



FARMING

for

WILDLIFE

• WRITTEN BY MIKE ZLOTNICKI // PHOTOGRAPHED BY MELISSA MCGAW •

Need a place to hunt? Two million acres are available, some of it enhanced by agriculture

IN the mid-1980s fresh out of journalism school at Carolina, I settled into life in the Triangle. Being an outdoorsman, I needed a place to hunt. Short of funds and with no land to speak of in the extended family, I drove out one summer day to explore the Jordan Game Lands.

The first stop was at one of the public dove fields, which, to my surprise, had a healthy crop of sunflowers. I returned with my Remington 1100 in the fall for some wing shooting and have never really left.

The N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission's Game Lands Program has over 2 million acres of land (including national forests) and actively manages about 480,000 acres. The game lands are owned by the state, leased, or co-managed with entities such as the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the U. S. Forest Service.



On those lands, the commission does quite a bit of “farming” and other management for the benefit of hunters and other users. For fiscal year 2012–2013, seeding and or fertilization was planned for 3,489 acres of food plots, dove fields and other habitat. Waterfowl impoundments are also managed for plant production. The estimated cost is \$1,800,000 and is funded primarily by license fees, forest product sales, and funds from the Pittman-Robertson Act, an excise tax on sporting arms, archery tackle and ammunition.

“The primary purpose is to provide hunting opportunities and the conservation of wildlife species,” said Isaac Harrold, land program manager and a 26-year veteran of the commission. “It’s always been our intent to allow non-hunters use of these lands as long as they don’t displace the primary users.”

The public dove fields are popular places in September. Chris Teague was taking a break from desk duty to drive around the dove fields and waterfowl impoundments off Brickhouse Road at Butner-Falls of the Neuse Game Land. He spent 20 years tending the grounds there before becoming supervisor of five depots that service more than 100,000 acres.

“On a good opening day we’ll have between 200 and 500 people,” he said as he wheeled his Ford truck around. “Even on a bad bird day we’ll have 150 to 200.”

He pointed to a fallow field. “This is a warm-season grass field,” he said. “We busted it in half with a disk to leave some brood habitat. Turkey and quail can use it. This disk row will green up and provide more cover and habitat.”

He drove to another spot where corn stalks and the remnants of Egyptian wheat stood. “Our annual food plots offer supplemental food supplies when mast crops wane,” he said. “They don’t just attract huntable game, but they also serve hikers and birdwatchers. We also promote natural vegetation that helps save money on seed cost and field trips.”

Teague said that one group of hunters taking advantage of the food plots were raccoon hunters, as the ’coons would forage on corn in the food plots, giving the hunters a likely place for their hounds to get fresh scent.

Top left: Chris Teague checks an ear of corn at one of the food plots off of Brickhouse Road at the Butner-Falls Game Land. Mowing, pictured, and disking (dirt strip to the right of the tractor) are used in addition to planting to manage land for wildlife. The commission’s public dove fields are very popular.

At the depot office a grease-chart calendar was on the wall, and Teague said the monthly “chores” were really just the highlights of the “to-do” list. Depending upon the month the conservation technicians at a given game land may mark timber for sale (the funds return to the program), manage waterfowl impoundment crops and water levels, do prescribed burns, prep crop fields, plant fields, band doves and ducks, conduct fire line maintenance, man deer check stations to collect biological data on harvests, post boundaries, repair gates and maintain wood duck nesting boxes, and that’s just some of what was on the board. At Butner, for example, there are 14 tractors, three bulldozers and a motor grader to maintain.

Between Jordan and Butner-Falls of Neuse Game Land there are about 60 wood duck boxes, and Stephen Thomas helps maintain them among his other duties. Thomas said that the nesting boxes have an 80 percent use rate and each nest contains about 10 to 12 eggs.

“We come in early and we know what we each need to do,” said Thomas, a Tennessee graduate who has been with the commission for three years. “There’s always something happening.”

He also said that people recognize the efforts of the technicians. “We get thanked a lot of times,” he said. “Deer hunters will come by and say ‘thank you for what you do.’ A lot of them are from the mountains. The duck hunters are vocal, too.”

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PIEDMONT

The R. Wayne Bailey-Caswell Game Land is about 18,000 acres of scattered tracts south of Yanceyville. The topography is unique, with steep draws and ridges. The game land is named in honor of the late Bailey, the man who is considered the founding father of modern wild turkey management in North Carolina.

Chris Baranski, Northern Piedmont management biologist with the commission, explained what makes Caswell unique. One significant difference is the CURE (Cooperative Upland Habitat Restoration and Enhancement) project at the game lands. There are almost 6,000 acres divided into seven units from 450 to 1,200 acres in size.

“CURE dramatically altered the landscape here,” said Baranski. Instead of traditional 20- to 40-acre clear-cuts, the commission went to as much as 150 acres. The clear-cuts were replanted with loblolly pines on a 10-by-15-foot grid and were sprayed with a selective herbicide to kill hardwood sprouts and reduce competition. The area grows for eight years and then is burned. The result is not just cover for quail, but also for small game and songbirds. The fire lines around each clear-cut are planted with rye or crimson clover. “The firebreaks

create easier hunter access, and the plantings create brooding and bugging areas for birds,” Baranski said.

At Caswell local farmers lease land for crops, with the understanding that 10 percent of the crop stays in the field for wildlife.

As Conservation Technician Matthew Williams slowly drove past a food plot of clover, a flock of turkey scurried back into the woods. The dove fields at Caswell are smaller than others farther east. “There’s not much flat land around here,” said Baranski.

Warm-season grasses like little bluestem, big bluestem, Indiangrass and switchgrass are planted in the dove fields between rows of grain or are planted and left alone to provide habitat.

