good thing is no good, so identifying native invasive species is difficult. For example, in a large waterbody, some cattails may enhance habitat and help clean water by removing excess nutrients. In a small pond or lake, they are generally discouraged from growing because they can take over quickly. One example, like along a lake dam, they may be allowed to grow, as they are an excellent defense against wave erosion by their strappy leaves and hold dam dirt in place with a spongy root system. In this situation, the slope at the dam should be so that they can only grow out so far before it gets too deep, which keeps them limited to a band in front of the dam. Once they start spreading to other shallow areas, you may decide they needed to be treated, removed or occasionally thinned in those areas, but still left for habitat. Some native species in some states are looked upon as desirable, while the same plant is viewed invasive in other states. This is where consulting a professional is advised to help you decide if a plant in your waterbody is beneficial both short and long term, and how it should be managed.

It is very common for new lake owners to want to establish shoreline habitat as soon as possible once their lake is complete. On occasion we direct them or we do it ourselves to find donor sights for local, native plant species. Maybe a

friend nearby has a plant species that really holds bass in his pond, so you want some and he's willing to let you take some. Be very accurate on your plant identification and knowing the plant biology of species in question before moving any plant species, and check with state agencies, as some plants can be transplanted using this technique, and some are illegal for you to move and have in your possession during transport. Make sure you are moving exactly what you want and make sure no laws are being broken doing it.

Transplanting someone else's headache is not good for your new lake. Even when you purchase aquatic plants from an accredited nursery, make sure there are no unwanted plants mixed in the bare root or potted plants. I have seen people move lots of torpedograss thinking it was Maidencane, only to be disappointed when they asked us to spray it later.

Sometimes we run into problems where exotics might be all the lake has for habitat, so what should the landowner do? We treat the exotics and see if any native desirable plants come in. If not, we will try and start reducing the exotic plants with herbicide or mechanically in same areas and gradually introduce desirable native species to hopefully take over and outcompete the exotics.

When managing aquatic plants, it's not always black and white, and it's definitely not easy, even for a professional. When faced with an exotic and/or invasive plant species do your homework and respond quickly. The earlier a plant problem is addressed, the better the outcome and cheaper the solution.



# Enhancing Turkey Habitat in Southeastern Piney Woods

Seth Basinger



Seth Basinger is a wildlife biologist on a private property in West Alabama. He received his B.S. in Biosystems Engineering from Auburn University and a M.S. in Wildlife Science from the University of Tennessee. Seth can be contacted at [seth.basinger.masonbend@gmail.com](mailto:seth.basinger.masonbend@gmail.com).

*Turkey nests like this are commonly found in rotationally burned stands on the property with “clumpy” woody cover.*

**B**urn, baby, burn...right?! When the question is raised regarding how to manage and attract turkeys in southern pine forests, the overwhelmingly used answer is...you guessed it, **PRESCRIBED BURNING**. And yes, in my opinion, prescribed fire is the number one forest management tool to enhance turkey habitat. However, there are more ways to benefit your property concerning turkey management than what meets the eye when it comes to fire. Often questions are left unanswered regarding burning in relation to turkeys and woods management: When should I burn? Where should I burn? How big of

an area should I burn? What should I do if I cannot burn? Hopefully this article will shed light on how to use different techniques with fire and herbicide, along with timber management strategies, on your property to grow, attract, and hold more turkeys than ever before.

## **Patch or “Checkerboard” Burn Regimes**

“Juxtaposition” and “interspersion” are terms I learned in wildlife camp that I figured I would never use as a wildlife biologist...until I started managing for turkeys. Without getting too deep into wildlife terminology, juxtaposition is basically how vegetation types are

arranged next to each other (small picture) and interspersion is how these are arranged across the landscape or your property (big picture). For example, regarding turkey management on your property, is there quality brooding cover adjacent (juxtaposed) to quality nesting cover? Is there connectivity between good roosting trees, food sources, and loafing areas? How are these components arranged (interspersed) on your property?

Let’s bring fire back into the picture. For those of you that do not know why burning is so critical for turkeys in pine forests, it does a

tremendous job of setting back plant succession in the understory while exposing food sources like seeds and invertebrates. Pine trees are able to withstand fire at certain growth stages depending on the species, and they also shed needles that add valuable fuels for carrying fire. By setting back succession, burning provides a vegetative structure that is more favorable to turkey brood-rearing, nesting, and simply traversing through the woods. Given the fertile soil and yearly rainfall amounts on the property I manage in Alabama, if we do not burn on a rotation every 2-3 years, the understory structure of the stand will get to a point where it is not favorable for turkey use. On your property, you may can go 4-5 years on your burn rotation, but it is unlikely you will need to burn more frequently than 2 years.

Patch or “checkerboard” burning is a concept that can be very advantageous for wild turkeys. From a management standpoint, would it not make sense to strategically place quality brood-rearing next to quality nesting habitat so that once a clutch of poults hatches, the hen can lead them directly to the “promised land?” This minimizes exposure to avian predators and is a management practice we have implemented on our property.

