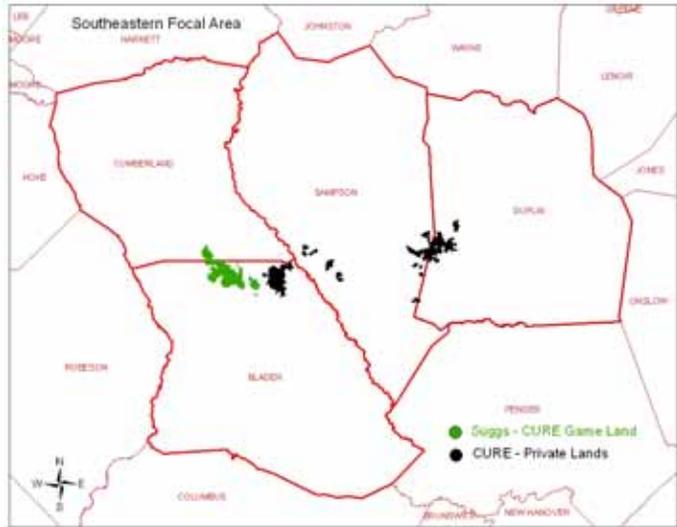


Hogs and Logs and Blueberries ... and QUAIL!

More than 200 years ago, turpentine manufacturing, along with lumber and agriculture, were the primary industries in North Carolina's Cape Fear River region. In fact, some claim the region's early history of monstrous rafts of tar, pitch and turpentine barrels lashed together and floated down river to the coastal port just a few miles away eventually gave rise to the state's moniker, the Tar Heel State.

Today, this agricultural region is still known for "hogs and logs," and now a thriving commercial blueberry industry. But four of this region's counties -- Bladen, Cumberland, Duplin and Sampson -- are becoming known for yet another natural resource -- bobwhite



quail. In fact, the area boasts some of the highest quail populations in the state ... and with no predator removal or supplemental feeding on properties being managed by the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission's (NCWRC).



This North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission project boasts some of the highest quail numbers in the state.

*All Photos:
Benjy Strope*

Prescribed fire on habitat blocks is a key quail habitat management technique in North Carolina's Southeastern Focal Area.



The NCWRC approach is a prime example of the national strategy to restore wild quail embraced by the 25 state wildlife agencies that comprise the National Bobwhite Conservation Initiative (NBCI). Rather than trying to create and manage habitat on small, scattered plots of land as they have done for decades, states like North Carolina are now eyeing larger parcels for greater, landscape-scale impact on quail populations. They may, for instance, identify a wildlife management area or other suitable large property as the core and then “stitch together” neighboring private or public lands to magnify the impact of available resources and quail response to them.

To the northwest, for example, Kentucky is building one effort around a 3,000-acre tourism attraction, Shaker Village. North Carolina is doing it based on the opportunity to work with the world’s largest hog producer, Murphy-Brown, LLC and other privately-owned agricultural operations. Work here is centered in Bladen County on 4,000 acres of swine, cattle and row crop operations that are adjacent to the Suggs Mill Pond Game Lands, which is a part of the NCWRC’s CURE (Cooperative Upland habitat Restoration and Enhancement) program.

In 2005, Murphy-Brown became the state’s first Corporate CURE partner. Corporate CURE utilizes funds from the North Carolina Department of Justice’s (NCDOJ) Environmental Enhance-





A field border and a thinned pine stand in the background.

flower, partridge pea, black-eyed susan, lance-leaved coreopsis and Maximilian sunflower.

Biologists monitor quail numbers on the original project area by summer whistle counts and fall covey counts. Average summer whistle counts on 22 points have always been above three birds/point since 2003. The past two years averaged over four birds/point. Biologists conduct fall covey counts in mid-October on 12 points, and the adjusted covey call average in 2003 was 3.12. In 2009 and 2010 the covey calls had an adjusted average of 4.8/point, while in 2011 they averaged 5.5 coveys/point.

Since the initial efforts, the quail focal area expanded—accompanied by similar habitat management efforts -- into Cumberland, Duplin and Sampson counties with additional commercial farms (DM Farms, Nash Johnson and Prestage Farms) all partnering with the state CURE program. And the number of enrolled properties continues to increase. This Southeastern Focal Area now includes improved wildlife habitat and water quality on 15,500 acres of commercial farmland, with 260 acres of field borders, 186 acres of wildlife habitat areas and 75 acres of native grasses. In addition, 170 acres of longleaf pine have been replanted in upland clear cuts, while 23 acres of bottomland were replanted in oaks and cypress.

“As the project moves forward we hope to engage as many landowners as possible to create much needed early successional habitat that benefits bobwhite quail and other declining species of songbirds,” said Mark Jones, with the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission’s Private Lands Program. “We’re focusing on filling in the gaps between Suggs Mill Pond Game Lands (where 2,800 acres are man-

ment Grants (EEG) designed to improve water quality while providing wildlife benefit. Initial habitat work included development of field borders (mostly 10 to 60-foot-wide linear strips of natural vegetation such as marehail, dog fennel, broomstraw, blackberry, sumac, smartweed and pokeberry), habitat areas (blocks of the same natural vegetation or planted in a mix of native warm season grasses and forbs), and areas of native warm season grasses. The grasses included switchgrass, little and big bluestem and indiangrass. Forbs used were primarily purple cone-



‘As the project moves forward we hope to engage as many landowners as possible to create much needed early successional habitat that benefits bobwhite quail and other declining species of songbirds...’

aged for early-successional habitats and represent one of four Game Land CURE areas in the state), and the larger privately-owned farm tracts. We hope to cross property lines and unite the farming community on a common goal of more environmentally and economically sound farming practices along with better wildlife habitat”.

“Education and outreach has always been a priority with this project,” said Benjy Strope who works on the Corporate CURE areas daily as a Technical Assistance Biologist with the Commission. “We work with the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service, North Carolina State University and other agencies to provide free wildlife and water quality workshops each year. Interested landowners, farmers or natural resource personnel, 255 so far, attend these sessions to learn about a variety of subjects ranging from field borders, forest management, and water quality to quail ecology, Farm Bill programs, native grasses and beneficial insects.”



Technical and financial assistance has been, and continues to be, an important tool for habitat management for private landowners within the focal area. Work on Corporate areas can be covered with funds from the EEG. On other private lands from 2005-2010, assistance was furnished by the federal Landowner Incentive Program (LIP) in the same four counties as the current focal area. LIP had 3,162 acres enrolled with a focus to restore longleaf pine. Last year, LIP was essentially replaced by USDA Farm Bill habitat programs that provide cost-share. Wildlife Resources Commission biologists provide management plans and implementation guidance for all cooperators.



“This project represents a glimmer of hope for early-successional habitat management and bobwhite management in an otherwise bleak world for these habitats and birds.



“There is also no doubt that many of these early-successional practices benefit reptiles, amphibians, fish, and other aquatic resources through improved water quality in keeping with the original intentions of the NCDOJ's EEG. We hope we can continue to grow this effort,” Jones said.



Strip Disking

And the Wildlife Resources Commission will provide free land management advice to any landowner in the focal area who asks, according to Jones.