

An aerial photograph of a winding river or stream flowing through a dense, lush green forest. The water is a deep blue-grey color, reflecting the surrounding trees. The forest is composed of many tall, thin trees, likely pines or cypresses, with their reflections clearly visible in the water. The overall scene is serene and natural.

THE BIG BUY

Written by Jim Wilson

Photographed by Melissa McGaw

The greatest conservation land purchase in recent history added tens of thousands of acres to the state game lands system, now open for the public to enjoy.



The International Paper land acquisition brought approximately 66,000 acres with a variety of habitats into the Wildlife Commission's Game Lands program in the Coastal Plains and Piedmont. Commission biologists such as Dale Davis (right, middle photo) must help decide how to manage the lands for game and nongame animals.

Timing, whether in wing shooting, fly-casting or land acquisition, can be everything. Take, for example, a decision made in a corporate boardroom in Tennessee a few years ago, one that set into motion events that left the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission with 66,000 acres of new property for its game lands program.

The timing — the acquisition occurred in 2006 — was at the very least fortuitous, even propitious. Had this opportunity presented itself today, in this time of pinched budgets and a ragged economy, could the commission and its conservation partners have been able to pull off the deal? Probably not. Fortunately, the deal is done and the parcels already are part of the commission's game lands, available for hunters, anglers and wildlife watchers to use. Perhaps more important, the land has been conserved for the future.

Massive Sell-Off

Briefly, International Paper Corporation (IP) of Memphis, Tenn., had determined by July of 2005 that it would make uncoated paper and consumer and industrial packaging its focuses. International Paper would shed a number of its operations unrelated to its new model, including forest products, plus most or all of its 6.8 million acres of forestland in the United States.

Most of IP's holdings in the South — 4.7 million acres — were acquired by two investment groups. Another 218,000 acres that stretched from Virginia to Florida and west to Arkansas, covering 10 states, was sold to The Nature Conservancy and The Conservation Fund, which in turn sold the land to state agencies and other groups. It was the single largest private land conservation sale ever in the South. The lands in North Carolina totaled 77,090 acres, with approximately 66,000 going into game lands. The remaining 11,000 went to the Division of Parks and Recreation, the Department of Cultural Resources and private conservation buyers, including hunt clubs that agreed not to develop the land.

In North Carolina, the land acquired by the Wildlife Commission consisted of four large holdings located near or on the Roanoke, Chowan and Tar rivers, plus a section on Juniper Creek near Lake Waccamaw and the Green Swamp.

The biggest property, just over 22,000 acres, was along the lower Roanoke River in Halifax, Northampton, Bertie and Martin counties. Located near state game lands and federal wildlife refuges, the bottomland hardwood forests provide habitat for game and nongame wildlife, including more than 250 bird species.

The upper Tar River property held 20,749 acres in Franklin, Warren, Nash, Edgecombe and Halifax counties and is located near Shocco Creek Game

Land and Medoc Mountain State Park. The watershed's exceptional biodiversity includes the globally endangered Tar River spiny mussel and more than 60 species of freshwater fish.

The Juniper Creek land consisted of 18,341 acres in Columbus and Brunswick counties. This tract is valuable not only for its natural features but also because it will help connect other conservation lands — Lake Waccamaw State Park, The Nature Conservancy's Green Swamp Preserve and the commission's Columbus County Game Land. The area is one of the most biologically diverse along the Atlantic coast, providing habitat for rare animals such as the red-cockaded woodpecker and plants such as the Venus' flytrap.

The final piece, 15,464 acres along the Chowan River in Gates and Hertford counties near the Virginia line, is adjacent to Chowan Swamp Game Land. The property includes a rare scrub oak and longleaf pine community, reminiscent of the Sandhills more than 100 miles away, and provides habitat for the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker as well as black bears, otters and migratory songbirds.

From those four IP parcels, the commission created six new game lands: Brinkleyville, Embro, Lower Fishing Creek, Sandy Creek and Tillery in the Piedmont, and Juniper Creek in the Coastal Plain. Additional acreage was added to the existing game lands of Bertie County, Chowan Swamp and Roanoke River Wetlands in the Coastal Plain, and Shocco Creek in the Piedmont.

High-Quality Additions

The acquisition of the IP land, said David Cobb, chief of the commission's Division of Wildlife Management, accomplished several things at one time for the game lands program. "The IP lands brought additional properties in high-priority areas like the Roanoke River Basin, the Tar River Basin and down around the Green Swamp. Some of those tracts were high-priority lands that fit in well with what we already had. Some of those tracts will serve as an anchor for some additional acquisitions in the future whenever we start getting money again to actually buy land.

"The purchase added acreage to the game lands system overall. Several of those areas were significant additions to lands that were already in conservation ownership that had high-priority species. It's not just the game lands and hunting and fishing and wildlife viewing, it had some conservation benefits for a lot of species."