From our observations, it appears that hens are selecting pine stands that have been burned 2-3 years prior for nesting. These stands consist of a scattered woody component that provides “clumps” of vertical structure that conceal hens and protect from predation while nesting. So by alternating burn years on adjacent stands, there is quality nesting cover with a nearby freshly burned area for excellent brood rearing after poults

hatch out. In our location, by the time poults typically hatch, a recently burned stand will provide low “umbrella” cover. This vegetative structure generally is tall enough to conceal poults from avian and ground predators, but still allows the hen to see well. Mobility and feeding is also easier in these stands during an extremely physically demanding time for poults. In my opinion, patch burning is a valuable technique to diversify vegetation composition and structure from a turkey management perspective.

Patch size can vary according to property size, stand size, or other habitat features. We usually divide our pine stands into 50 – 75-acre management units for our patch burning regime. There is no magic number for this size. The main thing is getting a feel for your property and the time you have to devote to burning. In our case, we have a limited number of quality burn days with a vast amount of woods to burn. To make things more feasible for us, this is generally the size we break our

burn units into. I don’t like patches over 100 acres because large areas have reduced habitat diversity. Patches less than 10 acres can promote increased diversity but are difficult to manage on this small of scale.

Another question managers often have is when or what time of year should burning be conducted? As I stated previously, you may only have a handful of good burn days or other time constraints that hinder you. We typically start in late November after a frost through the end of March before nesting initiation generally takes place (this is primarily dormant season fire in our neck of the woods). One concern is burning during deer season, but from my experience, prescribed burning has not negatively affected deer hunting to justify delaying burning until after deer season. When burning on a 2- or 3-year rotation in the Deep South, there will still likely be a vertical hardwood component left standing after a burn that would still provide enough cover to hold deer (unless a herbicide treatment



*Tractors with enclosed cages and skid plates are ideal for using in the woods.*



*Thinned-row sprayed with Escort XP to reduce overabundance of devil's walkingstick following a dormant season burn. This picture was taken in mid-July, about 2 months after the herbicide application in mid-May. Grasses present were unaffected by the herbicide, and forbs are starting to colonize again.*

has previously been applied, but more on that later!). Now, if you are interested in holding turkeys, start burning stands off through the winter and early spring. You may have the problem of “not knowing which bird to go to” come opening day! With that said, there is nothing wrong with waiting to burn a stand in March if that is what works best for your situation. Everybody has that stand or two down in the “honey hole” that there is always a bird hanging around that you may want to immediately attract with a clean burn just before turkey season. I know we do!

Alternatively, there is nothing wrong with burning late growing

season (August - October) if you can get fire to carry then. In fact, I recommend this in stands dominated by a woody understory. Burns conducted during this time are more effective at controlling woody competition than dormant season fire, which promotes more desirable forbs and grasses for turkeys. On our property, we generally don't have time to devote to burning during the fall or the ability to carry fire effectively due to fuel conditions. In West Alabama, we have to be careful burning too early in the fall because of fawning. Also, to avoid destroying turkey nests, we try to avoid burning in the early growing season (April-June in Alabama).

Also, please note that burning is not something learned on a YouTube video. This article is not intended to explain how to conduct prescribed burns; however, I will say that fire should always be taken seriously and used under the right burning conditions, along with the right personnel, equipment, and fire breaks. It is highly recommended that you contact your state forestry agency for any information or regulations on conducting prescribed burns, or if a burn certification program is required before lighting a match. Also, if you are unfamiliar with the species and growth stage of the pine on your property, it would be a good idea to contact a registered

forester to determine whether or not it can tolerate fire. Some state agencies or private consultants can aide in conducting the burn when landowners either do not have the personnel or equipment, or do not feel comfortable doing it themselves. However, burning is like anything else in life you have never done before. After a little time and practice, you will be asking yourself “Why have I not been doing this all along?!” There is definitely something innately primal about man and fire, you’ve just got to let your inner caveman out!

### **Thinned row Management**

In some cases, landowners and managers may not be able to burn, or burning may not be the right tool for the job in certain situations. On our property in West Alabama, we have a problem with encroaching blackberry, sweetgum, beautyberry, yaupon, privet, devil’s walkingstick, and other woody species in some of our pine stands. Time spent in the fall planting food plots and conducting deer camera surveys, along with the inability to effectively carry fire, usually restricts us to burning only during the dormant season. Fire during the dormant season typically just “top-kills” the woody species until the following spring growing season, where it will resprout from the roots. Using dormant season fire every few years through the stand will keep the vegetation structure at acceptable levels for turkey use, but this can get tiresome and time-consuming on large tracts of land. This is precisely the situation in which we have incorporated thinned row spraying to diversify the vegetative composition to enhance turkey use, especially when fire intervals are lengthy. This is easily accomplished in pine stands that have been thinned in rows.

Before we put the cart before the horse, you need the right equipment to do this. There are wildlife and forestry consultant services that contract spraying with skidders, but this management practice is also achievable for the common landowner. However, it is ideal to have an enclosed or caged tractor to protect the driver from getting “limb-whipped”, in addition to a skid plate to protect the undercarriage from stumps, logging debris, etc. Regarding the sprayer rig, I would recommend a 3-pt style for maneuvering purposes, and at least a 100-gallon tank for efficiency (if you spray a minimum of 10 gallons per acre then this will result in 10 acres on a tank). We calibrate our sprayer at 30 psi at a speed of 3 mph, which is a comfortable speed in the woods. A simple internet search regarding sprayer calibration can help set up your sprayer.

