JULY/AUG 2026 VOLUME 26, ISSUE 4

Wildlife Trends JOURNAL

A PRACTICAL WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT MAGAZINE



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Value Of A Fire-Born Ecosystem
By Jon Kohler

Remaking Your Worn Out Pond
By Scott Brown

The Future of the Deer Herd
By Braelin Smallwood

Wildlife Trends Journal Management Calendar
By Dave Edwards



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July/August 2026

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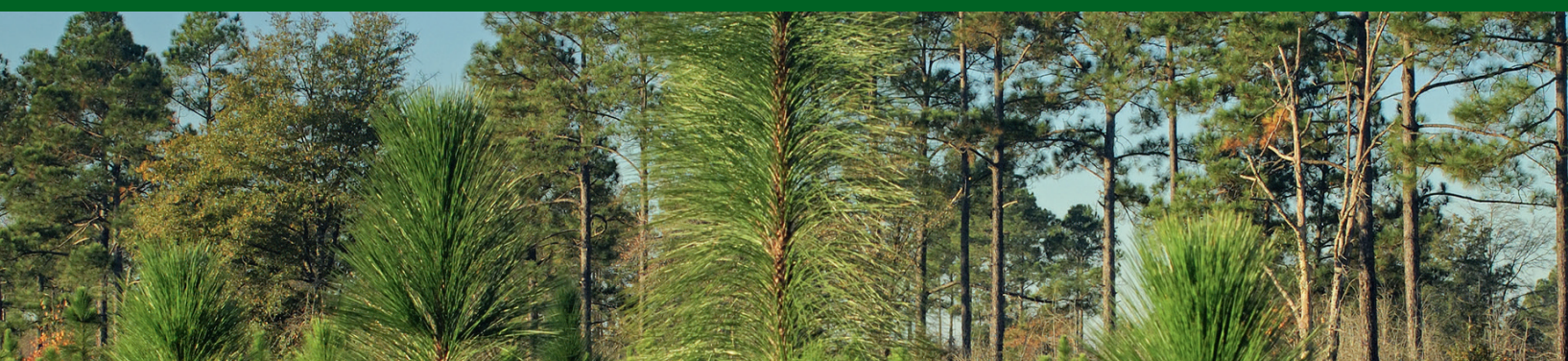
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Editor's Letter

Dear Valued Subscriber,

Thank you for your commitment to stewarding the wildlife and natural resources with which we have been entrusted. It is my pleasure to carry the torch Andy Whitaker so appropriately lit over 24 years ago.

Walk with us through this updated issue as we expand on the mission of this important publication. There are still the familiar, four feature articles covering a range of topics: the ecosystems fire creates, lake succession, protecting fawns, and your trusted management calendar. In addition, you will also get two new sub-features speaking into soil health and alfalfa, the queen of forage. But we are not stopping there. In this issue and those to come, we are adding several new departments touching on land values, equipment, safety, conservation, and recipes you can enjoy from your efforts on the farm.

The "Land Market Report" will educate you on a variety of land values throughout the southeast, from farmland and timberland to recreational properties, while highlighting key land features that drive the long-term value and enjoyment of your land. The new "Equipment Spotlight" will highlight equipment ranging from fifty to tens of thousands of dollars and its unique value proposition to a landowner or land manager. Safety can be easily overlooked, so we also want to challenge you to take a minute and think about how you and your family can stay safe while working hard on your land in our "Trends Tips" section. In the "Conservation Corner," we'll highlight a conservation organization that is amplifying our mission, with testimony straight from the leaders who are doing the work. And last but not least, step out of the dirt and up to the dinner table as we bring you amazing outdoor recipes, allowing you to enjoy your farm's provisions with family and friends.

Wildlife Trends Journal is a meaningful undertaking, and we cannot do this alone. We greatly encourage your questions, feedback, requested topics, and personal recommendations for future contributors as we work hard to expand and deepen the quality of our content for your benefit and those fortunate to carry the torch in the future.



Wildlife Trends JOURNAL

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***Wildlife Trends Journal* is a publication of GON Outdoors and 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.**

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Worth More The Way God Made It

By Jon Kohler, JD

A Hundred-Year Stewardship Arc, and Why the Market Finally Caught Up



All of us work on improving habitat because we love it. Some of us work on habitat with all the diligence of managing a professional sports franchise. Today, that's not far off — and this story shares why.

My dad always wanted to buy any land that bordered us. My mom always wanted him to stop. Blue Creek is natural Gulf Coast hammocks, longleaf, and tidal rivers, and he loved it a close third behind family and God. But my mom had had her fill of land that cost money instead of making it, and my dad lost the argument every time. It was the first time I heard the word divorce. Listening through the walls, I cringed at how poorly he made his case.

I was 14 years old. He never heard the promise I whispered through those walls. One day, I would build us the winning argument — and I did.

While we still own Blue Creek, he never lived to see today's recreational land market.

If you're like many of us who take wildlife management to a professional level, the costs are high. The annual return is measured financially in sporadic timber harvests, and intrinsically in shared experiences with friends and family. You've spent good money — and even more time — on habitat that doesn't show a return on any spreadsheet. It's a hard case to make to your spouse, your accountant, sometimes just to yourself. The financial data has finally caught up.

Doing right by the land is now one





of the best-performing investments in America. **Prescribed fire is more than habitat management — it's reinvesting in a Blue-Chip stock.** We can show a $2,000-per-acre difference between consistently burned land and neighboring timberland that isn't.

A-grade recreational land is now worth 40%+/- more than A-grade irrigated farmland in the same county. We're closing the best at $10,000 an acre. One of our properties just proved 132% appreciation in five years on land carrying a conservation easement — meaning it can never be anything but recreation. And the largest recreational land sale in Georgia history just closed for $39 million, in a story that reached over a billion people.

My dad would have won the argument today — and it wouldn't even be close. Here's how.

What "Improvement" Actually Costs

Sometimes the most valuable lessons come from the worst cases. A few years ago a past client of mine — whom I won't name — owned a significant amount of old, natural longleaf and wiregrass. Keep in mind: of the original 90 million acres of longleaf, only 5.6% remains today, and only about one-hundredth of one percent still carries the original wiregrass virgin ground cover, like his did. I sold about 4,000 acres of it and brought in a buyer for what is today one of the most famous, well-managed sporting plantations in the country. It was a record sale that shocked a lot of people and demonstrated the land's value that most never saw.

I thought he was impressed. Apparently not. The very next thing I knew, he was clearcutting a vast stand on another tract to convert it to irrigated farmland. Just like that, one of the rarest landscapes in America was, once again, converted to commodity production.

Why? Because the model he used to value the land was based on the past. He didn't see the intrinsic value, even though he'd just watched it pay. For some reason, he reverted to looking at land the way the corporations and Wall Street do — and by those metrics, conversion looked like a sound business decision, just like it had for the other 85 million lost acres. The biggest mistake? Not understanding how to monetize the intrinsic value of the 100th of 1%…the wiregrass. He only looked at the merchantable timber value.

My unnamed client took something rare and made it a commodity. The Rembrandt was ruined trying to make this painting look like something more recognizable to most.

Lick Skillet: What We Actually Raise

Now go the other extreme. Our family farm, Lick Skillet, sits on more than two and a half miles of the Aucilla River — the site of one of the first two ranches in Spanish Florida. Unlike that pristine longleaf and wiregrass, my place had been farmed, cut over, and exploited for nearly 400 years.

I once had a chance to buy a "perfect," almost untouched place. To do it, I would have had to sell Lick Skillet. Like a Southern Baptist preacher — what use would I be pastoring to a perfect congregation? I realized what I love is the same thing Jesus' story is built on: redemption. Taking the sins of the past and making the land better than it ever was.

We do it all. We have both low and high fence, hatch bobwhites and ring-neck pheasants, and raise whitetails, blackbuck antelope, Iberico pork, and wagyu cattle. All of it based around bird dogs. Sure, we have timber, but I saw the writing on the wall years ago. Today we mostly plant chestnuts, pears, plums, and various oaks. In fact, I got a lot of

my ideas from *Wildlife Trends*.

What we do differently is look at habitat from additional perspectives. To justify what I do at the scale I do it — to my wife, unlike my dad — I have numbers. That comes in the form of making the land worth more. A lot more. When I improve habitat, I look at it as a capital improvement that increases the property's value.

We create places. Beauty. Destinations. I don't look at it as raising crops, timber, or even wildlife. I create experiences. Positive, beautiful experiences shared with others in God's great creation.



There's something Biblical about improving land. It was the original assignment, after all. *The Lord God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it* (Genesis 2:15). The job description hasn't changed in six thousand years.

I'll be candid: we've had bad years at Lick Skillet too. We've burned at the wrong time. We've planted the wrong things and listened to the wrong people. We even had our breeder buck die a month before his only job for the year was to begin. We've made every mistake in one form or another. The land forgave us, like the good Lord forgives us — and so we keep moving forward.

Certainly, converting land into more productive uses made America prosperous. But I would argue that converting 95% of longleaf habitat for other uses has swung the balance too far. So would the buyers who put roughly $240 million in front of us last year — all of them calling because they wanted to invest in and improve the last of it.

Here is the most surprising statistic I can offer. Of the 17,000 acres we closed last year, the average sales price was **$6,900 per acre.** The places we sell are the places Wildlife Trends readers steward — the best-managed lands in the South. What the numbers tell is that managing land better than most increases its value by $1,000 per acre, or about 20%, over comparables. Knowing that should give you incentive to increase your burned acres as well as next year's chestnut budget. It does mine.

Three Witnesses to the Same Truth

In my profession, I'm more of an advisor — a trusted guide — than a salesman. From that seat, I get to see how ideas, people, and opportunities line up, and help line them up for others. One of the most striking observations I've





Walter Hatchett, Jake Paul, and Jon Kohler

made is the connection between three titans, all bound to one piece of ground over the course of a century — three men who have made, or are making, a difference for all of us. Each paid the price of believing this premise long before the market did. Each is now part of the proof.

Herbert Stoddard, 1924. A self-taught museum taxidermist gets hired by Northern owners of Southern hunting plantations whose bobwhite numbers are collapsing. What no one ties together is the parallel collapse of a newly formed asset class — quail hunting plantations. The U.S. Government had waged a propaganda war against prescribed fire, effectively shutting it down and erasing the market value of those plantations. Stoddard's finding — that fire is the engine of quail country, not its enemy — was so heretical the U.S. Forest Service tried to suppress him. So a taxidermist funded by absentee landowners had to go up against the Forest Service and their "Dixie Crusaders" — mobile movie theaters touring the South vilifying burners the way Walt Disney later vilified the hunter who shot Bambi's mother. In defense, he published The Bobwhite Quail in 1931. But what most people also don't know is that he wasn't only an employee — he was a plantation investor and broker. He and a partner personally assembled 26,000 acres in Decatur County, Georgia, that would later become Southlands. His own fortunes depended on persuading the world of his findings — that the way God continually renewed the land with fire was irreplaceable. He won — or none of us today would be reading Wildlife Trends or be a member of Tall Timbers. The folks there will also tell you that the science a taxidermist turned wildlife biologist wrote a hundred years ago is basically the same science they recommend land managers run today. **Witness number one:** the man who wrote the rule book got there a century early.

Jim Dahl, 2010. My mentor. Jim spent thirty years watching International Paper run Southlands as a corporate timber laboratory — "the Southlands Experiment Forest," headquarters of a 12-million-acre forestry empire. He came from Wall Street and was one of the first to treat recreational land as a separate asset class. In 2010, he set his sights on the property Stoddard had originally assembled but he had a problem. It wasn't for sale. To make his offer enticing he had to purchase **160,000 acres across 10 states** in order to own the gem. I ended up putting the deal together that sold off the 124,000 acres he didn't want. That deal closed at $142 million — the largest timberland transaction in the South in a decade. I remember thinking about his faith — how strongly he believed in what he was doing. He took the pivot out, metaphorically speaking. He never looked at timber as timber instead looking at it as aesthetics, experiences, and habitat. He restored fire on Stoddard's schedule. He built lakes and a 30-acre duck pond. He brought the wild quail back. The property started producing Boone & Crockett deer. **Witness number two:** the man who proved that converting timberland to recreation creates wealth — and built the model. The lesson Jim taught me, and the one I see most landowners struggle with, is the confidence to treat restoration as an asset class with rules. There are

fundamentals that work, and fundamentals that don't.

Jake Paul, 2025. Time marches on, Walter Hatchett and I closed Southlands at $39 million — the largest recreational land sale in Georgia history. It's no coincidence that Walter, too, was mentored by Jim — for 27 years. The buyer, a 28-year-old boxer/influencer who had just won the most-streamed sporting event in history took the $30 million he earned and put it into Stoddard's land. When Jake and I talked about why, the answer wasn't what the headlines made it out to be. He told me he wanted *a place where he could hunt the way he did growing up as a kid in Ohio, when his dad took him hunting.* The sale introduced fire managed lands to a global audience of over a billion people. *The Land Report* named Southlands, now Paul Reserve, the 2025 Sporting Deal of the Year. **Witness number three:** recreational land has gone mainstream — to a new type of buyer no one could have imagined — choosing Stoddard's land over almost anything money could buy.

