



Not Your Typical **Mountain Game Land**

Rolling hills and diverse wildlife populations
make Johns River Game Land a place to be

Written by Josh Leventhal | photographed by Thomas Harvey

Game land dove fields are normally harvested, mowed or burned prior to the opening of dove season. Other wildlife utilize these food plots as well.



Don't let its location fool you: Johns River Game Land is not like any game land you have visited in the mountains.

Nestled into the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains just outside of Morganton in Burke County, this 6,400-acre, permit-only game land features a mix of river bottom terrain, early successional habitat and pine and hardwood forests. Not only does the description sound like a Piedmont habitat, but so is its diverse mix of wildlife. Johns River Game Land has good populations of deer, turkey and small game, making it a hidden gem of the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission's Game Lands Program.

The combination of soil and location, limited pressure due to the permit-only hunts and active management contribute to the game land being so rich in wildlife diversity, according to Paul Thompson, the Commission's Northern Mountains land management biologist. "Put those three things together and you are going to have a good place to hunt," he said.

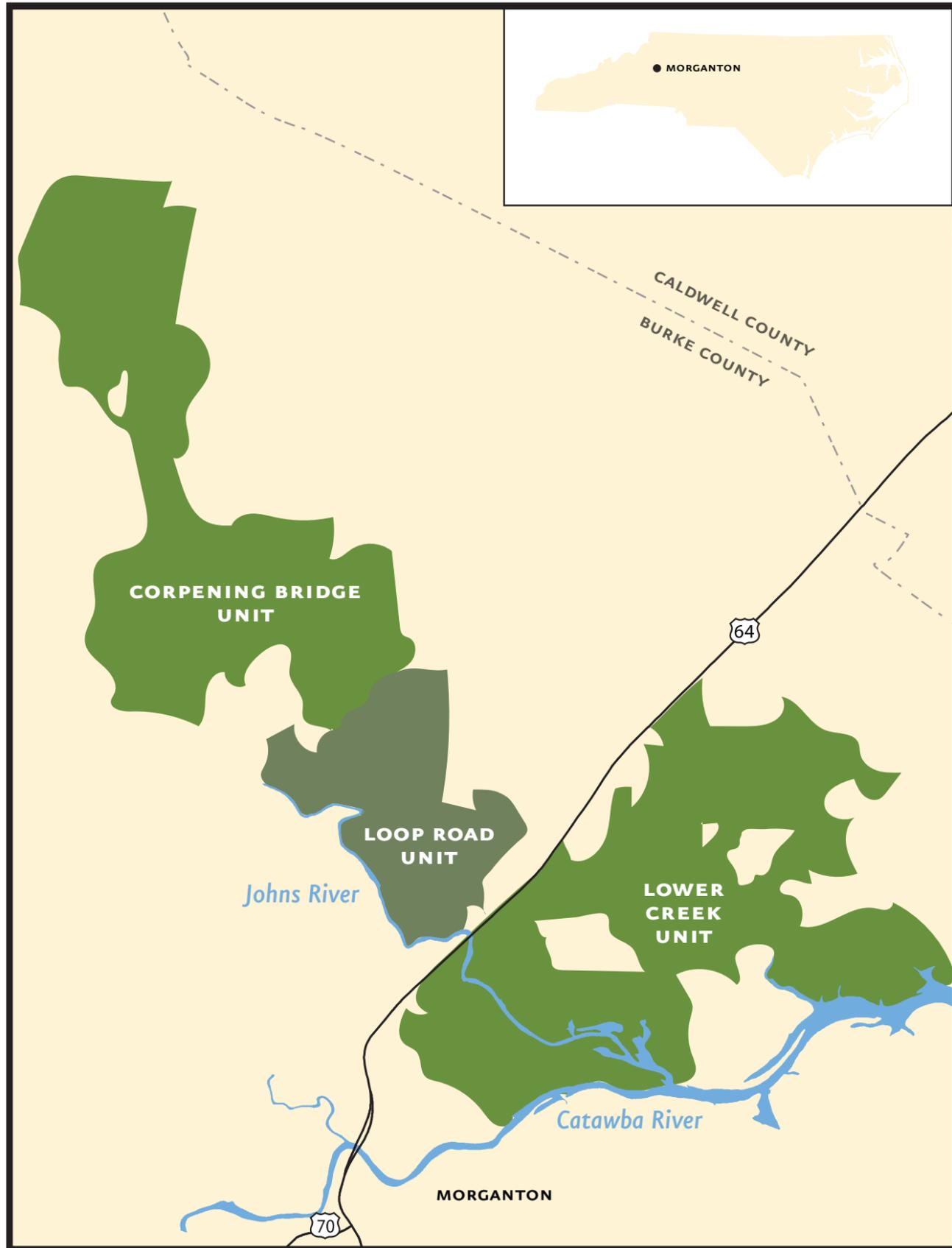
Hunting opportunities at Johns River Game Land recently increased thanks to a land acquisition that expanded the game land by 2,505 acres. The new Corpening Bridge Tract was purchased from Duke Energy in April 2018 with a grant from the Clean Water Management Trust Fund, funds from the Pittman-Robertson Act and donated land value per the Federal Energy Relicensing Agreement.