When spraying thinned rows, the most important aspect other than which herbicide to use is the nozzle selection. Depending on your objectives and the thinned row widths, you may need a nozzle to spray a narrow or wide swath. In most situations, it’s not ideal to kill all of the woody component in the stand. It is smart to leave enough woody cover between the rows for turkeys to escape avian predators. By killing the hardwood component in the rows, this allows forbs and grasses (herbaceous plants) enough space and sunlight to grow. Herbaceous plants provide more food availability from seed and invertebrate production, along with providing easier turkey mobility. Essentially, we are making linear wildlife openings beneath the stand of timber. If you are able, spraying perpendicular to the rows as well can provide a clumpy woody cover instead of strips, which is ideal in my opinion. Lastly, burning as soon

as the fuel load allows in a year or two following the herbicide application can really accelerate herbaceous response.

The second part of the equation is when to spray and which herbicide to use. We have learned it’s ideal, but not a necessity, to burn the stand the year prior to spraying. Not only does this make the vigorous woody regrowth more susceptible to the herbicide, but it also improves the visibility in the stand for the person doing the spraying. If you are new to spraying, there are numerous herbicides out there so I will not go into too much detail on brands and pricing. However, as turkey managers in most piney woods in the Southeast, our never ending battle is against hardwood competition in the understory. As opposed to mechanical control options such as mowing or roller chopping, we have found herbicide applications to be easier and more effective for us. Thus, I will touch on a few select herbicides that we commonly use that are safe to spray under your pines.

Sometimes, too much of a good thing can turn into a bad thing. For example, we had a pine stand on fertile ground that was so dominated by blackberry that it was impenetrable. Repeated burning only kept the blackberry from absolutely exploding, but after a couple of years it was reverting back to the “Amazon jungle” phase. Blackberry is not a bad species for turkeys (it provides fruit and escape cover), however a monoculture of it is not ideal. In this situation, we had success using **metsulfuron methyl (Escort XP, MSM 60)** for selective blackberry control in thinned rows. Metsulfuron methyl will also eliminate most brush and smaller woody trees, in addition to protecting most native warm-

season grasses.

Herbicides containing the active ingredient **triclopyr (Garlon, Element, Boulder)** are also great options for controlling woody species, especially waxy-leaf species such as yaupon, gallberry, etc. without harming desirable grasses. Additionally, **imazapyr (Arsenal, Chopper)** herbicides have residual soil activity and can also be used in situations to eliminate woody competition and retain blackberry and forb coverage, but it could be more damaging to native grasses. However, you should avoid spraying imazapyr around any mature hardwoods that you want to retain. It is important you figure out your objectives and which understory species are present in your pine stands to select the proper herbicide. Always follow labels for application and safety instructions. Last but not least, remember not to eliminate all of the woody component in the stand. Leave some for escape cover!

### **Timber Management Strategies**

Some other things to consider when managing for turkeys is when and how much to cut timber. Obviously, money is a driving factor behind this decision, as well as the value of your timber. Older, mature pine timber that can be managed with fire is highly valued to the eye of a turkey, but also to the eye of the logger. There's nothing wrong in conducting timber harvest in pine plantations in regards to turkey management. It can actually be very beneficial! However, I urge you to manage stands on a longer rotation if possible (e.g. 35-40+ years) and conduct more subsequent thinnings within the stand.

Depending on the species, site, and planting density, a stand can usually provide at least 2-3 thinnings

throughout the life cycle. Every time a stand is thinned, space and sunlight is now available to increase diversity in the understory. In addition, logging equipment does a good job trampling woody encroachment within the stand. Generally, we use basal area (a measure of the average amount of area occupied by tree stems) as a way to communicate with loggers how to thin to ideal stand densities. We typically shoot for a residual basal area (BA) of 60-75 on the first thin, 50-60 BA on the second thin, and 35-40 BA on the third thin. We have found these BAs to be a good balance between letting enough light penetrate the stand to promote herbaceous plants for turkeys while leaving enough merchantable, residual timber within the stand for the next thinning. If desired, the stand will then be clearcut following the third thinning.

I don't have to do much preaching to drive home the value of a fresh clearcut for turkeys. Everyone who hunts turkeys regularly knows this. However, if you do decide to clearcut, keeping stand size relatively small is more beneficial than large clearcuts. You want the stand to be manageable from a timber aspect when you replant it, but not too large where it will impede turkey movement on a large scale when the pines enter what I call the "uglies" (typically a few years after planting until the stand is first thinned). For example, if you have a 150-acre pine stand, incrementally harvesting 50 acre blocks over 5-10 years would provide better diversity and connectivity over time than if you were to cut it all at once.

When replanting pine, we have used longleaf wherever the soil is conducive. Longleafs were once abundant across the Southeast, but

have been logged and replanted with faster growing pine species since. In regards to turkey management, the ability of longleaf to tolerate fire puts it a step above other pine species. Longleaf can be burned extensively throughout most of its life cycle, however, precautions should be taken when burning seedlings (usually 2-5 ft). As a manager or landowner, soil and longleaf suitability information can be obtained from <https://websoilsurvey.nrcs.usda.gov> to see if replanting longleaf would be a viable option on your property. Remember, just because the soil is not ideal for growing longleaf does not mean that it will not grow there, it may just not grow as well as other pine species.