For hunters and anglers, Juniper Creek Game Land provides abundant opportunities, from white-tailed deer, black bears and wild turkeys to waterfowl, bobwhite quail and warmwater fishing. And Juniper Creek, like many of the other IP properties,

was a natural fit into the pattern of already established game lands.

"We're always looking to tie properties together," Cobb said. "For example, some of those properties along the Tar River were additions right there at Shocco Creek Game Land. Some of the tracts along the Roanoke were additions, and some were adjacent to properties we already owned. Tillery Game Land is right there at the Roanoke. It's not on the main stem of the river, but it's still a high-priority area. All of them, for the most part, qualified for Natural Heritage Trust Fund or Clean Water Management Trust Fund money, although we paid for quite a bit of that acquisition ourselves. To qualify for Heritage or Clean Water means that there was high conservation value."

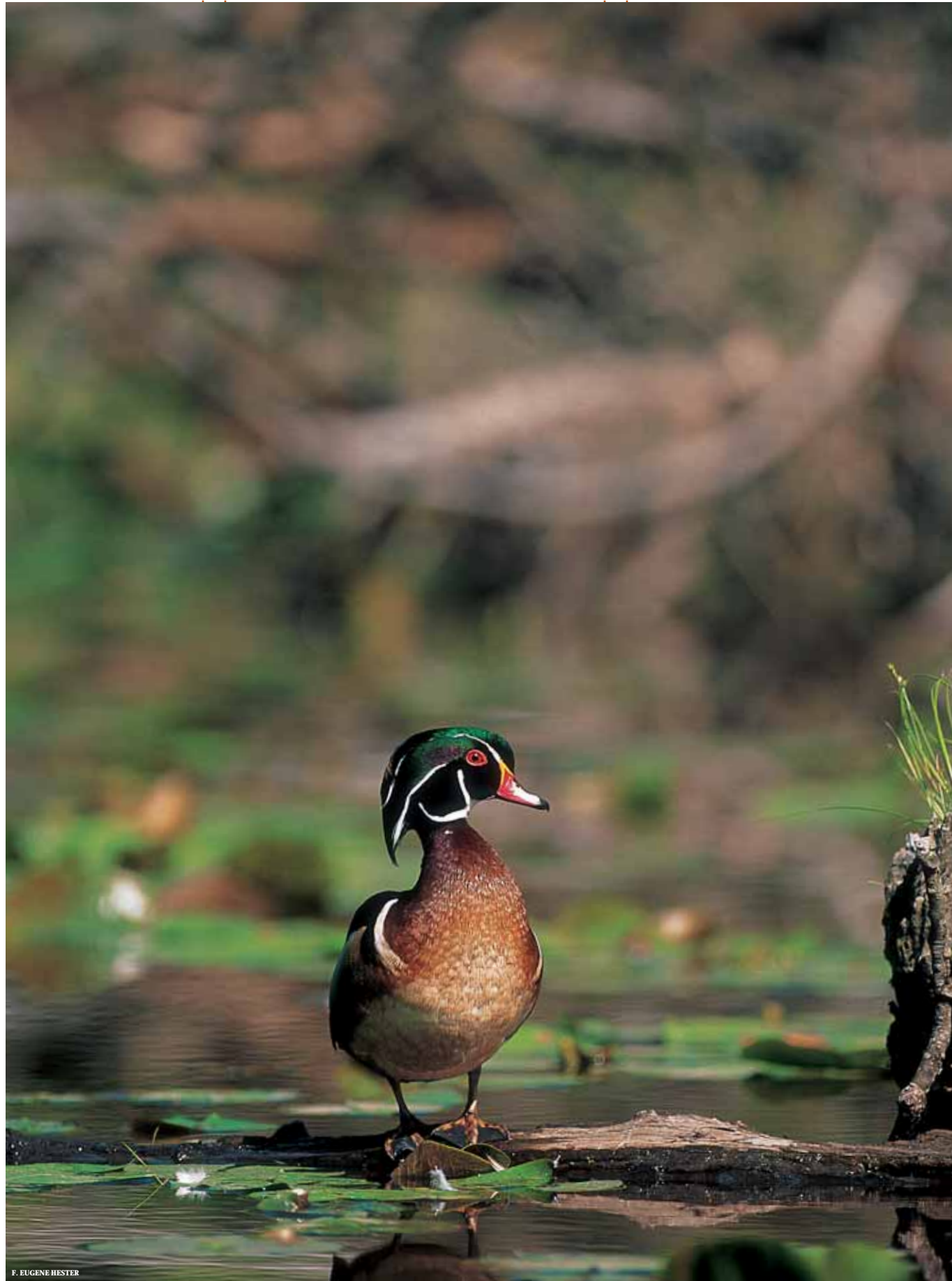
Dale Davis, the commission's management biologist for Districts 1, 2 and 4, said one of the most outstanding pieces of property from the IP sale is right there near the Roanoke, the 887-acre Wood's Island tract, which is now part of the Roanoke River Wetlands Game Land. All hunting on the game land is by permit only.