“It saves money on seed and benefits the rabbit hunters, turkey hunters and deer hunters. It seemed like a waste to manage these fields for one week a year,” he said, referring to the popular opening week of dove season.

At one small field, the grasses had fallen over, creating habitat underneath for small game and hiding them from avian predators. Many of the food plots had three defined stages and are not planted. Using successional disking, these fields are left fallow and disked in thirds on alternating years to promote natural herbaceous regeneration. “As land managers of public lands, we take great pride in the stewardship of North Carolina’s game lands for the protection of their inhabitants, and the opportunities provided to sportsmen and other outdoor enthusiasts,” said Baranski.



Native warm-season grasses, such as switchgrass, big bluestem and Indiangrass provide nesting and brood cover, as well as winter cover, for small game. They are also drought resistant, winter hardy and are adaptable to sandy and infertile soils. Opposite, an Eastern meadowlark vocalizes atop his perch.



Switchgrass



Big Bluestem



Indiangrass



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Conservation technicians Richard Clark and Tad Castellow survey the aquatic plants in an impoundment on Goose Creek Game Land.

Coastal Plain

At the Goose Creek Game Land, waterfowl are a specialty. Dan Martin, central coast technician supervisor, talked about some of the activities on the game lands just west of Aurora. “We manage salt marsh impoundments,” he said. “The vegetation in them — food — is created by water level manipulation. We draw them down in mid-spring after the return migration. It’s a slow draw-down for shore birds. We leave them dry all summer until the bottoms crack. Then you’ll see some plants sprout and seed out and then we’ll re-flood.”

It’s tougher to work at Goose Creek because everything has to be hauled in by barge, a three-hour trip one way for the six impoundments there and 10 in the central coast region. “A ton of time, pumping and fuel hauling,” said Martin.

There are 17 miles of dikes that have to be maintained. Throw in a hurricane now and then, and the repair work becomes extremely taxing. It’s a popular destination for waterfowlers and Martin knows it. Traffic is heavy, and the game lands also serve a lot of bird watchers and photographers, especially at Croatan.

“The Goose Creek Game Lands are a premier waterfowl hunting area for the eastern United States,” he said. “The commission has managed it for the long term. It serves a lot of people. Many a waterfowl hunter has killed their first duck here, and some their last. It’s a crown jewel.”

This is but a snapshot of what goes on to promote hunting and non-consumptive outdoor activities on the game lands across our state. There are 90 individual game lands scattered across North Carolina in 79 counties. A pool of 87 conservation technicians and staff biologists are ensuring you a quality place to hunt and recreate. Take advantage of it. ➔

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FIRE IS YOUR FRIEND

Since 1944 Smokey Bear has admonished Americans to prevent wildfire. In fact, it’s been the longest running public service announcement campaign in history. But what a lot of folks don’t realize is that fire is good — even essential — for many ecosystems.

“Prescribed burning is one of the most cost-effective and efficient land management tools we have for improving habitat on the landscape,” said Dean Simon, a Mountain Region wildlife forester with the commission. “Burning is a primary duty for all commission foresters. The Piedmont and Coastal areas have been burning for decades. We started burning in the Mountain region in 1987. Now we have a pretty good program on our Mountain game lands thanks to a dedicated, trained, and well equipped staff of wildlife technicians and biologists.”

Simon said that the flatter Piedmont and Coastal Plains topography makes for easier burning and that larger tracts of land can be burned with fewer people. In the mountains, fire wants to run uphill, so foresters burn from the top down and utilize more equipment and

people. Bulldozers are used to create firebreaks in concert with roads and trails. On flatter ground tractors with disks can create firebreaks. Natural firebreaks, such as creeks and rivers, are also utilized extensively.

Weather, especially wind, temperature and humidity, all play a part when planning a prescribed burn. Late winter and early spring are when these factors come together for the most optimum window of burn opportunities, and the Mountains have the shortest window; the Coastal Plain has the widest. There is also a secondary period from September to December that foresters will take advantage of.

“Training and experience let us know how the fire is going to act,” said Simon. “There’s a lot of planning that goes into a burn. Prescribed burning is as much an art as it is a science.”

The tools of burning include bulldozers, pickup trucks and ATVs with portable water pumping units and hand-held drip torches filled with a mix of diesel fuel and gas to start fires in a planned sequence. On large tracts helicopters are sometimes used to conduct prescribed burns.

Prescribed (or controlled) burning is a literal example of fighting fire with fire. As ground fuels like leaf litter, brush and pine needles build up over the years, the chance of a catastrophic fire from a lightning strike or carelessly thrown cigarette butt grows. Regular burning keeps the fuel supply lower.

“We are using prescribed burning from the mountains to the coast,” said Simon. “We have fire-adapted and fire-dependent plant and animal communities in need of restoration and maintenance.”

Frequency (how often) and season (time of year) greatly influence the results of our prescribed burning. Scientific research, much of which has occurred on commission lands, has greatly advanced our knowledge of the need, results and proper application of prescribed fire. There’s a lot of complexity across the state, but we’ve gradually fine-tuned our work.”

For more information on prescribed burning go to ncprescribedfirecouncil.org or www.fs.fed.us/fire/management/rx.html.



GAME LANDS BY THE NUMBERS

The commission specifically manages/maintains:

- 4 waterfowl blinds
- 6 observation platforms
- 19 hunting blinds for disabled sportsmen
- 28 hunter campgrounds
- 44 dams
- 49 lakes/ponds
- 64 miles of waterfowl impoundment dikes
- 71 waterfowl impoundments (5,526 acres)
- 91 bridges
- 228 parking areas
- 1,044 miles of unpaved roads
- 1,209 gates
- 10,924 miles of posted boundary
- 1,413 culverts