Additionally, keep in mind the importance of roosting habitat and **streamside management zones (SMZs)**. If you have inherited any timber land, most plantation pines were planted as close to creeks as possible. It is also no secret that turkeys like to roost on creeks or near water sources. It is beneficial to stop timber harvest close to these areas and specifically leave mature roost trees. We have done this, especially in areas that have little or no hardwood buffer along creeks.

Lastly, roads and firebreaks are extensively used by turkeys for traveling. Proper edge management of these features are critical to maintain connectivity for turkeys. Harvesting timber to widen roads and firebreaks can add tremendous seed and invertebrate availability readily used by turkeys while traveling, but are also quick to "grow up" when sunlight is let in. Within only a few years, woody shrubs and saplings can create a "wall or curtain" effect which can hinder turkey movement. When

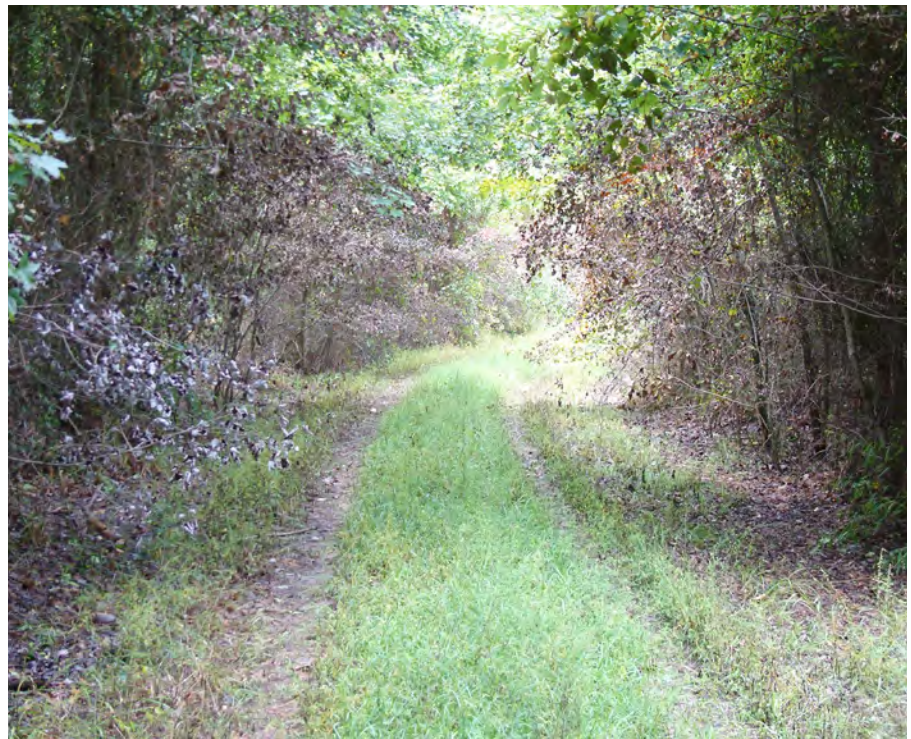
walls appear, we generally turn on one side of our sprayer and spray **Garlon XRT** along the target area. The value of using Garlon XRT is that it will kill any part of the hardwood species where the spray touches the leaves, but is less volatile to surrounding non-target species. Therefore, you don't have to worry when spraying under mature hardwood trees that you want to retain.

### **Final thoughts**

Managing quality turkey habitat in the Deep South is no walk in the park! It takes a good deal of time, effort, and patience. However, it is extremely rewarding when it all starts to come together. From a habitat perspective, **fire**, **herbicide**, and **proper timber management** are three of the most valuable tools in managing quality vegetation diversity and structure for turkeys in southern piney woods. Quality turkey management is a continuous learning process and will never be completely figured out, but since we seriously started implementing patch burning, thinned row spraying, and strategic timber management, our turkey survey results have shown about a 30% increase over the past few years. Hopefully, by using or modifying these techniques to best fit your management scheme, it will help your turkey populations to grow as well!



*Thinned-row spraying with Escort XP primarily to reduce blackberry, sweet gum, and beautyberry. The stand was burned in February 2016 and then sprayed June 2016. This picture was taken in May 2017. Look at the lasting herbaceous response.*



*Woods road sprayed with Garlon XRT to kill limbs of encroaching woody hardwood saplings to “open up” the edge. Reducing woody edges and keeping roads and firebreaks in open, herbaceous vegetation offers excellent feeding opportunities while not hindering turkey mobility. (Photo credit: Ryan Basinger)*

# Why, When, How to Plant Trees

By Allen Deese

Allen Deese is a Sales Representative with Native Forest Nursery out of Chatsworth, GA. Contact him at [allen@nativeforestnursery.com](mailto:allen@nativeforestnursery.com).

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*15 year old Chinese Chestnut, produced over 250 pounds of seed each year for last 5 years.*

**H**ere we are today in the times of the internet that you can find an answer to anything. Not only the answer but 10,000 opinions on why to do this and not that and how it worked for me but not for them. So, without all that expert

commentary, let's try and spend time on why planting trees is a good thing for your wildlife along with your property. Not just for now but for years to come.

