

LOUISIANA FOREST STEWARDSHIP NEWSLETTER

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Wildlife Plantings in Today's Economy

Story by David Moreland

We read about it in the newspapers everyday; we hear about it on the radio; we see it on television every evening when we come home from work; the economy in this country is bad and has been that way for over a year. Cut-backs, lay-offs, downsizing and budget-cuts are just some of the terms that we frequently hear. We all probably know of businesses that have had to shut down or curtail services. In September 2009, the *Baton Rouge Morning Advocate* reported that Louisiana lost 2,500 jobs in August 2009, and employment was down 32,100 jobs from the previous year. The bad economy has impacted every phase of our lives, including those of us who manage wildlife and incorporate wildlife plantings into our management plan. In 2008, fertilizer and nitrate costs dramatically increased; \$20 for a 50 pound sack of triple-thirteen and a few bucks more for 8-24-24. Cost for a sack of ammonium nitrate was also in the \$20 range. Diesel and gas prices were over \$4 a gallon. To make matters worse, those of us who did spend the money for spring plantings had to deal with the June 2009 drought that Mother Nature gave us.

We are told that economic recovery will be slow and will come in spurts. There is some evidence of a turn-around for wildlife managers. Fertilizer and nitrate costs have declined to just a little over \$10 a sack. The cost for gas and diesel fuel is also less than what it was in late 2008. While we are making gains in our recovery, there are ways that wildlife managers can reduce the costs for plantings and still obtain the benefits of this important habitat work.

IMPORTANCE OF WILDLIFE OPENINGS & PLANTINGS

Wildlife openings have long been recognized as an important aspect of managing habitat for many wildlife species. Leopold, in his book *Game Management*, referred to habitat as "game range." He further stated that if land is to be occupied by game it must provide places for feeding, hiding, resting, sleeping, playing and raising young. It was also recognized many years ago that farm land can benefit many species of wildlife such as pheasants, quail and rabbits. The term "farm game" was created to describe such species. "Forest and range game" was the term given to describe such species as deer and turkey, since they will utilize both forest land and cultivated land (Leopold, *Game Management*).

Dr. James Dickson, Merritt Professor of Forestry and Coordinator of the Wildlife Program at LA Tech, edited the book *Wildlife of Southern Forests*. The book describes the importance of openings and plantings for white-tailed deer, the eastern wild turkey and the northern bobwhite. Openings and plantings are primarily important for their value as feeding areas. For hunters, feeding is important from the standpoint of seeing and harvesting game. These wildlife openings or plantings have other value. Edge is created by openings, and many species of wildlife benefit from this. Edge creates plant diversity and denotes a change in habitat types in the wildlife landscape. For white-tailed deer, edge provides travel corridors and locations for scrapes



Photo by Cody Cedotal

and rubs. If managed correctly, the openings can provide year-round cover for quail and rabbits. Cover is important for both quail and turkeys in the summer during the brood raising period when the newly hatched chicks and poults are feeding in these openings. Openings and plantings can be used by wildlife throughout the year for feeding areas, especially if managed to provide year round food sources.

Openings and plantings in simple terms create plant diversity. Most wildlife species feed or utilize many different plant species. Bobwhite will eat many species of grass seeds, both native and farm grown, as well as hard mast and fruits from woody species. Ever jump a covey of quail under an oak tree while they were feeding on the mast debris from the squirrels feeding on the acorns and dropping their cuttings on the ground?

The new LDWF publication that Scott Durham, Deer Program Manager, developed, *Managing White-tails in Louisiana, Volume 2*, provides the names of specific plant species deer eat in the different habitat types found across the state. The LDWF publication, *Checklist*



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of *Woody and Herbaceous Deer Food Plants of Louisiana*, gives a description and photo of the important plant species. Openings and plantings create this plant diversity by setting back plant succession. Management of these openings or plantings can either maintain plant succession at a certain stage, or allow the vegetation to grow to the next stage (for example a grass opening may be allowed to grow to the brush stage or a hedgerow is created within the grass plot to provide additional food and cover).