Three witnesses, a century apart, all telling the same story: *the land is worth more the way God made it than the way man "improves" it. Fixing the improvement creates more wealth than destroying it ever did.*

Why the Market Finally Caught Up

In economics there's a concept called the velocity of money — the faster a dollar trades hands, the more accurately the market knows its true worth. The corollary is also true: when an asset trades slowly, the market's published price lags reality. Economists call this the price-discovery problem, and it's the defining trait of every illiquid market — fine art, classic cars, rare collectibles, and land.

A great quail plantation might trade once in a generation. Until it does, its real value is hidden, and the last comp on record is almost always behind where the market has actually moved. My firm counters this with what we call **Intrinsic Value Velocity**. By closing enough quality transactions in this niche at a speed fast enough to keep the comps current, we reveal the truth that slow-trading markets normally hide.

For two decades, you could buy almost any quality recreational property at any reasonable price, and because there were so few comparable sales, your purchase became the next comp. There was almost no way to lose money. That's also the same blind spot that ruined our former clients land. He assumed the value on his own, and he couldn't believe we had more buyers ready to pay what the longleaf/wiregrass habitat was actually worth. Now the trade volume is finally high enough to reveal the truth.

Recent closings — closed deals we've made:

- **Lake Wautauga** (private 25-acre lake): **$10,000/acre**.

- **Kissaway Plantation** (1,190 acres): just shy of **$9,000/acre**.

- **Southlands** (5,747 acres): **$6,790/acre at scale**.

- **Twin Oaks** (1,966 acres, conservation easement): **$6,400/acre** land and timber value — same tract sold in 2020 for $2,760/acre. **132% appreciation in five years**.

- **Rivers Edge** (1,400 acres on the Flint River): **$9,850/acre in 2024**, up from $8,000/acre five years earlier, up from $4,500/acre in 2017. **135% across three sales in seven years**.

For comparison: good irrigated farmland in Georgia currently trades around $6,500–$7,000 per acre, and softening. The top fire-managed recreational land is now consistently outperforming the best-improved farmland. My partner Walter Hatchett — who closed Rivers Edge all three times — put it plainly: *"The difference today is the number of B&C bucks we proved it could raise and the demand for quality deer."* The bobwhite quail may be the prince of game birds, but in 2026 it's the B&C buck that's king.

Calling these top properties simply "recreational land," or even "plantations," no longer captures their modern identity. The very best of them — managed by Tall Timbers principles, exceptional architecture, the best wildlife and longterm stewardship history — are an even higher asset class. We call them **Legacy Sporting Lands™**. At one time, a Parker, a Purdey, or a Holland & Holland was simply a "gun." They went through the same maturation: the masters detached from the rest of the market, and the prices reflected it. Same thing is happening here.

Our Private Collection Plantation Maps are the deepest record of these lands anywhere. We spent decades developing them proprietarily; in 2018 we released them publicly to show the world how important these lands are and worth saving. The collection covers the four most important Plantation Belts — the Red Hills, the Albany Area, Union Springs, and the ACE Basin. The latest edition added 5,000 new acres of fire-managed land. Added. Not subtracted.

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Wildlife TRENDS

Land Market REPORT

Liquid Gold: Why Water Features Drive Real Estate Liquidity

When evaluating recreational timberland and hunting tracts, trees and topography tell only half the story. The presence, type, and quality of water features are often the ultimate wildcards influencing long-term investment yield. In the land investment market, "liquidity" traditionally refers to how quickly an asset can be converted into cash at a fair price. But for landowners looking to float a premium listing, financial liquidity is directly tethered to literal, physical liquidity.

Properties with strong water infrastructure appreciate faster and sell significantly quicker than dry, landlocked timber tracts. Here is how literal liquidity flows into financial returns:

1. The Wildlife Magnet: Amenity and Lifestyle Value

From a recreational standpoint, water features can be one of the single greatest drivers of a property's dollar value, transforming a monotonous timber monoculture into a diverse ecosystem.

- **Live Water Premiums:** Year-round creeks, trout streams, or river frontage command the highest market premiums, acting as natural magnets for whitetail deer and wild turkey.
- **Waterfowl Potential:** Established duck marshes, oxbows, or green-tree reservoirs routinely fetch substantial premiums from specialized waterfowl enthusiasts.
- **Trophy Bass Infrastructure:** Turnkey engineered ponds add a completely separate buyer demographic adding anglers to a traditional hunting listing, driving up competitive bidding.

2. The Timberland Trade-Off: Balancing Utility and Access

While water enhances recreational appeal, it introduces operational variables that savvy land investors must carefully evaluate:

- **Streamside Management Zones (SMZs):** Forestry guidelines require mature timber buffers along streams to protect water quality, which can slightly reduce immediate logging acreage.
- **Harvest Accessibility:** A creek restricting equipment access can become a liability unless the property features robust internal road networks like low-water crossings or established culverts. Fortified damns that can act as a bridge for equipment when creating an impoundment create a great access point and have more longevity than a structure to simply retain water.

Deepening the Buyer Pool

Pure timberland can sometimes languish on the market because the buyer pool is limited to institutional investors looking strictly at internal rates of return. Enhancing "live water" features or introducing a well-managed lake instantly shifts the tract into the recreational buyer market. This demographic is vastly larger, less sensitive to shifting timber prices, and willing to pay a premium for aesthetic value and a variety of year-round recreational opportunities.

Ultimately, the right balance of hydrology can transform a standard timber investment into a world-class sporting paradise—safeguarding asset liquidity and driving premium appreciation for years to come. If you want your land investment to flow smoothly when it's time to cash out, physical liquidity is the ultimate value multiplier. A study of sales across the southeastern states over the past five years indicates a premium of approximately $1,000 per acre for tracts containing significant water features like ponds, private lakes and lake frontage.

Amenity	Average $/Ac
Lake Frontage	$4,099
None	$2,852
Pond/Private Lake	$3,876

Nacogdoches County, TX. 414 Acres Sold 2025 $9,482 per acre

This timberland tract features over 300 acres of mature plantation with multiple hardwood drains and private pond to support wildlife habitat. Approximately 10 miles west of Nacogdoches Texas.

Hinds County, MS. 509 Acres Sold 2025 $3,122 per acre

Located southeast of Edwards Mississippi with over 2 miles of paved county road access. There is mature pine and hardwood throughout the drains on the property with 85 acres of upland recently clearcut and 103 acres heavily thinned. Turkey Creek is the eastern boundary which is part of 126 acres of floodplain on this tract. There is a 23-acre lake on the property with a man-made levee.

Spalding County, GA. 279 Acres Sold 2025 $7,706 per acre

Located north of Griffin Georgia. This tract contained 15 acres of open land, 240 acres of planted pine and natural hardwoods. Additionally, there is a 20-acre lake and a 3-acre catfish pond. Troublesome Creek flows through the property.



Upson County, GA. 1,004 Acres Sold 2025 $4,200 per acre

This recreational tract in located south of Atlanta and west of Macon. There are also 324 acres of natural merchantable hardwood and pine on the bottomland areas spreading out from Clear Creek which runs through the property forming a 26-acre pond known as Turner Lake.

Putnam County, FL. 638 Acres Sold 2025 $7,000 per acre

Located southeast of Hawthorne, only 25 minutes to Gainesville and just over an hour from Jacksonville. Main features include a 10-acre lake with frontage along 80-acre Moss Lee Lake. This tract offers a mix of 82 acres of productive pasture and 121 acres of merchantable pine plantation.

Leon County, FL. 2,073 Acres Sold 2026 $10,130 per acre

This property is located north of Tallahassee and encompasses just over 2,000 acres of highly managed recreational plantation. Boasting over 3.5 miles of Ochlocknee River frontage and a signature 1.5-mile live oak canopy entrance. The property features diverse, world-class recreational ecosystems: Piney Woods: Mature longleaf pine and wiregrass supporting wild bobwhite quail. Water & Sport: Four managed lakes (~100 acres) for bass fishing, plus a dedicated plant-and-flood duck pond. Protected in perpetuity by a conservation easement, the estate permanently guards its abundant deer, turkey, and wild bird habitats against regional development.

Some recent sales that exhibit some premium for water features and recreational appeal.

When, Why And How To Start Your Lake Over

By Scott Brown

"I always stress what you do around your lakes and upstream is as important as what you do in your lakes."

Decades of poor weed management can lead to the shallowing of a waterbody. This eventually leads to excessive plant growth, undesirable species, and begins affecting water chemistry, which in turn affects fish growth, reproduction success and young-of-the-year survival.

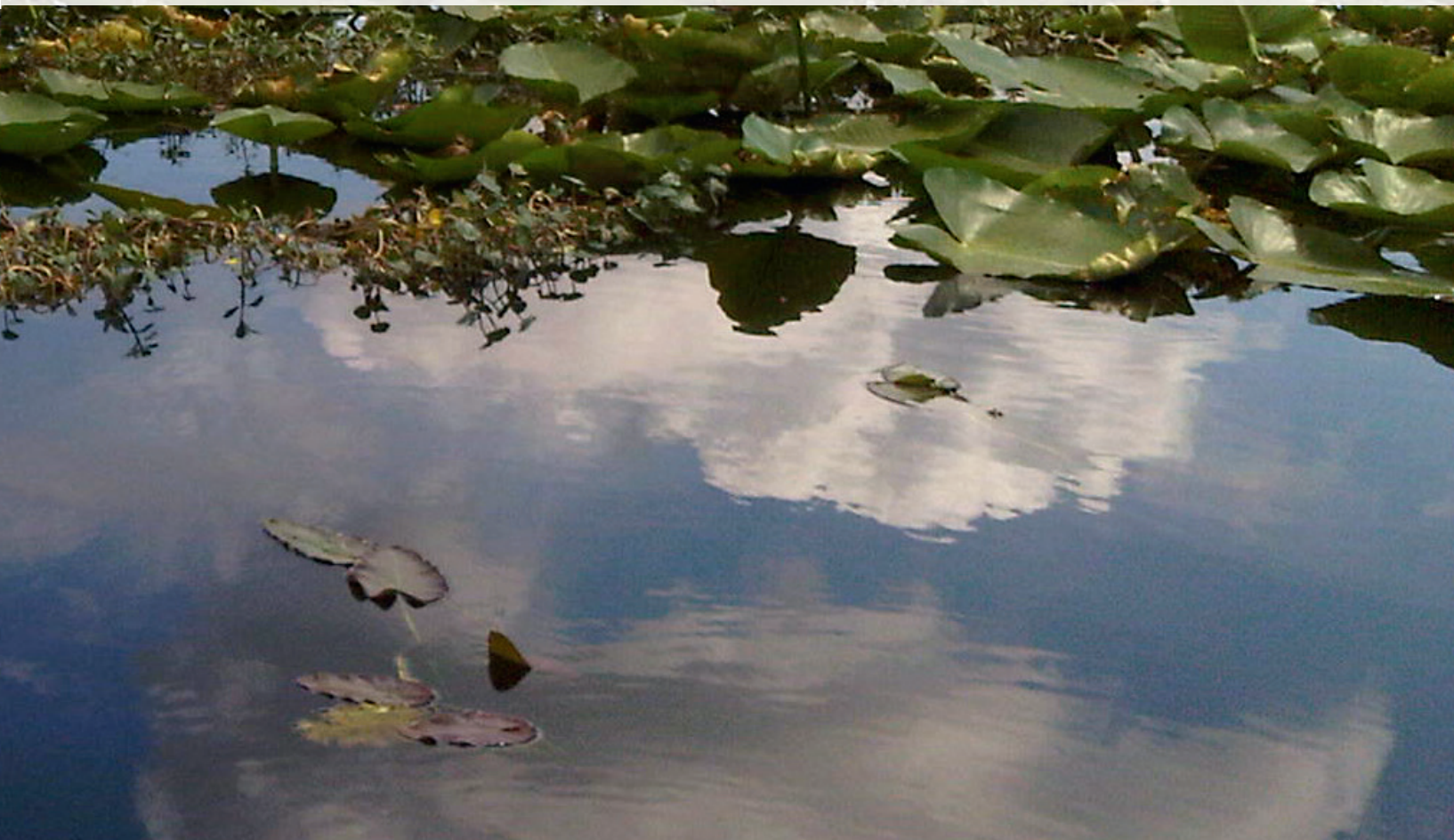


Starting a lake or pond over is a very hard decision, even for professional lake managers. Most management problems can be corrected in a few years without a complete restart. But sometimes starting over is thrust upon you, whether it be a dam failure, lake draining, or a near 100% fish kill. But in other instances, the lake or pond owner must weigh whether the costs of a restart will ultimately yield greater benefits than managing what you currently have and bringing it to the point of being a quality fishery.

There are three primary reasons to start over. The first is the waterbody itself: it has become shallow, filled with organic material, and the water chemistry has gone bad. The second is the fish population, whether it is unbalanced, stunted for years, or overrun with undesirable species. The third is severe drought or dam failure, where the lake almost or completely drained. We'll look at each of these in more detail.