Being in the nursery business for twenty plus years, I have seen a

lot of different trees and plant ideas come and go. But I have seen one constant through my fifty-plus years of life. If you desire at any time to watch something grow, you must put it in the ground. With trees, you may not get instant satisfaction,

but within 5-8 years, you will be amazed at the results. Yes, trees will produce that soon! Most chestnuts and many oaks will start dropping in that time frame. Fruit trees are the same and will have fruit that soon in life.

As stated above, planting chestnut seedlings now will start benefiting you and the animals in 5-8 years. Some say sooner, and it's possible to have nuts before then, but we need the tree to grow to become strong with spreading branches so that it can support tons of fruit or nuts, not just ten or fifteen. Native oaks such as **Chinkapin Oaks, Dwarf Chinkapin Oaks, Live Oaks, Swamp white oaks, Nuttall Oaks, Shumard oaks** I have seen all produce in the 5-10-year time frame.

Planting trees in groups is also an added benefit. For instance, I have one spot that holds ten Chinese Chestnuts. This one spot produces over a thousand pounds of seed each year. These trees are on about 1/2 acre of land. Could you imagine a field of Chestnuts, Chinkapin Oaks, Live Oaks, White Oaks, Nuttall Oaks all in one area? Planting in groups would allow you to have a nut drop from September thru January. Not only does this increase the food source for wildlife, but it significantly increases your property value, and will make your kids one day thank you for all the hard work.

Fruit trees are pretty much the same. **Pears, Persimmons, Crabapples, Mullberrys,**

**Apples and Plums** are all very beneficial to supplying the animals with nutrient-rich food sources and helping with the carrying capacity for your land. Do you have to have 20-30 trees? The short answer is no. For pollination purposes, you do want to plant a minimum of three per species and mix varieties for pollination. Keeping in mind that pears pollinate

pears, apples mixed with crabapples, persimmons with persimmons, and so on.

How fast do you want the trees to mature? Yeah, I know, tomorrow. How can you get production sooner, plant more significant trees? Just don't go too large unless you plan to irrigate each tree. The more substantial tree that you plant,



*6 year old McKelvey Pear*

the more water for the tree to survive. I typically do not go more massive than a fifteen gallon unless I have irrigation. When planting 7-15-gallon trees, you can start putting them in the ground as early as November in the Southeast, up north you could plant in October. Taking care to dig a nice wide hole and watering in well at planting should be efficient and get the tree through the winter and most if not all of spring. Most trees die in August, September of the 1st year after planting. Why, because the trees break out

in early spring, the landowner goes out, and the trees are growing getting plenty of rain, and all is great. But then August shows up, it is hot and dry, and we forget about the trees until we go back out in September to plant. Too late, if you allow the roots on a 1st year planted tree to dry out, it's dead.

I touched on this in the last paragraph, but I want to emphasize the planting dates for trees. Any plant that is grown in a pot/container, you can start planting in the fall. Times will vary somewhat depending upon

where you live. Customers living in the Southeast should feel comfortable starting to plant in early November. Northeast, I would probably say October, same for the Midwest. So anything that has an established root system, grown in a container, be it 1 gallon or 15 gallons, you can get in the ground early fall through the end of March; the sooner you plant, the better chance you have in the tree surviving. The same goes for bareroot plant material. Bareroot trees cannot be pulled from the soil until they have gone dormant, which is typically around December. So proper planting dates for them would be December thru March in the southern part of the U.S. The northern part of the U.S can plant thru the end of April. But I would like to reiterate that it's better to plant sooner than later.

### **Tree Planting Tips**

1. Soil test, much like anything that you plant it always helps to create the perfect condition for your plant, and this also helps identify soil types for the trees you intend to grow. For instance, our native White Oak likes upland dryer sites, somewhat rocky hillsides. Some oaks are very versatile such as a Nuttall oak, which is used a lot for landscaping but is also a fast-growing wetland species tree.
2. Purchase your trees from a reputable company. When buying container trees, try and find air root pruned trees. These would be grown in RootMaker bags, Root Pouch



*15 Year Old Nuttall Oak, started producing acorns at 8 years*



*Galloway Pear*

- bags, or plastic pots with holes and gaps to allow air circulation. Trees that are grown in hard plastic pots can become severely root-bound, and although they look good when purchased, they will not survive.
3. Prepare beforehand for your planting. Mark the area where you plan to plant, spray, and remove the weeds, prepare your holes not too deep but wider than needed in a sunny location. Shade, weeds, and animals will slow the growth of your trees or kill them. **Do Not Plant Too Deep!** Bareroot trees plant at the color change of the root to the tree itself. Container trees plant about 1 inch above soil level.
  4. Do not fertilize at planting. I encourage you to use Bionutrition at planting to reduce transplanting shock. These products include beneficial bacteria that will colonize the root surface, improve nutrient uptake, and stimulate new root growth. Some nurseries prepare a root dip for all bareroot trees and dip them before shipment.
  5. As stated above, plant in direct sunlight, trees grow broad and robust when receiving adequate sunlight. Avoid planting in existing timber or thickets unless you have opened the area to receive light. Remove all existing vegetation and keep it gone. Use 2"-3" of mulch, pine straw, pine mulch, old cardboard, shredded paper, or grass clippings. A 3-4 ft circle is excellent, and do not pile it against the trunk of the tree.
  6. Protect your trees using at least 5 ft tall Plantra Tree Protectors and fiberglass stakes. For larger trees, use the 3 ft trunk protectors to keep deer from rubbing them. Sometimes you will have to fence each tree or simply drive rebar or fence post around the tree to keep bucks from rubbing them.
  7. 1st full growing season, early March, apply around 3 pounds of 10-10-10 around each container-grown tree; for Bareroot trees, add only one pound the 1st season. If you do not see new shoots of

growth soon, then add 1 pound of 21-0-0. Do not exceed this amount of nitrogen per tree.