"It's a beautiful piece of property," Davis said. "Part of what makes it so special is the diverse habitat. Some of it is in bottomland, some in cutovers. Then it slopes uphill to an upland pine plantation, which IP did an excellent job of managing. We've even planted some longleaf there."

Davis has yet to hunt the property, but only because he hasn't been fortunate enough to draw a permit. The tract once served as a hunt club for IP employees. "It has excellent deer and turkey hunting," he said. "A couple of our technicians hunted there and had a fantastic turkey hunt."

For hunters and anglers, Juniper Creek Game Land provides abundant opportunities, from white-tailed deer, black bears and wild turkeys to waterfowl, bobwhite quail and warmwater fishing.





F. EUGENE HESTER

The Right Price

In addition to being high-quality parcels of land that fit well into the game lands program, the IP purchase also was a good business deal.

“It was an opportunity to get a large acreage in total at a comparatively reasonable price,” Cobb said. “The IP land ended up being less than \$1,000 an acre. Compared to most of the land that we’re buying, even rural property, none of it is even coming close to that across the board. Even if you’re talking about a few hundred acres, you’re often in millions of dollars. Overall it was an opportunity to acquire a lot of high-quality property at one time.”

The addition to the game lands program was the largest since 1971, when the commission expanded game lands from 700,000 acres to 1.5 million acres by folding into the program approximately 800,000 acres of U.S. Forest Service land in Croatan, Uwharrie, Pisgah and Nantahala national forests, plus some state-owned public land and private industrial forests, including some lands owned by International Paper. Today, the commission has about 2.1 million acres in game lands from the Coastal Plains to the Mountains and owns outright about 470,000 acres.

Although land owned outright by the state, through the commission, is only about 25 percent of the total, that figure has grown. Having ownership of a game land provides the commission more opportunities for management yet places the burden of management entirely on the commission.

“The big change over the last 20 years is that the additions have been state-owned land,” Cobb said. “It’s really been a significant increase. There’s been a lot of land added, but not a lot of stewardship money added. That’s money to hire people to manage the property, money to post boundaries and grade roads and do prescribed burning and plant fields. We have more latitude in what we do on the state-owned game lands.

“We’re involved in some of the management activities on some of the national forest lands, but management activities there are dictated by the U.S. Forest Service and not by us. It’s better for us if we have more latitude in what we do, but it puts the responsibility on us for trying to do everything. A lot of times, that’s hard to do.”

The stewardship aspect, the actual managing of the property, is something most hunters, fishermen and other users of public land do not consider. For them, the addition of the land into a game lands program is the ultimate act in the scenario. That’s far from the actuality. Managers must decide where to concentrate their work, which roads will be graded and graveled multiple times each year, which roads will have to be closed, which game lands have sufficient staff to conduct prescribed burning, which do not. “It’s a constant prioritization,” Cobb said.

Perfect Timing

The IP lands could well be the last significant single addition to the game lands system that we see for some time. North Carolina was fortunate that the deal came along when it did.

“There’s no way that deal could be put together today,” Cobb said. “The monies that were available through Clean Water and Natural Heritage are not available today, and I certainly would not recommend to the director that we take out a large land acquisition bond today. The timing was critical. I can’t imagine us being able to do that now.”

That is a predicament Cobb hopes the Wildlife Commission does not find itself in again. “We really need to figure out a new model,” he said. “For years there was a significant amount of money available to protect land—not as much as we needed, but still a pretty significant amount. And there was property out there, but some of the really high-quality conservation properties were not on the market. The economy takes a dive, and a lot of property is available right now, but many of the funders have dried up, for the most part.

“There’s a real need for a new model as to how we fund land conservation and protection, so that in times when our economy is such that there is a lot of land available, we have a lot of money available to buy it with. But the model we’ve always worked under doesn’t work that way.

“What we have to do is figure out funding sources that are not so directly tied to the exact condition of the state’s economy. The Heritage program is funded based development levels. When the housing market slumps and development slows, revenues into the Natural Heritage Trust Fund fall. When the state budget is in the condition it’s in, opportunities for money to be put into the Clean Water Trust Fund go down.”

What form that new model might take is uncertain. Perhaps it would take an endowment fund, something similar to the commission’s Wildlife Endowment Fund, which has worked very well for more than 25 years. A fund such as that might be slow to grow in the first years but would begin to build more rapidly as the fund reaches 10 to 15 years of age.

“There are a lot of people thinking about that right now, but we haven’t quite figured it out,” Cobb said. “But we are working on it.”

Deals such as the massive IP acquisition don’t present themselves often. But a new funding model could mean that when opportunities do come along, the timing and the state of the economy might not be so critical. ♦

The addition to the game lands program was the largest since 1971, when the commission expanded game lands from 700,000 acres to 1.5 million acres.

Jim Wilson is the associate editor of WINC.