Most private waterbodies are man-made either by damming a ditch or creek known as an embankment pond/lake or by removing dirt from an area that water can sheet flow or be redirected into, known as an excavated pond/lake. Many times, both techniques are used on an embankment waterbody where a ditch or small creek is dammed, but dirt is dug out so it is deeper and shoreline slopes are greater than the natural lay of the land. Some of the aging process can be slowed by making sure lakes are deep enough to compensate for early erosion and dead plant material build up, and shoreline slopes steep enough to discourage excess vegetation growth. Continually allowing weeds to grow and then treating them with herbicides fills the waterbody as the dead plants sink, building organic material on the bottom that eventually affects water chemistry, fish reproduction, and growth. Once the waterbody becomes too shallow, it becomes more difficult and eventually impossible to manage for quality largemouth bass, bream, crappie and the forage needed to support that population.

When a lake becomes too shallow and needs to be restored, we refer to this as a lake restoration project. To identify whether your waterbody needs restoration and succession turned back, there are some things that help identify an aging lake and questions that need answering to determine if it is time to act. Looking at water chemistry, vegetation and fish species present,





On rare occasions a complete restart is needed. Sometimes just the fish population, and others from the lake bottom up. This was a 36-acre dam failure that went down to 4 acres, six feet deep, where many largemouth bass survived, so only forage fish needed restocking.

their numbers, and growth rates can all help determine if a restoration project would greatly benefit your waterbody. How deep is the waterbody and how many inches of organic material (muck) is built up on the bottom? We have recently started work on some private lakes where the dominant plant species is Nuphar (lilies) and the fish species make-up is predominantly gar, bowfin, lake chubsucker and bullhead (all trash fish). Not a lot of bass, bluegill or redear sunfish. Water chemistry data revealed poor water quality year-round from top to bottom — only six feet down at the deepest spot, with an average depth of about 4.5 feet. Desirable species like bream/panfish and largemouth bass have low spawning success — eggs do not hatch due to lack of oxygen in muck or if they do hatch, young-of-the-year struggle to or do not survive. A spawn may not occur at all due to stress of the few adult fish of those desirable species present. Poor water quality conditions cause adult fish species stress, which slows growth and diminishes reproduction success.

Once it is decided to conduct a lake restoration project, which technique to use needs to be considered. There are three primary ways to deepen a waterbody, remove organic material, and turn back lake succession. Some techniques are cheaper and easier than others. When determining which technique is best, consider your situation, objectives, cost, equipment access, a disposal site if needed, and permitting requirements.

1. Lake Drawdown

The cheapest technique to perform is a lake drawdown. This can also be used to reduce acreage and costs for large-scale herbicide treatment or to mechanically remove floating islands of vegetation (called tussocks). It can also expose vegetation during the winter causing cold weather die-off. Finally, it can be performed to expose bottom sediments, allowing the drying of organic material and reducing the organics when it refills. This simulates an extreme drought and can be very beneficial to a fishery, if done correctly. If the exposed material is not given enough time to dry, then it was a waste of time and money. The bottom material must be allowed to dry at least 90 days, but we prefer 120 days or more if possible. The



Heavy organic buildup may require a lake draining and scraping out to remove the nutrients and start completely over.

longer it dries, the better for water chemistry, vegetation and the fish population when it refills. Obviously, you start this at the beginning of the dry season and want it to be completed before the rainy season.

2. Dewatering & Scraping

The next technique is dewatering and scraping. The water is drawn down to expose most or all the bottom so it can be accessed with heavy equipment to scrape and dig out material. If no deposit site can be found, material can be used to create islands after it dries completely.If the waterbody is large enough, this can create more shoreline for desirable species such as bream/panfish and largemouth bass. Most private waterbodies are too small and to reduce costs, material deposit sites need to be nearby. Like the drawdown, this needs to start at the beginning of the dry season and be completed before the rainy season.

3. Dredging

The third and most expensive technique is dredging. It does not require removing water, kills fewer fish, and can be done any time of year. It does require a nearby site to temporarily store and dry material before trucking it to a deposit site or a site where material and water can be pumped directly, with the water draining back into the lake and leaving the material behind.

Before starting, looking into permitting requirements is a must. Each state, and possibly county governments, have different permitting requirements. Each state may also have multiple agencies which should be contacted to see what, if any, permit is required from them. Removing water and pumping it downstream may require a permit and which agency is responsible differs from state to state. Besides state and county governments, the US Fish and Wildlife Service may require a permit if the work affects threatened or endangered species at the project site or deposit location. The US Army Corps of Engineers may require a permit for larger projects or for where the material will be deposited. Do not let the fear of permits discourage you from looking into it. Your project



Dredging is the least invasive method for removing heavy organic buildup and deepening a lake, but it is very expensive.

may fall under every agency's minimum acreage or cubic-yard threshold, requiring no permits at all, but please check prior to pumping, digging, or dumping, as the fines are exorbitant. When in doubt, I would recommend using a local pond-engineering consultant to help develop a plan and coordinate the permitting process.

Restarting The Fish Population

On occasion, a fish population gets so out of sync that it must be restarted by applying Rotenone (fish poison), restocking with desirable fish species, and managing so it doesn't repeat itself. This tactic is usually reserved for smaller waterbodies. We have started over due to a pond taken over by bullheads, rough fish (gar, bowfin, carp, suckers, gizzard shad, etc.) and crappie. Rotenone must be applied by a professional applicator. Once it is applied, fish begin surfacing in 15-20 minutes. They are dipped and disposed of over three or more consecutive days. After two weeks, the new fish can be stocked. Restock with fathead minnows, mosquitofish, largemouth bass, bream (bluegill and redear sunfish) and maybe golden shiners, threadfin shad, and channel catfish. Do not stock anything from nearby waterbodies, as that's what may have caused your problem to begin with. Several small pond owners have put themselves in this situation by moving bullheads from a nearby source, thinking they were channel catfish, and after a few years of reproducing at a high rate, the waterbody is full of nothing but bullheads. Another issue in the deep south is ponds taken over by exotic fish. The only way to restore it is to kill all the exotics and start over. However, be careful to identify the exotic and learn its biology and life habits. Figure out how they got there and eliminate that pathway. Sometimes it is as easy as telling users to not introduce any fish into the pond. The other extreme is that every time it floods, those undesirable fish are getting into your waterbody from an upstream source, nearby canal, or in the case of the walking catfish, just walk over from a nearby water source when it rains. In these cases, it might be a reason to do nothing.



The fish population may need restarting, first by killing it out with Rotenone (fish poison) then restocking desirable, native fish. From lower left-up-and-around: brown bullhead, gizzard shad,

A fish die-off can occur naturally, as opposed to Rotenone use. Before commencing with the restart after a low dissolved oxygen



Treating too large an area with herbicides can cause minor and catastrophic summer fish kills. Some are so bad, the fish population needs to be restarted with stocking forage fish first and predators (largemouth bass) later.



The fish population may need restarting, first by killing it out with Rotenone (fish poison) then restocking desirable, native fish. From lower left-up-and-around: brown bullhead, gizzard shad, tilapia, largemouth bass, gar, walking catfish.

fish kill, you must determine the reason for the die-off and fix it. You do not want a repeat in just a couple years after starting over. Ninety-nine percent of fish kills are caused by low dissolved oxygen levels. You also must estimate what percentage of the fish perished. Was it only one species? Was it only big individuals of all species? Were all species and sizes affected? These types of die-offs can be triggered by nutrient buildup on the bottom, a lake that is too shallow, too much dead vegetation after spraying, high nutrient runoff, a green lake experiencing consecutive rainy or cloudy days that causes an algae bloom die-off, and spring or fall lake rollover. Solutions range from not spraying that large an area, installing an aeration system, or draining and scraping the lake.

Drought or Dam Failure

The final cause for a restart is severe drought or dam failure. Once you accept the fact that it really happened, the first step is identifying good and bad things about the old waterbody. Did the old waterbody have good water chemistry or is there something that can be changed to improve it? Is the current habitat conducive to growing lots of quality fish, or are there areas for improvement? Were the fish species present what you desired, or did you have a quality bream or catfish fishery, but really wanted a high-quality largemouth bass fishery? You have been presented with an unplanned drawdown. Make the best of it: plan and follow that plan.

If the dam blew out, finding a quality company to rebuild it is required. We recommend someone local who knows the soils and understands any permitting needed from county, state, or federal government. Assess why the dam may have failed. Was it due to too much water? Did the overflow drainpipe(s) or emergency over flow structures not work properly? Was the dam not cored with clay? Was the dam not wide or tall enough? Were trees or woody shrubs allowed to grow on the dam, the roots caused a leak, and the extra water eroded it away until it failed? A good pond builder will be able to assess why it happened, and rebuild to prevent a repeat. Finding clay on your property or having it trucked in will be necessary to do the repairs right. I suggest the USDA's *Ponds - Planning, Design, Construction* (Agriculture Handbook 590) as a reference for landowners to use when constructing a new lake or pond or performing a rebuild. It goes into great detail on pond building, and particularly construction of the dam, outflow structures, and emergency overflow spillways. Obviously, the internet is another endless source of information, but identifying good information from hobby lake managers and builders can be difficult, so be careful.

WHILE THE LAKE IS DOWN: DESIGN TARGETS

An empty or drawn-down lake is the only chance you get to fix its shape. Before the water comes back, these are the targets worth hitting:

- Depth: Keep some water at least eight feet deep through a drought. Unless an aeration system is installed, no area needs to be greater than 15 feet.
- Bottom contour: Do not leave it smooth. Avoid isolated deep holes that are not connected by deepwater trenches.
- Shoreline slope: 4:1 or steeper. Anything less encourages vegetation growth farther out into the lake, and buys you years of constant herbicide use, grass carp, or scraping.
- Organics: If they are present and scraping is not an option, allow the lake to stay drained for over three months. Letting the bottom dry will help immensely.

The final step prior to dam repairs and refilling is asking what can be done to improve the lake. Such things to consider changing before it refills are size, shape, depth, bottom contour, and shoreline slope. Most desired species such as bream and largemouth bass are an edge species, so the more irregular the shoreline and bottom, the more edge and habitat available for those species. Those species spend most of their time hiding, feeding and reproducing in the Littoral Zone (area between land and deep water where aquatic vegetation is located). There is a lot more shoreline where it zigzags in and out than a rectangular or circular shaped lake. If there are excessive organic materials present that made for poor water chemistry prior to dewatering, consider scraping that material and hauling it out. In this scenario, you have bypassed the draining work and permits. Make the best of it being low or empty. Outflows are important; if one caused the dam to fail, change and/or enlarge it. Consider adding any amenities such as docks, a boat ramp, fish attractors/ offshore habitat, gravel spawning beds, agricultural lime, an aeration system or a fountain. These items are all easier to install when empty rather than at full pool from a boat. During a drought, some of the water needs to be eight feet deep, while no area (unless an aeration system is installed) needs to be greater than 15 feet. Bottom contour should not be smooth nor should there be isolated deep holes not connected by deepwater trenches. Shoreline slope needs to be 4:1 or steeper, because anything less encourages vegetation growth farther out into the lake and can cause problems in the future that require constant herbicide use, grass carp, or scraping. If organics are present and scraping is not an option, allowing it to stay drained for over three months and allowing the bottom to dry will help immensely. There may have been a submerged or shoreline plant that was out of control prior to dewatering. This can be addressed while exposed either with herbicides or by scraping them out along with a little soil to remove roots and tubers that might allow the plant to resprout after refilling. Before the problem plant dies due to drying out, treat with EPA-approved systemic herbicides.

Stocking

Stocking is a little tricky if the lake did not go completely dry, because you need a feel for what fish remain as the waterbody refills. How many acres of water were left at the lowest point? How deep was it when water levels were lowest? Did a spawn happen while it was down, or will it happen after it refills? These questions lead to how many fish and what species are present.



After a fish kill, severe drought, dam failure, or purposely draining that was not 100% dry, have the fish population sampled by electrofishing to see where you are restarting from. Depending on the severity, the time of year, and how many fish are estimated to be present, stocking rates and which

If it went dry, stocking as if it were a brand-new lake is necessary. If it was a 35-acre lake that went down to 4 acres, 4-6 feet deep in winter and spring, it probably doesn't require a full restock. There may be an area to harbor a good number of fish, but if total draining is necessary to properly repair the dam, they will still be lost. Do not cut corners on dam reconstruction, because it needs to be the best it can be.

"Do not cut corners on dam reconstruction, because it needs to be the best it can be."

If nothing has changed upstream, and you have good baseline water chemistry data, checking the water chemistry is not necessary prior to stocking, but you may want to for peace of mind. We know fish already thrived here, so there is no reason they will not again just because it went dry.

You want to stock bream/panfish and minnows as soon as the water levels get over 6 feet. If it went dry, then bass 6-12 months after the initial forage stocking. If it did not go dry, assess with an electrofishing sample as soon as the boat can be launched to see what the bass numbers, sizes, and Relative Weights (health/robustness) are. If it did not go dry and bass survived, they will have a growth spurt when the water is down due to concentrated forage with no cover, and bass food is plentiful. If the water is down too long, they will then start becoming thinner, as the forage is depleted and bass are not consuming what they were in the beginning. Bass may not need restocking if they had enough food and good water chemistry while the lake was down. Or they may need a boost, depending on numbers, sizes, and when their next spawn occurs — as it refills or once it is full. If channel catfish are desired, they can be stocked whenever the hatchery has them available, but are cheaper when the hatchery is already delivering other fish, and can be smaller without big bass present. For new lake stockings we also add either fathead minnows and/or mosquitofish for small bass and large bluegill forage to start. Once bream and minnows are stocked, turn feeders on immediately dispensing small pellet sized, high protein feed to expedite growth and encourage reproduction prior to predator (largemouth bass, striped bass hybrids, crappie) introduction. For new lakes we recommend 750-1,000 per acre of a bluegill (75%)/redear (25%) mix, plus 1,000 per acre of mosquitofish and fathead minnows. For lakes that did not go dry, stock 250-500 per acre of bream and still 1,000 per acre of the others. Once the bream get to about six inches, switch feed to a mixed size pellet so all forage fish present can benefit.