Over the next several years, stick with the above directions, increasing 10-10-10 up to about 1 pound per year. Pear trees are vigorous growers, so limit nitrogen if the trees are growing great. Doing this can help reduce your chances of disease. The above directions are great on Apples as well as crabapples.

Planting trees can be very rewarding for yourself as well as your family and friends. Trees will increase your property's value, aesthetics, as well as the productivity of your land.

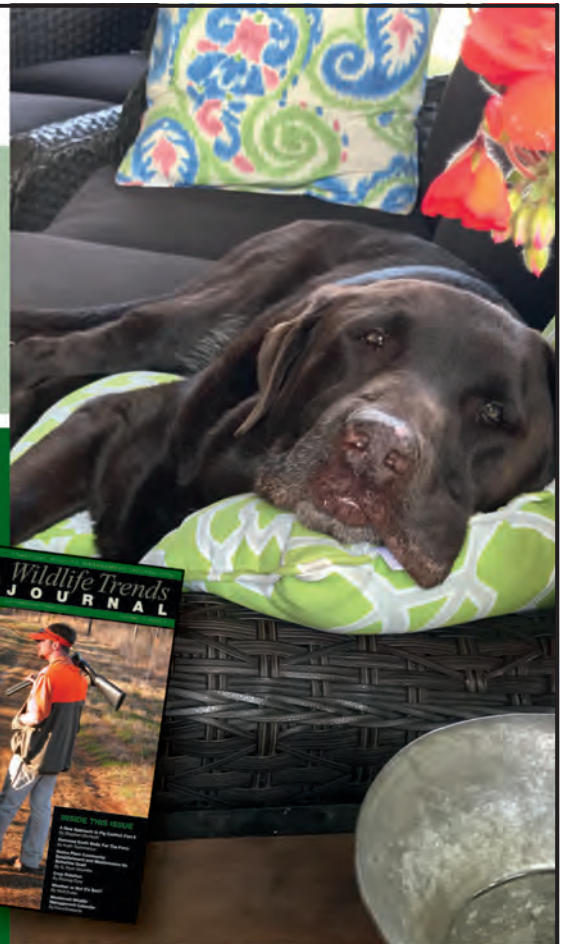
Hardly a day goes by that I do not speak with someone that says, "I wish I had planted trees years ago." I also hear on a very consistent basis that I lease land, and it's a waste of time planting trees on someone else's property. Well, planting trees for the future is never a waste of time. I know it can be frustrating because I have planted many trees to return and see them mowed or sprayed, but hey, I did my part. I'll keep on planting and hope that one day I can sit in the shade of the trees I planted for someone else. But Confucius says, "Man who does not plant tree cannot watch it grow."

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# Wildlife Trends Journal Management Calendar

By Dave Edwards



*Collecting shed antlers offers valuable insight into the progress of your management program and quality of the buck population.*

## **Assess management strategies, review or develop a plan, & prepare for upcoming projects.**

**P**lanning and preparation well in advance are critical to ensuring you have the resources, materials, and time needed to successfully complete projects you intend to start this summer. A saying I've heard over the years captures this well, "People don't plan to fail, but often fail to plan." Effective planning allows landowners to prioritize projects, establish a realistic budget for the coming year, and develop timelines that help keep efforts on track. Many landowners approach projects as

they arise or as ideas come to mind. While this approach can work, it often leads to inefficiencies and, in some cases, the allocation of time or money to lower-priority projects while more critical needs go unaddressed. Without a clear plan, resources may be exhausted before the most impactful improvements are made.

Spring is a busy time for us at Tall Tines Wildlife Consultants, as we work with landowners to develop a clear plan of action for the year ahead to improve wildlife habitat and hunting opportunities. We routinely conduct what we refer to as Property Management Assessments. During these consulta-

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.



*Late winter is a great time to assess your program and develop a plan that will improve hunting and enjoyment of your property.*

tions, we review projects completed in the previous year, evaluate harvest data and other relevant information to understand how wildlife is responding to management, reassess progress toward established goals, and evaluate the property to identify limiting factors. From this process, we develop a prioritized list of management actions designed to move the property closer to the landowner's objectives. While this is a professional service we provide, the underlying process is one I believe every landowner should undertake annually—whether working with a professional biologist or not.

Regular evaluation and intentional planning are essential to continued progress. As another saying goes, “Don’t keep doing the same thing and expect different results.” Late winter and early spring are ideal times to assess your management program, identify areas for improvement, and develop a clear plan to address those needs moving forward.