"The Johns River land acquisition exemplifies the power of partnership by enabling the Commission to increase this game land by 66 percent," Gordon Myers, the Commission's executive director, said at the time of the purchase. "This game land will provide lifetimes of access and opportunity for many of our constituents and

Left: The Johns River Boating Access, located at 1318 N.C. 18/U.S. 64, provides easy access to explore the game land from the water. Opposite: Crops planted at the Johns River dove fields include wheat (pictured), millet, sunflowers and corn.



JOHNS RIVER GAME LAND



it enables us to conserve the abundance of habitat for multiple significant species.”

The new tract is well on its way to achieving Myers’ goals. The new Corpening Bridge Tract features 45 acres of dove fields newly planted with corn, sunflower, millet and wheat. The fields will debut this fall, and an early summer tour of them revealed a picturesque setting. The once-fallow fields were now alive with colors, the sounds of songbirds and signs of wild-life (a fawn was working its way through the fields this particular morning). The game land crew plans to add non-functioning power lines through the fields to help attract doves.

“If the birds are in the area, they won’t find a field with better conditions,” Thompson said.

The Commission has also planted a 12-acre dove field in the Corpening Bridge Tract that will be used for permit-only dove hunts for disabled hunters. Hunters will be able to access the dove field from a road running along the field’s edge. The disabled dove field is believed to be the first of its kind on public land in North Carolina. Three permit hunts are scheduled for this field in early September.

After those dates, hunters can purchase a small-game permit that allows them to hunt small game, including dove, on the Corpening Bridge and Lower Creek Units from Sept. 16 through the end of the

first segment of dove season. It also allows hunting small game (including dove) on Mondays through Wednesday only from Dec. 16 to Dec. 28 and on Mondays through Saturdays from Dec. 30 to Feb. 29 during applicable seasons on the entire game land.

The prospect of using the dove fields this fall was briefly in doubt after a late-spring deluge left them under several feet of water. Game Lands staff debated in June whether a re-planting would be necessary but decided to stay the course. They were rewarded with an almost entirely healthy crop.

“The water receded quickly and they were not submerged for too long,” said Kip Hollifield, the Commission’s Mountain region supervisor. “We were fortunate.”



RALPH HENSLEY

Top: A ground blind used by disabled hunters. Tier III hunts are Commission-facilitated hunts by permit for disabled hunters held annually on the game land. **Above:** A white-tailed deer fawn feeds on vegetation.

A Place to Call One In

Johns River Game Land has already developed a reputation as a prime turkey hunting destination. The mix of early successional habitat and pine and hardwood forests are ideal habitat for turkey and make the turkey hunting permit a competitive offering.

“If you ever put in for that permit and get drawn, the odds are pretty good,” Thompson said.

Hollifield agrees. He harvested a turkey during a permit hunt at Johns River Game Land last year. He found success by starting out at daybreak at a high point, hearing a turkey and moving in its direction before setting up in a place to call it in.



Game animals at Johns River Game Land include white-tailed deer, mourning dove and Eastern wild turkey. Opposite: Mourning doves rest on a power line above a sunflower field; 98 percent of their diets is various seeds.



MIKE PADGETT

RALPH HENSLEY



“It’s got good access and you can cover quite a bit of country there just walking along,” Hollifield said. “There are a lot of logging roads and the terrain is not too difficult, especially for the mountains.”

The game land’s accessibility is one of its calling cards and allows hunters of all sorts to take advantage of its opportunities. A recent widening of the Loop Road has created an edge habitat of sorts and another easy footpath for hunters.

“It is in the foothills, so it is a little easier to get around on,” said Christopher Jordan, the game lands and forest resources manager for the Commission. “It’s not as steep topography as other game lands in the mountains. There is more accessibility for folks who have limited mobility.”

Deer hunting is also popular at Johns River Game Land, with four different permit hunts available. The Commission also hosts a Tier III deer hunt for disabled hunters each October. Five hunters participated in the event last year in which Commission staff led them on a deer hunt by setting them up in blinds, dragging out, skinning and quartering any deer that were harvested. They also hosted a cookout for the participants.

“It’s pretty much a turn-key deal. They just need to show up,” Thompson said. “We do everything for them except pull the trigger. Our guys love it. It’s a great event.”

Small-game hunting opportunities at Johns River Game Land range from rabbit to mourning dove with a variety of other species

in between. Small-game populations should get a boost with the decision to convert 95 acres that had been planted in corn as part of a co-op lease into early successional habitat. Commission staff have already begun to turn much of that land into early successional habitat and they will actively manage it through controlled burns.

“We’re just trying to do something for small game down there to make it a little more conducive for them.”

Active land management is one of the biggest reasons for the diverse wildlife at Johns River Game Land. The staff conduct regular controlled burns to maintain early successional habitat and to thin the pine and hardwood forests.

“Johns River Game Land is unique to the mountain game land program, and it shows with the harvest rates. It has got a lot of wildlife, a lot of deer, turkey and small game. Just in the way that it

lays makes it a good piece of property to manipulate the habitat on. The gentle upland terrain, flat bottomland and good soils make for a combination that responds well to active management. It’s one of those places that you wish all of the game lands were like up here in the mountains.” ♦

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