Restocking predators without having forage sizes present that they can consume is a waste of money, and you are not gaining anything, just losing time. There are a couple ways to stock your bass. Options are pure Northern, pure Florida, or the F1 Cross (Tiger/Gorilla bass). Occasionally we have stocked 25 per acre of Northern or F1 Cross, and are following up two years later with 15-20 per acre of pure Florida females. We fin clip the pure Florida females, so they are never removed during the small bass removal process. Fin clips are visible the fish's entire life, whereas Floy or Dart tags eventually fall out or break off. Bringing in big fish from outside waterbodies, especially the predators, does not expedite anything. It just slows things down and may require additional restocking of forage later to regain a balanced forage/prey population. Buying and stocking trophy bass is another frequent question. No one wants to sell their prize largemouth bass unless they are doing away with a lake or selling the property. It took them many years to grow them. In some states moving bass is illegal, whether caught from the nearby public reservoir and/or river or paying to have them electro-fished from another private lake and brought to you. If a large, old bass

FORAGE STOCKING RATES

All rates are per surface acre. Which set you use depends on whether anything survived.

New lakes, or a lake that went completely dry

- Bluegill / redear mix — 750-1,000 per acre (75% bluegill, 25% redear)
- Mosquitofish and fathead minnows — 1,000 per acre

Lakes that did not go dry

- Bream — 250-500 per acre
- Mosquitofish and fathead minnows — 1,000 per acre

Feeding

- Turn feeders on immediately with small, high-protein pellets to expedite growth and encourage reproduction before predators go in.
- Once the bream get to about six inches, switch to a mixed-size pellet so all forage fish present can benefit.



Lakes today are designed to have fun, grow quality fish, and less for growing food! Proper management will keep your lake in good health, with quality fish for decades. There is nothing more fun than pond fishing with topwater plugs.

is stocked in your lake, there is no guarantee how long it will live or if anyone will ever catch it before it dies of old age. Another point: your new lake probably does not have forage large enough to support big predators while the forage base is still building.

If your lake is green with a good algae bloom, stock a load (one load per 10 acres) of threadfin shad the year after the fingerling largemouth bass are stocked, and if larger bass are already present, stock immediately. At this same time, stock about 250 small golden shiners per acre. Two years after the largemouth bass have been stocked, you can add 10-25 lbs. of crawfish per acre if the habitat will support them and budget allows it. Crawfish are usually big, so allow the bass to grow before stocking. If big bass are already present, you can stock crawfish immediately. If your waterbody is suitable for black crappie, stock them a year after the threadfin shad and golden shiners go in at a rate of 25 per acre. With proper forage stocking and a supplemental feeding program, bluegill can be spawning in 6-8 months and measure over 8 inches in 10 months. If you wait on stocking predators, we have seen largemouth bass grow more than 16 inches, with a few "shooters" (fast growers) to 18 inches in year one, and three-to-four pounds in two years. Black crappie can reach almost 10 inches by end of year two after stocking.

Final Thoughts

Whether you are building a new lake or must start over on an existing lake, I recommend inviting a professional lake manager to meet with you on site to look firsthand at your situation and provide expert advice. Restarts are complicated, and it may require some sampling and educated guesswork depending on where you are restarting from. On restarts, changes can be made before the lake refills and is stocked that will improve the previous waterbody's water chemistry, habitat, and/or fish population. And when starting from scratch, it does take time before you see large bluegills, redear sunfish, largemouth bass, channel catfish, or crappie. But following proven guidelines and performing management tasks to upkeep the waterbody once complete will ensure a long, successful run with your lake. The best advice I can give is to have patience. No one likes a lake restart, no matter the reason, but you can experience some of the best fishing years of your life if it is done properly and with patience. Yes, you may lost quality fish, but with some work, funding, and knowledge, it will be as good and probably better than it was. This early success in a lake's life cycle is known as the New Reservoir Syndrome, and you must take advantage of it. This is the same reason we may prescribe a lake drawdown to reset the habitat and fish population. If nothing else, as a land and lake manager, you should know by now patience is required to achieve greatness. Things that are rushed usually fall short of expectations.

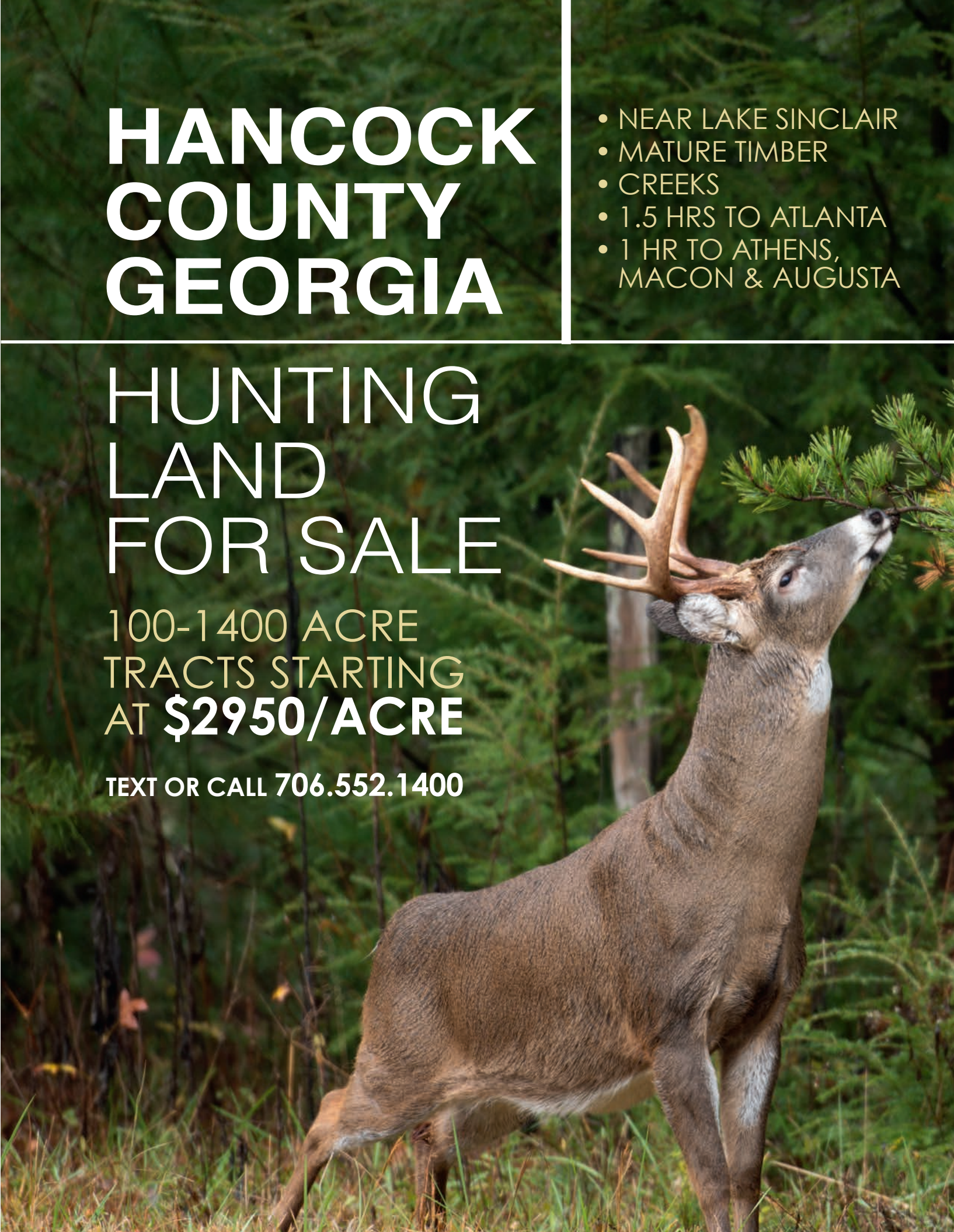
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The Future Of The Herd Starts Here

By Braelin Smallwood, Assistant Editor, Georgia Outdoor News

This article originally appeared in the July 2026 issue of Georgia Outdoor News. For more stories from GON, visit gon.com.

The next giant. The next county record. The next big buck contest winner. He might be taking his first breath right now in a briar patch somewhere near you.

Somewhere in some briars or a thick spot of overgrown grass, a little spotted fawn is taking its first breath. If the tiny brown thing is a buck, a lot of hunters won't think much of him come next fall.

Give him four years to grow.

That nice mature buck that you're showing your buddies and losing sleep over. That bruiser is developing right now during fawning season.

That's why so many hunters preach the same message every summer: don't mow.

For many hunters, protecting fawns is almost as important as protecting deer during hunting season. The reason is simple—today's fawns are tomorrow's deer herd.

Though the ideas and principles discussed herein are applicable across the Southeast, this article focuses on some specific characteristics about the state of Georgia.

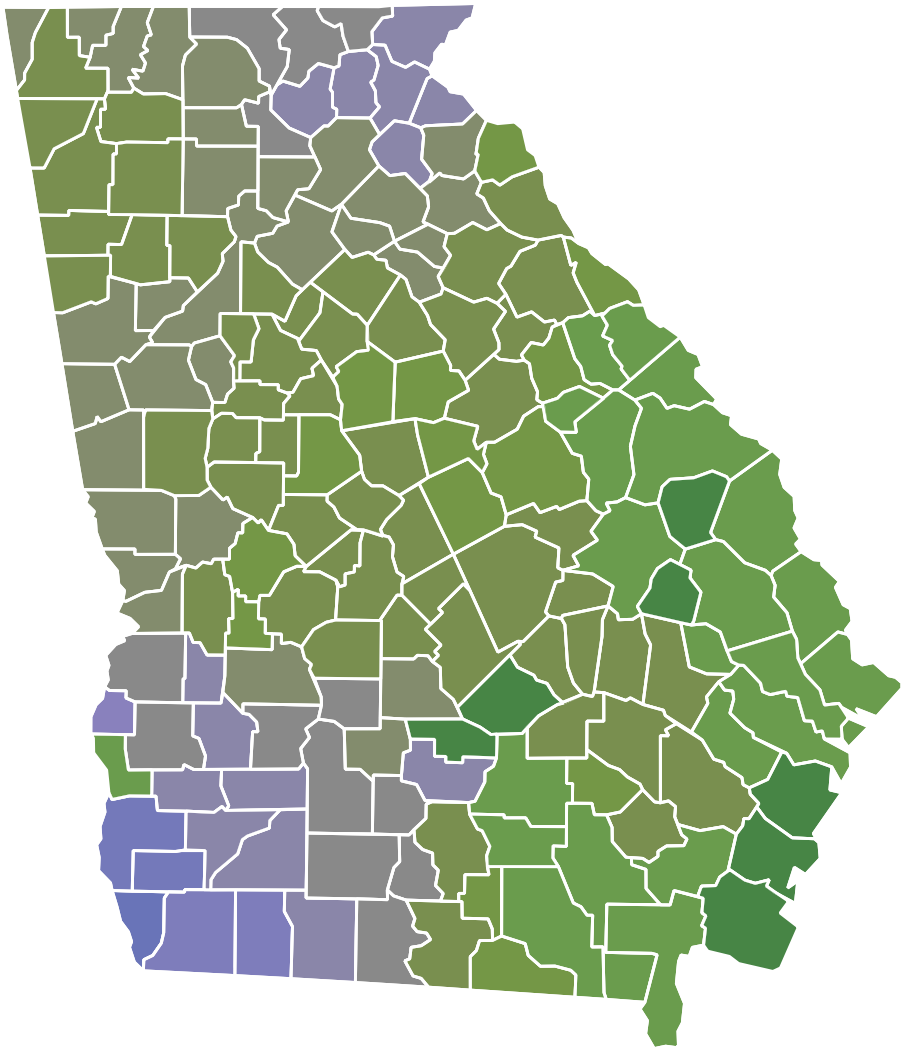
Georgia has one of the most unique and varied deer reproductive cycles in the country. Georgia's unusual rut timing is often attributed in part to historical restocking efforts that introduced deer from several regions of the country, though researchers also point to differences in day length, or photoperiod, across the state. Whatever the reason, fawning doesn't happen everywhere at the same time.

Most hunters spend summer thinking of the rut and the big buck to be chased, but June and July are crucial for the future deer herd.