**Transplant native shrubs or trees to add aesthetics or screen unnatural structures or objects.**

While not directly related to wildlife management, late winter is an

excellent time to complete small landscaping projects that can enhance the overall experience around your camp and hunting areas. Installing or transplanting shrubs and other plants can improve aesthetics and help conceal unnatural or utilitarian features around the property. Common examples include electric boxes, air-conditioning units, pump houses, clay target throwers, and similar infrastructure. In some situations, native shrubs can also be used effectively to create visual screens along property boundaries where desired. Although purchasing shrubs or plants is always an



*Pruning young fruit trees is critical to ensure proper growth and development of a solid structure.*



*Late winter through spring green-up is one of the most nutritionally stressful periods for deer across much of their range. Providing nutrient-rich supplemental feed offers deer a reliable and available food source during this period.*

option, I encourage considering the transplanting of native plants already present on the property. These plants are well adapted to the site's soils and climate, typically establish more successfully, and come at no cost. When selecting plants, prioritize species that are evergreen or provide year-round screening. Species that have proven successful include wax myrtle, broomsedge grass, various holly species, and ferns. When transplanting, it is important to keep as much of the root ball intact as possible. Leave ample space around the base of the plant and cut a wide circle with a shovel, gradually working deeper and beneath the plant until the root mass, along with the surrounding soil, can be removed. Handle the root ball care-

fully during transport to minimize disturbance and protect the fine feeder roots. Using a large nursery container (such as the black pots shrubs and trees are sold in) can help support and protect the root mass during relocation. Prepare the new planting hole larger than the original root ball and loosen the surrounding soil. After placing the plant in its new location, backfill with soil from the hole, ensuring that all air pockets are eliminated. Firm the soil around the root ball, secure but not compacted, and water the plant thoroughly if possible. During the first year following transplanting, particularly through the first summer, these plants may require some additional care. Ensure adequate moisture and

control competing vegetation to promote successful establishment.

### **Prune fruit trees.**

Pruning fruit trees is an important management practice that improves overall tree health and enhances fruit production. When done correctly, pruning promotes balanced growth and helps develop a strong, well-structured tree. However, heavy or improper pruning should be avoided, as it can stunt growth and delay fruit production, particularly in young trees. Proper pruning establishes a sturdy scaffold system made up of well-spaced, wide-angled branches capable of supporting heavy fruit loads and withstanding high winds. Young trees that are trained correctly will begin producing qual-



*Prescribed fire is one of the most effective and cost-efficient habitat management tools available to increase, improve, or maintain natural habitats*

ity fruit earlier and continue to bear efficiently as they mature. The optimal time to prune fruit trees is during the dormant season, when stress on the tree is minimized and structural issues are easier to identify. That said, diseased, damaged, or dead branches should be removed whenever they are observed to prevent the spread of problems. Regular, incremental pruning on an annual basis is key

to maintaining healthy, productive fruit trees. Allowing trees to go unmanaged for several years and then attempting to correct them with heavy pruning often leads to reduced productivity and increased stress. In contrast, older trees that have been neglected may require more assertive pruning over time to restore vigor and rejuvenate fruit production.

### **Collect shed antlers.**

Across most of the whitetail's range, bucks will have shed their antlers by mid to late March. Searching for and collecting shed antlers is a fun and rewarding springtime activity for friends and families, and it provides a great excuse to spend time outdoors together. Beyond recreation, shed antler collection offers valuable insight into the quality and progress

of the deer herd on your property. By documenting and comparing sheds from year to year, landowners can track trends in antler size and development. A gradual increase in shed size over time is often a strong indicator that a deer management program is moving in a positive direction. To improve your chances of finding sheds, focus your efforts in high-use areas such as food plots, fields, around feeders, and along travel corridors—especially locations where deer are forced to jump fences, cross ditches, or navigate other obstacles. These areas commonly cause antlers to loosen and drop. For those looking to add an extra element of enjoyment, training a Labrador retriever (or other suitable breed) to locate shed antlers can be a highly rewarding experience. Shed dog training not only increases efficiency but also creates a fun and engaging outdoor activity for both the handler and dog.

**February and March are THE BEST times to scout your property for deer sign and identify new stand locations.**

Have you ever noticed that deer seem to disappear just before or shortly after hunting season begins? It's not because they have the season marked on a calendar. More often, it's the result of increased human activity and disturbance as hunters prepare for opening day. Loud noises, frequent property access, full-scale scouting sessions, and last-minute stand preparation can cause deer to alter their movement patterns and shift into areas where they feel safer. With more than 25 years of experience managing and hunting deer, I've learned that hunting pressure plays a major role in hunting success. If your goal is to improve your hunting experiences and consistently see more deer, particularly mature

bucks, managing disturbance on the property is critical. One of the most effective ways to reduce hunting pressure is to be prepared well in advance of the season. Late winter or immediately following hunting season is the ideal time to evaluate your property and identify areas for improvement. After a whole season of being pressured, deer naturally gravitate toward areas where they feel secure. Learning where deer spend time when pressure is high provides valuable insight into where they are likely to be found during the following hunting season. Late winter is also an excellent time to erect or relocate stands, trim shooting lanes, and complete other habitat or access improvements. Completing these tasks months ahead of the season significantly reduces the amount of pressure you'll need to apply just before opening day. By planning ahead and minimizing disturbance, you can dramatically improve your chances of seeing and harvesting the mature bucks you've worked hard to grow, while also creating a more enjoyable and productive hunting experience overall.