Peak Deer Movement in Georgia



10/13-10/19
10/20-10/26
10/27-11/02
11/03-11/09
11/10-11/16
11/17-11/23
11/24-11/30
12/01-12/07
12/08-12/14
12/15-12/21
12/22-12/28

County
All

Appling	11/03-11/09
Atkinson	10/20-10/26
Bacon	10/27-11/02
Baker	11/24-11/30
Baldwin	10/27-11/02
Banks	11/24-11/30
Barrow	11/10-11/16
Bartow	11/03-11/09
Ben Hill	10/13-10/19
Berrien	11/03-11/09
Bibb	11/03-11/09
Bleckley	11/03-11/09
Brantley	10/20-10/26

In the Blue Ridge and Piedmont regions, peak fawning generally occurs from late May through June. In southwest Georgia, where breeding occurs later, fawning can stretch into July and even August. The reasons behind Georgia's varied rut timing could fill an article of their own, but the short version is this: Georgia's rut can occur anywhere from mid October to late December—and in some places, even into January.

When it's time to give birth, a doe will often leave the herd and seek isolated pockets of dense cover. Old fields, briar thickets and stands of native warm-season grasses provide the security they need to raise newborn fawns away from disturbance and predator attention.

That caution is necessary because predation is generally considered the leading source of mortality for newborn fawns. Researchers have found that when quality fawning cover is limited, predators may focus their efforts in those areas, making survival even more difficult for newborn fawns.

The first month of a fawn's life is critical. During those first 30 days, every instinct and behavior is centered around survival.

Days 1-3: The Immobile Phase

Newborn fawns are weak and spend nearly all of their time bedded on the ground. Their best defense isn't running—it's remaining perfectly still.

Days 4-10: The Hider Strategy

Does spend most of their time away from their fawns to avoid drawing attention to them. If a doe

has twins or triplets, she'll often separate them to reduce the chance that a predator finds all of them at once.

Days 11-21: Building Strength

As fawns grow, they become stronger and more mobile, spending increasing amounts of time with their mother.

Days 22-30: The Ruminant Transition

By about four weeks old, a fawn's stomach begins transitioning toward digesting vegetation. It will still nurse for another month or two, but it's beginning to become a true ruminant.

Unfortunately, making it through those first 30 days isn't easy.

While many animals will opportunistically prey on newborn fawns, Georgia's three primary predators are coyotes, bobcats and black bears. Of those three, coyotes are generally considered the most significant threat because of their abundance and their ability to cover large areas while searching for food, though bobcats and black bears can also have significant impacts in some areas.

Coyotes are especially effective during a fawn's first few weeks of life, when hiding—not running—is the fawn's primary defense. That's one reason many hunters support predator management efforts.

Predators aren't the only challenge fawns face.

Weather can play a major role in fawn survival, just as it does with many wildlife species in Georgia. Extended periods of extreme heat can reduce forage quality, stress nursing does and increase the energy demands placed on young fawns. Add drought conditions to the equation, and the outlook becomes even tougher.

Then there's us.

Hunters and landowners can have a significant impact on fawn survival, often without realizing it. That's why you'll hear so many people say, "Don't mow."

Freshly dropped fawns rely on their instinct to remain motionless when danger approaches. Unfortunately, that strategy doesn't work very well against a tractor and bush hog. Mowing also removes the very cover fawns depend on to stay hidden from predators.

If possible, consider delaying bush hogging for a month or two until fawns have had time to grow, gain mobility and develop their ability to escape danger.

In some areas, targeted predator control has been shown to improve short-term fawn survival, particularly when conducted immediately before and during fawning season.

So why does all of this matter?

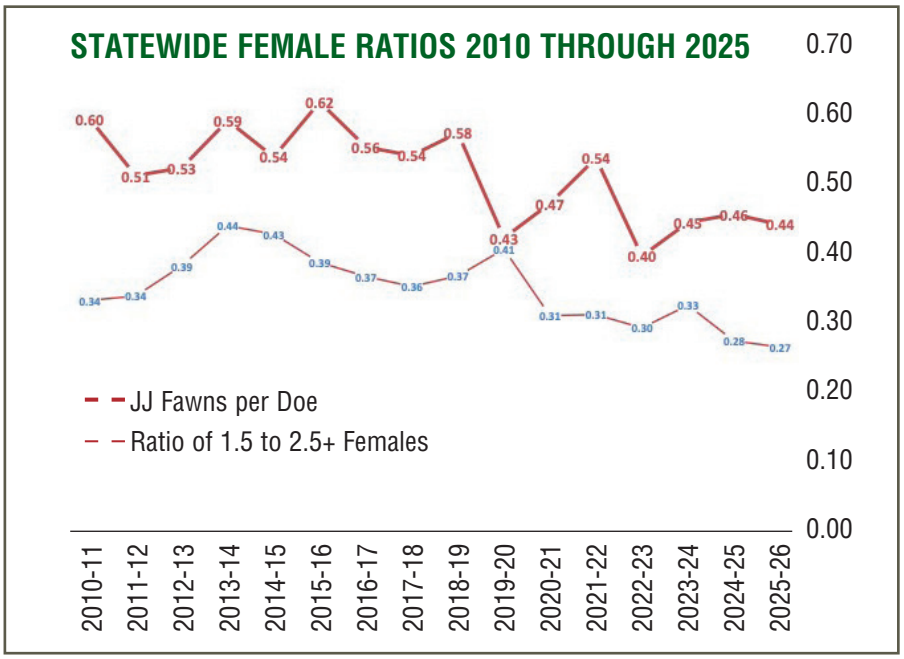
Because deer management is a long game.

A fawn born this summer will be a 1.5-year-old buck during the fall of 2027—the young deer you see pushing does around during the rut. That same deer won't reach true maturity until around 2030.

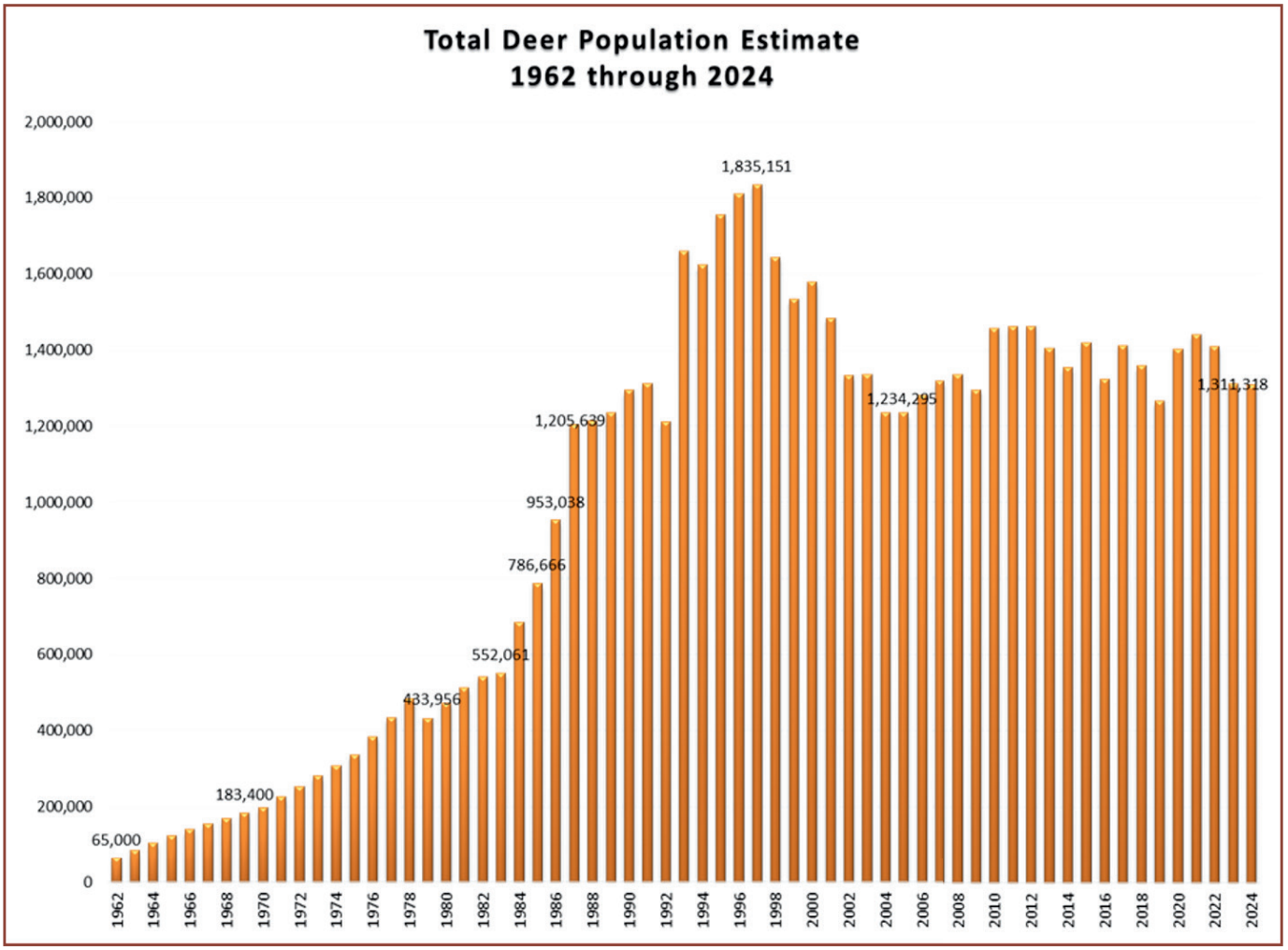
In other words, the decisions we make today affect the deer herd hunters will see several years from now.

A poor fawning season doesn't just affect this year's deer population—it creates a noticeable "hole" in the herd for years to come. Fewer fawns this summer means fewer yearlings next year, fewer 2.5-year-olds the year after that and, ultimately, fewer mature bucks down the road.

Fawn recruitment is one of the most important indicators of a healthy deer population. Simply



This graph was provided by DNR Deer Biologist Charlie Killmaster. The data set was collected from deer processors across the state.



Provided by DNR Deer Biologist Charlie Killmaster.

put, fawn recruitment is the ratio of fawns to adult females (ages 1.5+).

According to research conducted by the Georgia DNR Wildlife Resources Division during 2023-2024, fawn recruitment has remained relatively stable over the past decade. However, recent data suggest a downward trend, which could have long-term implications for Georgia's deer herd.

"Georgia saw the most significant drop in fawn recruitment from around 2000 to 2017," said Charlie. "We reduced either sex-days in a lot of the state during some of those years to acclimate to lower recruitment."

To understand the importance of recruitment, it's helpful to look at Georgia's deer population as a whole.

While deer density varies greatly by region, Georgia's overall deer population has declined since peaking at approximately 1.8 million deer in the mid to late 90s. Much of that decline was intentional, driven by management strategies that increased antlerless harvest opportunities to bring deer numbers in line with available habitat. By 2004, the state's deer population had stabilized around 1.2 million deer, where it has generally remained ever since under the framework established by the DNR Deer Management Plan. Right now, the deer population sits around 1 to 1.3 million.

"Overall, the population and recruitment are stable, but there are many counties with increasing or decreasing populations," said Charlie.

Even with a relatively stable statewide population, opinions about deer numbers vary widely depending on where you hunt, which is consistent with what information DNR has obtained from processors.

Through Georgia Outdoor News' annual reader survey, hunters expressed concerns ranging from too many deer to not enough deer.

"I believe the doe limits are too

high in the areas I hunt."

"John's Mountain WMA does not need doe days. Deer population on John's has dwindled down so bad, it's painful."

On the other hand, some landowners and farmers reported the exact opposite concern.

"I'm in a severely overpopulated deer area and I farm, so I feel the effects financially as well as the other farmers around me."

"Deer are overpopulated and not being managed. Farmers need more permits."

As you can see, deer management isn't a one-size-fits-all issue.

Despite differing opinions across the state, The Georgia Wildlife Resources Division (WRD) has done an admirable job balancing the needs of hunters, landowners and the resource itself. While there are certainly pockets of Georgia with higher or lower deer densities, the statewide population has remained relatively stable for years.

That's especially important when you consider the pressures facing deer habitat. Georgia's human population continues to grow, hunter participation remains strong and land-use changes continue to reshape the landscape. Although forest land still covers roughly 67% of Georgia's land area, corporate ownership of timberland has increased significantly since 1982, creating greater potential for land fragmentation and development.

Through ongoing research and monitoring, WRD continues to manage Georgia's deer herd with both biological sustainability and hunter success in mind.



"We've never been able to track county-level populations effectively, but UGA will soon be working on a new model that will really improve that now that we have a solid decade of county-level harvest data from Game Check," Charlie said.

At the center of all these management decisions is Georgia's ecological carrying capacity—the number of deer the landscape can support while maintaining healthy habitat conditions. Based on research and input from regional biologists, WRD biologists estimate Georgia's deer population is currently near levels that can be supported by available habitat on a statewide basis, which some research indicates to be 1.1 million.

That brings us back to fawns.

Fawns are the future of Georgia's deer herd. They replace the deer lost each year to predation, hunting pressure, vehicle collisions and natural mortality. Without adequate recruitment, the population cannot sustain itself over time.

Recruitment has generally stabilized in recent years, Georgia is producing fewer fawns per doe than it did several decades ago, making fawn survival more important than ever. While hunters can't control every factor that affects fawn mortality, they can influence some of them through habitat management, predator control and simple decisions like delaying summer mowing.

At the end of the day, protecting fawns isn't just about saving a few deer. It's about ensuring that Georgia continues to have a healthy, sustainable deer herd for future generations of hunters.

So do your part for the fawns.

Wildlife Management Calendar July – August

By Dave Edwards

Prepare skinning shed for deer data collection

Deer season is just around the corner, and now is the time to make sure your skinning shed is ready. The information collected from harvested deer provides one of the most valuable tools for evaluating your deer herd, measuring the success of your management program, and making sound harvest decisions throughout the season. Before opening day, take inventory of your equipment and organize your data collection area. At a minimum, you should record each deer's age (using the jawbone), live or dressed weight, antler measurements, and reproductive information from does.

Essential supplies include a jawbone extraction tool, pruning loppers, a wire basket for drying and storing jawbones, sharp knives, a way to hoist deer to hang, a reliable scale, flexible measuring tape, permanent markers, pencils, harvest data sheets, and written instructions for collecting and recording data—especially if multiple hunters will be processing deer. It's also a good time to sharpen knives, lubricate and inspect equipment, calibrate scales, replace worn ropes or cables, verify that water is available, and organize your work area so harvest data can



A skinning shed is more than a place to process deer. It's where the data that drives future management decisions are collected.



Mowed access lanes make it easier to follow bird dogs, retrieve birds, and move safely through quail habitat.

be collected quickly and consistently.

Many of the tools and supplies needed for harvest data collection are available through home improvement/hardware stores, the National Deer Association and forestry supply retailers. A well-prepared skinning shed will make data collection easier and help ensure you gain the maximum management value from every deer harvested.

TYPICAL CHECKLIST FOR A SKINNING SHED

- ☐ Sharp skinning knives
- ☐ Knife sharpener or steel
- ☐ Pruning loppers (jaw removal)
- ☐ Gambrel
- ☐ Hanging scale (calibrated)
- ☐ Flexible measuring tape
- ☐ Harvest data sheets
- ☐ Clipboard
- ☐ Pencils & permanent markers
- ☐ Wire basket for drying jawbones
- ☐ Disposable nitrile gloves
- ☐ Paper towels/shop towels
- ☐ Disinfectant & cleaning supplies
- ☐ Gut bucket
- ☐ First aid kit

Mow access lanes through quail hunting areas

Well-managed quail habitat is typically maintained with prescribed fire, disking, and selective herbicide applications—not mowing. These practices create the open, diverse ground cover that bobwhites need while promoting the native grasses and forbs that support nesting, brood rearing, and abundant insect populations.

Even in properly managed habitat, however, navigating quail woods can be challenging. Thick native vegetation, scattered shrubs, and young saplings often make it difficult for hunters, bird dogs, and especially young hunters to move comfortably through the cover. A simple solution is to mow a network of access lanes before hunting season. These lanes aren't intended to improve quail habitat; they're designed to improve huntability by making it easier to follow dogs, retrieve birds, and move safely through the property. The layout of these trails is largely a matter of personal preference. Some managers prefer a straight-line or checkerboard pattern that makes navigation easy and ensures complete coverage of the property. Others favor gently winding lanes that blend into the landscape and create a more natural appearance. I generally prefer the latter.

Timing is also important. Mow access lanes during late summer, roughly two to three weeks before the growing season ends. This allows enough regrowth to soften the freshly cut appearance while leaving well-defined walking paths by opening day. Delaying mowing until very late summer also helps protect wildlife. Quail woods often provide excellent fawning cover, and by waiting until this time, most fawns are old enough to escape an approaching tractor and mower. The result is a network of trails that improves the hunting experience while preserving the natural appearance and wildlife value of the habitat.

Start preparations for fall food plots

Successful fall food plots begin long before the seed goes in the ground. The most productive plots are the result of careful planning, proper soil preparation, and good timing, not last-minute planting just before the first rain. Late summer is the perfect time to finish preparing for the upcoming planting season. If you haven't already, conduct soil tests and apply any recommended lime. Although the ideal time to apply lime is in late winter or spring, allowing several months for it to react with the soil, applying it now is still beneficial and will continue improving soil pH for future plantings. Remember, late is better than never. Order seed and fertilizer early to avoid shortages and last-minute substitutions. Whenever possible, base your fertilizer application on soil test recommendations rather than relying on a standard blended fertilizer. Matching fertilizer to your soil's specific nutrient needs improves plant growth while reducing unnecessary expense.

Weed control is another critical step that is often overlooked. Existing weeds compete directly with newly planted seedlings for moisture, nutrients, and sunlight. If weeds are present, eliminate them two to three weeks before planting to create a clean seedbed and give your forage the best possible start.

Now is also the time to prepare your seedbeds. Smooth rough plots, correct drainage problems, repair equipment, and address any soil compaction before planting season arrives. A smooth, firm seedbed promotes excellent seed-to-soil contact and improves germination success. If you broadcast seed, a cultipacker is one of the best investments you can make for establishing productive food plots.

Finally, don't let the calendar dictate your planting date. Wait for adequate soil moisture and a



Gradually conditioning your hunting dog before the season improves endurance, reduces the risk of heat-related illness, and helps ensure peak performance on opening day.

favorable weather forecast before planting. A week or two of patience is often rewarded with faster germination, stronger stands, and far more productive food plots.

Condition and train hunting dogs

With dove, early teal, and shooting preserve quail seasons just around the corner, now is the time to begin conditioning your hunting dog for the demands of the upcoming season. Just as athletes need time to build endurance, dogs should gradually increase their fitness before opening day rather than being expected to perform after months of inactivity. Start with short training sessions during the cooler hours of the morning or evening, gradually increasing both the duration and intensity over several weeks. Incorporate retrieving drills, obedience work, and free running to improve endurance while keeping the sessions enjoyable. Frequent water breaks and rest periods are especially important during hot weather.

Heat and humidity can quickly become dangerous for working dogs, particularly in the Southeast where early-season temperatures often reach the 90s. Learn to recognize the early signs of heat stress, including excessive panting, slowing down, reluctance to retrieve, confusion, weakness, or lying down unexpectedly. At the first sign of overheating, stop training immediately and move your dog to a shaded, well-ventilated area. Offer cool (not ice-cold) water in small amounts and, if available, allow the dog to cool itself in a pond or other clean water source. Wetting the dog's belly, paws, and groin with cool water can also help lower body temperature. If your dog fails to recover quickly or shows signs of heat exhaustion or heat stroke, seek veterinary care immediately, as these conditions can become life-threatening within minutes.

A well-conditioned dog will hunt longer, perform better, and recover more quickly. Taking the time to build endurance now is one of the best investments you can make in your hunting partner's health and success this fall.

Host a cookout for your neighbors.

Wildlife management doesn't stop at the property line. Whether you own 100 acres or 10,000, the decisions made by neighboring landowners can influence the quality of your



Wildlife doesn't recognize property boundaries. Building relationships with neighboring landowners is one of the most effective investments you can make in your management program.

hunting and the success of your management program. Late summer is an excellent time to invite neighboring landowners and hunters over for a cookout. With hunting season just around the corner, wildlife management is already on everyone's mind, making it the perfect opportunity to build relationships and discuss common goals. Conversations often include topics such as deer management objectives, harvest strategies, habitat improvement projects, food plots, prescribed burning, trespassing concerns, poaching issues, and trail camera photos. You'll likely discover that your neighbors share many of the same interests and challenges that you do.

Working together can also produce significant economic benefits. Neighbors frequently share tractors and implements, split equipment costs, coordinate prescribed burns, and purchase seed, fertilizer, lime, or supplemental feed in bulk to reduce expenses.

Perhaps the greatest benefit is the opportunity to establish or strengthen a deer management cooperative. Because white-tailed deer routinely travel across multiple properties, management is almost always more effective when neighboring landowners work toward common objectives. The larger the area managed under similar harvest and habitat strategies, the greater the potential for improving herd quality and hunting success.

Sometimes all it takes to begin that cooperation is a simple invitation to share a meal. The friendships formed around a cookout can lead to years of improved and successful wildlife management and enjoyable hunting experiences.

Begin flooding duck ponds in early September.

If your property includes managed waterfowl impoundments, late summer is the time to begin planning your fall flooding schedule. In many parts of the South, blue-winged teal are the first ducks to arrive as they migrate south, with birds often appearing from late August through September. Rather than flooding an entire impoundment at once, consider flooding only about 25–30% of the pond initially. This provides early migrants with shallow feeding areas while preserving the remainder of the available seed for later in the season. Include a mixture of shallow water, exposed mudflats, and small pockets of open water to create attractive feeding and resting habitat. A gradual flooding strategy also helps conserve valuable seed resources. Although many native wetland plants produce seeds that remain viable under flooded conditions for several months, seeds from agricultural crops typically deteriorate much more quickly once submerged. Delaying full flooding helps ensure food remains available during the peak migration of ducks later in the fall and winter. As additional ducks begin arriving in October and November, gradually raise water levels to flood the remaining portions of the impoundment. This staggered approach provides a dependable food source throughout the hunting season while maximizing the value of the habitat you've worked all year to produce.

If you've never hunted the early teal season, give it a try. Teal readily decoy, often respond well to calling, and their fast, darting flights provide some of the most exciting wingshooting of the entire waterfowl season.

TYPICAL FLOODING TIMELINE

Late August – Early September

- ☐ Begin flooding 25–30% of the impoundment.
- ☐ Provide shallow feeding areas for early-arriving teal.
- ☐ Maintain a mix of open water and exposed mudflats.

September

- ☐ Monitor water levels and food availability.
- ☐ Avoid flooding the entire impoundment too early.
- ☐ Hunt only portions of the pond to minimize disturbance.

Late October

- ☐ Begin flooding additional sections of the impoundment.
- ☐ Expand available habitat as migrating ducks increase.

November – December

- ☐ Complete flooding of the impoundment.
- ☐ Maintain desired water depth throughout the primary duck season.
- ☐ Continue adjusting water levels as needed to maximize food availability and hunting success.

Prepare Dove Fields for Opening Day

The best dove fields typically have three things in common: an abundance of seed, readily available food, and a location that naturally attracts doves. While you can't change where birds choose to fly, you can greatly improve the

attractiveness of your field by making food more accessible. By August, most managers should already have their dove crops established. Your focus now should shift from growing seed to exposing it. Mourning doves feed almost exclusively on seeds and strongly prefer feeding on bare or lightly vegetated ground where they can easily detect approaching predators. Unlike turkeys, doves have short legs and are poor scratchers, so seeds hidden beneath thick vegetation often go unused. One of the most effective management practices is maintaining strips of bare ground throughout the field. These open lanes provide easy landing areas, allow birds to move freely while feeding, and offer access to the small grit they need for digestion. Freshen these strips with a disk as needed throughout the late summer and hunting season.

About a week before your first hunt, manipulate portions of the field by mowing, disking, chopping, or burning mature crops to expose seed on the soil surface. If vegetation is still green, an application of glyphosate several days before burning can help produce a cleaner burn where legal and appropriate. Rather than manipulating the entire field at once, consider preparing only the areas you'll hunt first. Saving portions of the field for later manipulation can help maintain bird numbers and improve hunting throughout the season.

Before manipulating any dove field, always review your state's baiting regulations. In most states, manipulating crops that were grown on-site using normal agricultural practices is legal, while adding seed to the ground outside of accepted agricultural practices is not.

Dove Field Tips

- Maintain several disked strips of bare ground throughout the field.
- Plant a diversity of crops with different maturation dates to provide seed throughout the season.
- Manipulate only the portions of the field needed for upcoming hunts to extend hunting opportunities.
- Avoid excessive hunting pressure. Limiting hunts to about once a week will help keep birds using the field.
- Establish clumps of Egyptian wheat or similar tall cover at planned shooting locations when planting the field to provide concealment for hunters.

Prepare Trail Cameras for the Upcoming Season

Late summer is the perfect time to inventory and prepare your trail cameras before the busy hunting season arrives. Whether you use cameras to conduct formal deer surveys or simply monitor deer activity, a little preparation now can prevent missed opportunities later. Start by gathering every camera and inspecting it for damage. Check latches, seals, battery compartments, and mounting straps for signs of wear. Replace cracked cases, broken straps, or damaged antennae on cellular cameras. Clean camera lenses, motion sensors, and infrared flash covers to ensure clear photos and reliable performance. With more than 25 years of conducting camera surveys and managing trail cameras, I can tell you that dead or weak batteries are responsible for more camera failures than just about anything else. For that reason, I recommend installing fresh batteries before every deployment. If your cameras use memory cards, inspect them for damage, format



Most trail camera problems are preventable. A little preseason maintenance now can go a long way toward dependable operation throughout the hunting season.

them before use, and label each card so it stays with the same camera throughout the season. Keeping cameras and SD cards paired makes photo management much easier and helps troubleshoot problems if one camera begins malfunctioning. This is also an excellent time to update camera firmware. Test each camera by walking in front of it before taking it to the field. A few minutes spent testing can save weeks of lost data.

Finally, organize all of your deployment supplies before heading to the field. I keep a backpack dedicated to trail camera work that contains extra batteries, memory cards, mounting straps, mounting brackets, pruning loppers, and a few basic tools. Having everything you need in one place will save countless trips back to camp and make camera deployment much more efficient.