**Ensure deer have quality nutrition during late winter through spring green up.**

Late winter through spring green-up is one of the most nutritionally stressful periods for deer across much of their range. Bucks have just endured the physical demands of the breeding season, does are pregnant, high-quality natural food sources are limited, and colder temperatures increase overall energy requirements. Ensuring deer have access to adequate nutrition during this time is critical to helping them enter spring in good physical condition. Providing quality food sources through late winter allows deer to capitalize on the

spring green-up—one of the most nutritionally rich periods of the year due to the abundance of new plant growth. When deer enter spring in good condition, they can direct this high-quality nutrition toward body growth rather than basic maintenance. The result is healthier does, increased fawn survival, improved body condition, and increased antler development. Although this topic falls within a February–March management window, the availability of quality food during late winter is largely the result of management actions implemented months or even years earlier. These actions may include timber thinning, active management of native vegetation, incorporating perennial plantings into food plots, and maintaining appropriate deer herd densities. These foundational practices form the backbone of effective nutritional management. One action that can be implemented immediately is the use of supplemental feed, which can provide an additional source of high-quality nutrition during periods of low natural food availability. However, supplemental feeding should never be viewed as a stand-alone solution. As the saying goes, you cannot hang shutters if you do not have a house. Similarly, you will not grow big bucks or maintain a healthy herd through supplemental feed alone. Supplemental feeding is most effective when used in combination with sound habitat management and proper herd control. Before initiating a supplemental feeding program, landowners should ensure that core management practices are in place and verify compliance with local game laws, as many states restrict or prohibit feeding. Ideally, supplemental feed should be provided year-round, but its value is greatest during late winter and late summer, when natural food availability is at its lowest. For landowners with

limited budgets, focusing supplemental feeding efforts during these critical periods will yield the greatest benefit to the deer herd.

### **Plan and schedule timber harvest activities.**

When timber is harvested during winter or early spring, sunlight reaches the forest floor at a time when native plants are beginning their annual growth cycle. This allows desirable grasses, forbs, legumes, and woody browse to germinate and grow throughout the entire growing season. The result is a rapid response of early successional vegetation that provides high-quality food, abundant cover, and improved habitat structure for a wide range of wildlife species. For deer in particular, this flush of new growth offers nutritious forage during spring and summer when body condition, antler growth, lactation, and fawn development are occurring. Additionally, the dense regrowth created following a timely harvest provides valuable bedding cover and escape habitat, improving overall security for deer and other wildlife. In contrast, timber harvested during the middle of summer—when much of the growing season has already passed—limits the amount of time plants have to regenerate before cooler temperatures and shorter days slow growth. While vegetation will still respond following a summer harvest, the reduced growing window often results in less overall plant biomass and lower-quality cover during the first year. As a result, the immediate wildlife benefits of the harvest are diminished until the following growing season. Beyond deer, properly timed timber harvests can significantly benefit a variety of wildlife species, including turkeys, quail, songbirds, and small mammals. Increased insect abundance,

improved brood-rearing habitat, and greater plant diversity are common outcomes when sunlight and disturbance are introduced at the right time. Over the long term, strategic timber management helps create a diverse mosaic of habitat types across the property, which is essential for supporting healthy and resilient wildlife populations. Of course, timber markets, access, and stumpage prices play an important role in determining when a harvest occurs, and these economic factors must be considered. However, when market conditions allow for flexibility, scheduling timber harvests during the winter or early spring can substantially increase the immediate wildlife value of the harvested area and accelerate the return on habitat investment. When combined with follow-up management such as prescribed fire, selective herbicide use, or controlled browsing pressure, these harvests can become some of the most productive wildlife habitat on the property.

### **Make finishing dormant season prescribe burning a priority.**

Prescribed fire is one of the most effective and cost-efficient habitat management tools available to landowners, and late winter through early spring is an ideal time to apply it. When properly planned and executed, prescribed fire improves habitat quality by resetting plant succession, increasing plant diversity, and stimulating the growth of native grasses and forbs that are highly beneficial to wildlife. For deer, prescribed fire promotes the growth of nutrient-rich forage that becomes available almost immediately during spring green-up. This high-quality forage supports body condition, antler development, lactation, and fawn growth. In addition to forage bene-

fits, fire reduces dense understory vegetation, improving movement and visibility while still maintaining adequate cover for bedding and security. Prescribed fire also provides significant benefits to a wide range of other wildlife species. The increase in forbs and insects following a burn creates excellent brood-rearing habitat for wild turkeys and other ground-nesting birds. Over time, rotating prescribed fire across the property creates a diverse mosaic of habitat conditions—varying in vegetation height and structure—that supports greater wildlife diversity and resilience. Late winter and early spring burns are especially advantageous because they allow vegetation to respond immediately as growing season approaches. These burns can also reduce fuel loads, helping to lower wildfire risk while improving long-term habitat conditions. Prescribed fire is most effective when integrated into a broader management strategy that may include timber thinning, invasive species control, food plot management, and proper deer herd management. For many landowners, recruiting the assistance of a professional wildlife biologist is helpful in determining where and when prescribed fire would be most beneficial on the property and help develop a long-term burn plan that aligns with landowner goals.

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