A little preseason maintenance goes a long way toward ensuring your cameras are dependable when bucks begin shedding velvet, deer movement increases, and the information they collect becomes most valuable for making hunting and management decisions.

One of the biggest mistakes hunters make is waiting until opening morning to decide what deer should—or should not—be harvested. Successful deer management begins long before the season opens by developing a harvest plan based on sound biological information rather than emotion or opportunity.

Develop Deer Harvest Plan Before Opening Day

Late summer is the ideal time to meet with family members, hunting partners, or club members to discuss management objectives and establish harvest guidelines for the upcoming season. Determine how many does should be harvested, identify bucks that should be protected, and agree on any harvest criteria that will help achieve your long-term goals. Equally important, decide who will collect harvest data and ensure everyone understands the importance of recording age, weight, antler measurements, and other biological information from every deer harvested.

A harvest plan is only as good as the information used to develop it. While trail camera photos can reveal which bucks are using a property, they rarely provide enough information to effectively manage a deer herd. A professionally conducted camera survey using scientifically accepted methods can estimate deer density, adult sex ratio, fawn recruitment, buck age structure, and overall herd health. This data provide the foundation for sound harvest recommendations, eliminate much of the guesswork from management decisions, and establish a benchmark for measuring progress from year to year.

When opening day arrives, the difficult decisions should already have been made. Hunters can then enjoy the season knowing each decision in the field supports the property's long-term management goals and the overall health of the deer herd.



The best harvest decisions are made long before opening day. Use trail camera photos and herd data to identify harvest and "protect" bucks before the season begins.

Trends TIPS

By Marion Barnes,
Senior County Extension
Agent, Clemson University

Safety Tips for Landowners

Heat-related illnesses can be serious, even life-threatening, for landowners working in the summer heat. The following tips can help you stay safe during the hot summer months ahead.

Checking the weather forecast for ultraviolet (UV) index and heat index (HI) allows for planning outdoor activities, employing protective measures and staying hydrated. The heat index was developed for shady, light, windy conditions, so exposure to full sun can raise heat index values by up to 15 degrees F, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The UV index predicts the intensity of the sun's (UV) radiation and the risk of sunburn.

Cover up. Select lightweight, light-colored clothing made of moisture-wicking fabric. Wide-brimmed hats (4 inches or greater) offer more protection than baseball caps. Choose sunglasses that block 99-100% of both UVA & UVB rays. Long-term exposure to the sun's UV rays can increase the incidence of cataracts.



Select a broad-spectrum sunscreen (UVA & UVB) with a sun protection factor (SPF) of 30 or higher when exposed to the sun for long periods of time.

Extreme heat is a leading cause of weather-related fatalities in the US. Safety experts tell us it takes about 2 weeks for our bodies to adapt to heat and recommend gradually increasing your exposure time to hot weather environments, giving your body time to acclimate. Take frequent rest breaks in the shade to cool down.

Drink plenty of water when performing strenuous activities. Generally, a cup (8 oz.) of water every 15-20 minutes, according to the CDC. Avoid overhydration, which can impact electrolyte balance.

Know the symptoms of heat-related illnesses: heat rash, heat cramps, heat syncope, heat exhaustion and heat stroke. **Without proper treatment heat exhaustion can lead to heat stroke, a life-threating condition which requires immediate emergency medical attention.**

Sources: Heat Stress & Hydration DHHS-NIOSH Pub.# 2017-126 & Great Plains Center for Agriculture Health: Sun Safety



Soil Analysis For Optimal Food Plot Success

By Dana Johnson

Food plots are a critical component for most wildlife management programs. They provide benefits to hunters and landowners alike. They can be used to provide wildlife habitat and quality forage or for attracting animals for harvest. Seed, fertilizer, and equipment costs for a one-acre food plot can cost more than $250. A pH (potential of hydrogen) range between 5.8 and 6.8 is optimal for a plant to get maximum benefit from both macro and micronutrients. A soil analysis provides all the information you need to ensure maximum forage production.

Why get a soil analysis?

Soil analysis from different labs will vary on how much information is provided, but all will include the pH and macronutrients (phosphorous, potassium and nitrogen) concentrations. The minimal cost of a soil analysis up front can save thousands of dollars on fertilizer and seed. Think of it as a risk management tool for food plots.

Proper soil collection is key in conducting a usable analysis. The first factor in soil sampling is good spatial variability, as this provides a quality representation of nutrients throughout the field. Collecting samples from multiple locations provides better results. A good reference is to sample five locations per acre, mix them, and submit one sample for analysis. On fields of two or more acres, grid the field in one-acre sections and provide a separate sample for each.

Soil collection depth is also vital for a good test. Analyzing the top six inches may show nutrient values much different than those twelve to eighteen inches deep. Nutrients such as nitrogen can move many feet through the soil, but potassium may only move a few inches, and phosphorus may only move a few centimeters.

"A pH (potential of hydrogen) range between 5.8 and 6.8 is optimal for a plant to get maximum benefit from both macro and micronutrients."

A soil probe is best to get samples. They are extremely efficient and available in many lengths, but one that will penetrate a minimum of

twelve inches is recommended. The probe is pushed into the ground and the plug is easily removed. They can range from $50 to $200. Choose one that can penetrate deep into the soils you have. Heavy clays may need one with a footstep to drive it through any hardpan.

Augers that attach to cordless drills are another option and are easy to use. I recommend the ones with the 1.5-inch bits and can be found at many big box stores, costing between $15 and $30. Soil texture could become an issue and attempting to drill through dry clay soils can prove difficult.

Most labs have their own containers and forms for submission. Expect the results from a few days to a week depending on time of year. Remember, the analysis is only as good as the sample provided.

Interpretation of Results

Each lab will deliver results in their own format. They include soil group, cation exchange capacity (CEC), pH, and macronutrient values. Next to these values it will indicate concentration of each and pounds per acre if needed. Fertilizer is only usable by the plant if the soil pH is between 5.8 and 6.8, otherwise nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium are not available to the plant.

Nitrogen is needed by wheat, rye, oats, and other common monocots from planting to maturity. Properly inoculated legumes will use granular nitrogen when first planted. In time, the rhizobium inoculant containing nitrogen fixing bacteria will form symbiotic root nodules that convert atmospheric nitrogen into plant available ammonia. However, in more acidic soils, these bacteria slow down dramatically. For example, if your soil has a pH of 5.1 and you apply 60 lbs. of nitrogen per acre, the plant cannot take it up because it largely remains in an unavailable form. The excess nitrogen also easily leaches through the soil if not used by the plant.

Phosphorus is not mobile in the soil, so it stays until used. If the pH is very acidic or alkaline (a pH less than 6), phosphorus is also unavailable to the plant until the pH is adjusted to a range that allows it to be usable. Many wildlife food plots can have excessive phosphorus because little to no lime has ever been applied to the soil to adjust the pH. This can cause growth issues for plants as the excessive phosphorus does not allow the plant to take up nutrients such as zinc, copper, and calcium. Extremely high phosphorus levels can also outright kill plants.

Potassium (K) is needed by plants for adenosine triphosphate (ATP) production and phosphorylation, driving energy transfer within the plant. Potassium moves in the soil solution but not to the extent of nitrogen. Where nitrogen can move feet within the soil, potassium may only move inches. Again, if the pH is not within a specific range, the plant cannot use it. Continued applications of potassium can create excessive amounts which ultimately lead to toxicity issues. Too much potassium can prevent plants from taking up micronutrients such as magnesium, iron, zinc, and calcium.

Taking a soil sample every two or three years is nothing more than a

UNDERSTANDING CATION EXCHANGE CAPACITY

You may be less familiar with what cation exchange capacity (CEC) is and why it's important. CEC is a measure of the soil's ability to hold positively charged nutrients, namely calcium, magnesium, and potassium. High CEC levels often indicate a soil that can both store more nutrients and better resist leaching.

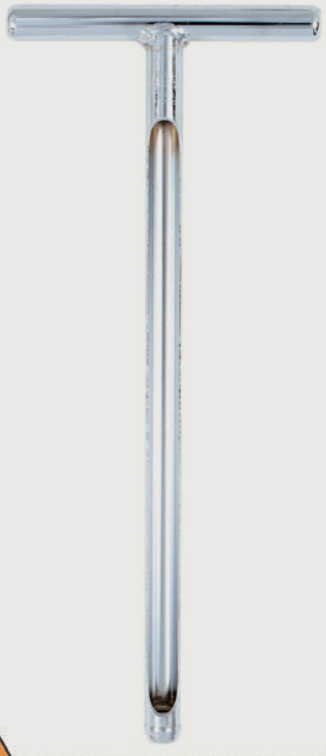


risk management tool for food plots. It takes effort to plant a food plot, so taking a sample in for analysis makes good sense and can save money. Deer and other wildlife will choose the most nutritious forage available. If the plant is unable to take up the nutrients from the soil, the forage significantly loses its palatability. For example, if you take a field with a pH of 5.2 and only lime one side for a target pH range of 6.5, deer will tend to feed more on the side with the more neutral pH. This is because the plants are taking in the nutrients and, to put it simply, taste better. If you want to draw deer to your hunting area, take a soil sample, send it to an accredited lab in your area, and follow the recommendations. It's well worth the effort.



Wildlife TRENDS

Equipment Spotlight



FORESTRY SUPPLIERS

OAKFIELD MODEL HA 19" TUBE SAMPLER

A good land manager tests their soil regularly, and the key to optimal soil testing is proper collection. With the right equipment, you'll be far less tempted to cut corners on the number and depth of samples needed for an accurate analysis— and less inclined to skip this critical step altogether when investing in your food plots.

The **Oakfield Model HA 19" Tube Sampler from Forestry Suppliers** is a great option, and at the time of this article you could have one delivered to your doorstep for under $100. It's a one-piece tool built from nickel-chrome-plated, 16-gauge steel that resists rust and abrasion, with an 8" handle welded directly to the tube — no parts to loosen, break off, or lose in the field. The 19" probe pulls a clean core roughly 15" long and 3/4" in diameter, and the tube is designed to shed friction so the sample slides right out for inspection. It ships with a screw-in tip suited to moist soil, and replacement tips are available for dry, wet, or stony and gravelly ground, so you can keep sampling across the range of conditions found throughout the Southeast. Depending on where you're located and whether the soil is holding enough moisture, a tool like this can be the difference between pulling sufficient samples and not bothering at all.

RECIPE BOX
Dishes from the Heartland

By Ty Phillips
Reprinted from Georgia Outdoor News



Venison Picadillo (Mexican Stewed Ground Beef)

Ingredients

- 2 tbsp cooking oil of choice
- 1 lb. ground deer meat
- 1 can diced tomatoes, and their juices
- 1/2 small can tomato paste
- 1 jalapeño, diced
- 1 white onion, diced
- 1 small baking potato, cut into 1 in. cubes
- 1/2 cup diced carrots
- Cumin, chili powder and oregano

Directions

1. In a large skillet or saucepan, heat the oil over medium-high heat and brown the ground deer meat, stirring occasionally.
2. Once the deer meat is browned, reduce the heat to medium-low; then add the diced tomatoes, tomato paste, and seasonings to your taste preference (I like mine a little on the spicier side). Stir in to mix and cook for 2 minutes.
3. Add the onion and jalapeno, stir in to mix and cook, stirring occasionally for 10 minutes, or until their color dulls.
4. Add the potato and carrot, stir in the mix and cook, stirring occasionally for 15 minutes, or until they soften. If the mixture starts to stick to the pan, fill the can of diced tomatoes with a little water and pour it in to add some moisture without losing the tomato flavor.
5. Serve as desired. This is a versatile recipe, and I've enjoyed it with tortillas, cheese, lettuce and sour cream for tacos, spooned into cored green peppers and topped with cheese, and baked for stuffed peppers, or thrown over tortilla chips with cheese for homemade nachos.
6. Add the onion and jalapeno, stir in to mix and cook, stirring occasionally for 10 minutes, or until their color dulls.
7. Add the potato.

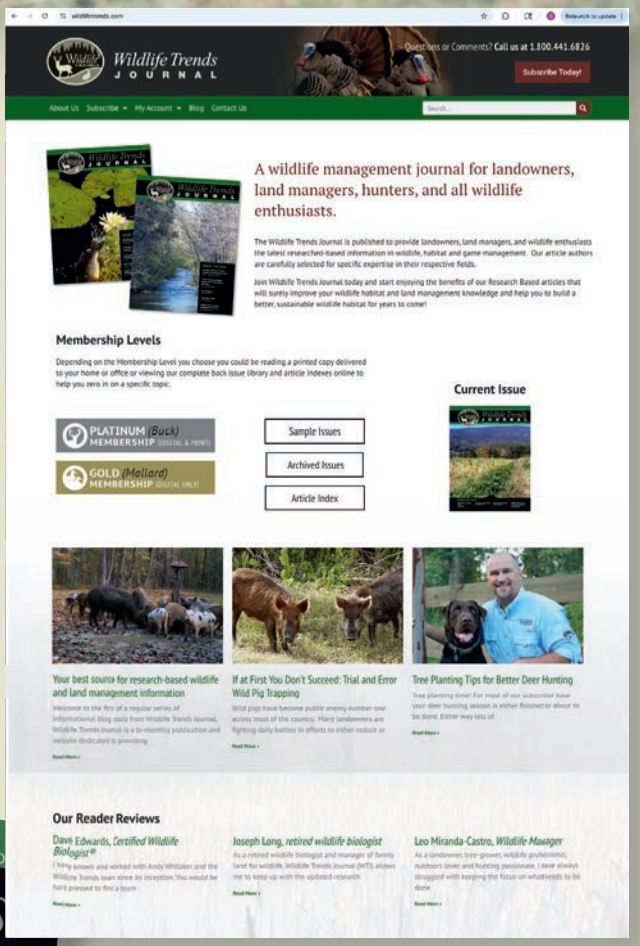
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National Deer Association for Wildlife Trends Journal



NDA Field To Fork hunt in Georgia 2025.

The National Deer Association is the leading non-profit deer conservation organization with a mission to ensure the future of wild deer, wildlife habitat and hunting. We work to protect the wild deer resource and ensure it is wisely managed for today's and tomorrow's hunters by following and sharing the science on deer and habitat management. How do we accomplish this mission?

Educate Hunters and Habitat Managers

NDA provides deer hunters with reliable, science-based information, helping them manage and hunt deer more successfully. Over 2 million people visit NDA's website annually. Our educational videos get over 15 million views a year. We publish an average of 75 new articles annually and distribute them through our free weekly e-newsletter.

Recruit New Adult Hunters

The highly successful Field to Fork hunter recruitment program is the cornerstone of NDA's R3 effort. In 2025, NDA hosted 86 Field to Fork hunts in 14 states, training 619 new hunters. More than 80% of our trainees continue hunting on their own. In addition, more than 90,000 students have enrolled in our Deer Hunting 101 online course.

Advocate for Wild Deer and Deer Hunters

Protecting deer and hunting requires engagement with lawmakers. NDA advocates sustainable, science-based management of wild deer. We work with elected officials to protect fair-chase deer hunting. In 2025, we issued 33 policy action alerts to our members, prompting nearly 2,000 letters from NDA members to lawmakers.

Improve Public Hunting Land

Less active forest management over time has reduced habitat quality – and hunting opportunity – on federal lands. A 20-year agreement with the U.S. Forest Service allows NDA to act as a conservation partner and directly implement habitat management.

Since 2021, NDA has improved over 1 million acres on 27 national forests in 31 states.

Create Deer Stewards

Nearly 7,000 graduation certificates have been awarded through NDA's advanced Deer Steward training courses, and many state wildlife agencies have asked us to train their wildlife staff. Our 2025 graduates alone (359 people) manage over 235,000 acres of private land and 350,000 acres of public land!

Empower Volunteers

NDA's volunteer-led Branches amplify our mission impact at the local level. Our Branches organize venison donation drives, public land workdays, seminars, educational field days, and Field to Fork hunter recruitment training, among many other impactful activities. Our recently created State Branch model is growing rapidly.

A Lot More

We publish an annual Deer Report providing a statistical look at deer harvests and deer herd health nationwide. We created and publicized a national deer processor map to increase venison donation in every state. We are currently constructing a new Private Lands Program to directly assist landowners managing deer and habitat. We are always seeking new ways to work for deer and hunters.

Financial Responsibility

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The Queen Of Forages Holds Her Place On A Southern Throne

By Shanna Reynolds, UGA Extension County Agent and Forage Team Member

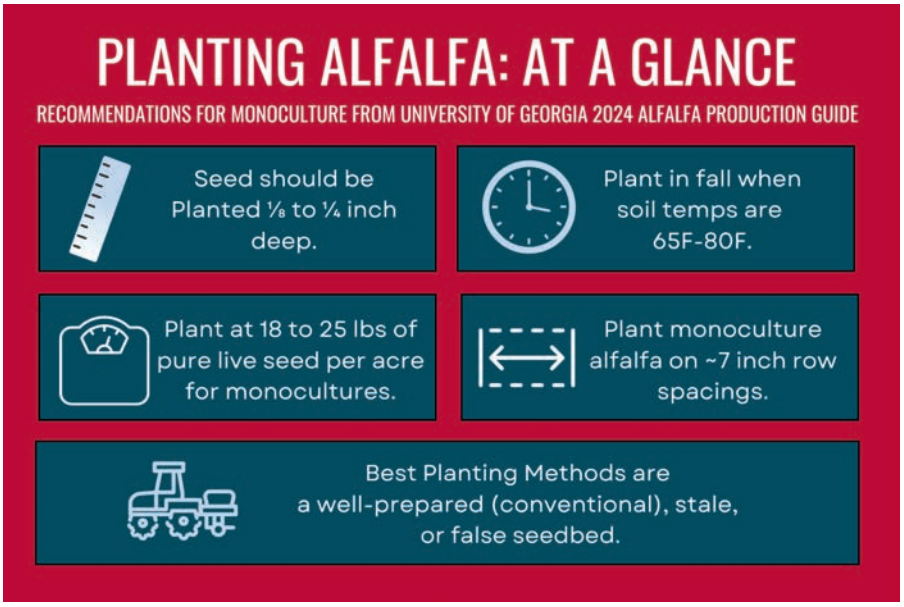
For decades, alfalfa has been considered a premier forage crop in American agriculture. While it remained a staple across much of the country, many producers in the Deep South gradually abandoned it as insect pressure, diseases, and challenging growing conditions shortened stand life and made other forages more practical. In recent years, however, the "queen of forages" is making a comeback.

Alfalfa is a perennial forage legume grown for hay, silage, and grazing. Covering nearly 20 million acres across the United States, it has earned its royal nickname thanks to its exceptional yield potential and outstanding nutritional value. Recent advances in plant breeding have produced varieties that are better adapted to southern climates, more resistant to insects and diseases, and even more tolerant of grazing pressure than those available just a generation ago.

It's easy to understand the renewed interest. Alfalfa produces highly palatable, protein-rich forage that performs well for cattle, horses, and many other livestock species. Its extensive root system reaches remarkably deep into the soil, giving the plant impressive drought tolerance and allowing it to remain productive during dry periods. As a legume, alfalfa also fixes atmospheric nitrogen, reducing fertilizer needs while improving soil health and building organic matter over time.

The environmental benefits are equally impressive. Healthy alfalfa stands provide food, shelter, and breeding habitat for wildlife while supporting diverse soil microbial communities and beneficial insects. Hundreds of bird species use alfalfa fields for nesting and feeding. Deer eagerly browse young growth—sometimes to the frustration of landowners—and wild turkeys and quail benefit from the abundance of insects thriving within established stands.

For wildlife managers, newer grazing-tolerant varieties have made alfalfa a more attractive option for food plots, but care must be taken to prevent overgrazing of newly established stands.



Anyone considering alfalfa should understand it is not a crop that succeeds by accident. Alfalfa is not a "weekend warrior" project for the casual hobby farmer or deer hunter. It demands careful planning, routine scouting, proper equipment, and a commitment to intensive management. The payoff is a superior forage crop, but success depends on following research-based recommendations throughout the life of the stand.

In the Southeast, fall planting is generally preferred over spring establishment because grass weed competition and insect pressure are typically lower. Planting six to eight weeks before the average first frost—usually during September in much of our region—allows seedlings to establish before winter arrives.

Soil preparation is critical. Alfalfa requires fertile, well-drained soils, and producers should conduct soil tests well before planting. Sampling both the 0-6 inch and 6-12 inch soil depths helps identify nutrient and lime needs throughout the root zone. A firm seedbed is essential; your boot should sink no more than one-quarter inch when walking across the field. Seed should be planted shallow—about one-quarter inch deep regardless of planting method.

Many producers choose to establish alfalfa using conventional tillage, while others successfully use no-till drills into herbicide-suppressed vegetation. Either approach can work if fertility, weed control, and insect management are handled properly.

Variety selection may be the single most important management decision. Producers should choose varieties that have been evaluated under southeastern conditions and possess resistance to the diseases and insects common to their area. Roundup Ready varieties are also available for easier weed control, although they come with a higher seed cost. Some land-grant university plant breeding programs, such as the University of Georgia and the University of Florida, are working on research and development of additional alfalfa varieties suited to challenging conditions of the region.

Both pre-plant and post-emergence herbicide programs may be needed to manage weed competition during establishment - especially if establishing a pure stand of alfalfa.

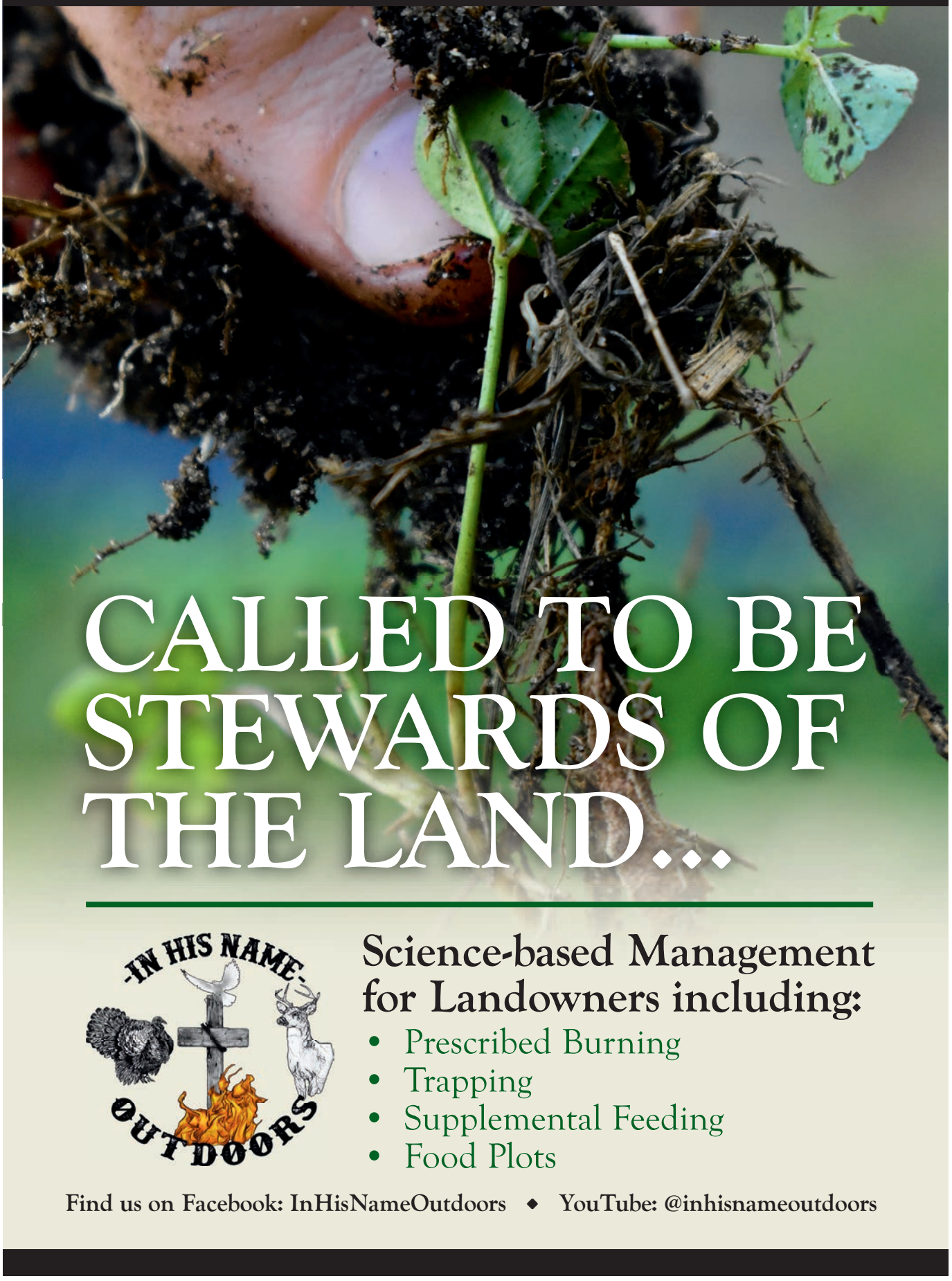
Once established, alfalfa requires consistent attention. Soil fertility should be monitored annually through soil testing, with both macro- and micronutrient deficiencies corrected before they reduce stand vigor. Producers should also scout regularly for disease and insect pests capable of damaging alfalfa.

If harvested for hay, the first cutting should generally wait until approximately 25 percent bloom, in late spring. This allows the plant to develop deep roots and replenish energy reserves, promoting stand longevity. Subsequent years can be cut earlier in spring.

There are a couple cautions worth remembering. Alfalfa can exhibit autotoxicity, meaning new seed should not be planted into thin spots within existing stands or immediately after terminating an old stand. Like many legumes, it can also cause bloat in grazing livestock if not managed carefully.

The good news is that today's producers have more resources than ever before. Decades of university research have removed much of the mystery surrounding alfalfa production in the Southeast. Local Extension agents remain one of the best resources for guidance on establishment, fertility, pest management, and harvest timing.

With proper management, alfalfa stands commonly remain productive for five years or more. While it still requires dedication and careful stewardship, modern varieties have proven that the queen of forages deserves a place in our southern fields.



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