ESTABLISH A MANAGEMENT PLAN

To get the maximum benefit from wildlife openings and plantings, as well as reducing the costs for this type of habitat work, the landowner or hunting club should develop a management plan for the land. There are numerous avenues for assistance with developing a management plan. The Forest Stewardship Program (FSP) is a good place to start for private forest landowners. Through FSP, landowners can glean information about forest and wildlife management and other objectives from both the Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry (LDAF) foresters and Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) biologists. Another good source for development of a management plan is the Landowners for Wildlife Program initiated by the LDWF. This program can assist with management plans for landowners or lessees who may only be interested in wildlife objectives. The Deer Management Assistance Program (DMAP) is yet another source of information available for clubs and landowners who desire specific information about deer herd and habitat management. The Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service has Area Forestry Agents that are an excellent source for information about forest management. (See the Spring/Summer 2009 Newsletter for contact names and numbers).

All management plans incorporate objectives. What does the club or landowner want to accomplish by creating openings or plantings? No doubt, the primary objective for most landowners and hunting clubs whose focus is deer, is the development of openings and plantings for harvesting deer. However, with a little thought and effort, these deer openings and plantings can be managed to provide habitat for other game species. The deer craze that has dominated the hunting community for so many years has developed into a big business. Of course the major objective of a business is to promote and sell their products, so a lot of money could be spent on products that do not produce any better results than the less expensive ones.

DEVELOP A TIMBER PLAN & UTILIZE NATIVE FORAGES

One way to cut wildlife management costs is development a sound timber management plan for the land and let the forest produce the food for wildlife. Once the plan is developed, put it into action. Yes, the timber industry is suppressed. At a recent meeting of the Red Stick Forestry Association in Baton Rouge, Buck Vandersteen, Executive Director of the Louisiana Forestry Association, reported that 10,000 logging jobs have been lost in the state along with \$54 million in private landowner revenue from timber sales. But according to Dr. Mike Dunn, Forest Economist with the LSU AgCenter, landowners should focus on the long term and stick with the management plan; it will pay off in the long run. He also said that private forest landowners may begin seeing improvement in the forest economy in 2011. In the meantime, if the plan calls for thinning of a



A two-acre field beginning to move toward the shrub/tree stage (note volunteer pine trees). It provides cover and some food for deer and rabbits, but is too thick for turkey and quail. Fire and bush-hogging strips would set back plant succession and make it more valuable for deer and game birds.

stand, thin it.

Thinning the forest opens up the canopy, allows sunlight to hit the ground, promoting the growth of grasses, forbs and shrubs that can be utilized for food by wildlife. Clearcuts create openings in the forest that promote excellent growth of woody and herbaceous plant species. Vic Blanchard, Forester for Wilbert and Sons, incorporates 40-acre clearcuts in his forest management plans for their land. The recent LDWF/LSU telemetry study on their land in West Baton Rouge Parish found deer to utilize much smaller home ranges than studies done in other states. One explanation for these smaller home ranges could be that these 40-acre clearcuts which are loaded with high quality native forages keep the deer from having to do a lot of moving in search of food. These managed clearcuts provide sufficient food and cover. Turkeys and quail can utilize such clearcuts for feeding and nesting, until these sites become too thick for them to move around in. Smaller openings created from timber cuts, one acre in size or smaller, promote good plant diversity for wildlife. Cutting undesirable tree species, especially Chinese tallowtrees, allows sunlight to hit the ground and promotes the growth of more desirable plant species. Chinese privet is a shrub species that can dominate a site and reduce available sunlight, thus preventing the growth of other plant species. Reducing these privet thickets by cutting or herbicide treatment is something that landowners and clubs can do now if regular thinning work is not going on. I am not a big fan of broadcast, non-specific herbicide treatments since it can reduce the growth of many desirable deer browse species, but herbicide treatments applied to specific species of plants is a valuable tool. Prescribed fire is yet another way to set back plant succession and promote plant growth when thinning is not possible.

On the small tracts that I manage, I have incorporated native shrubs into hedgerows within a food plot. Arrowwood, elderberry and French mulberry are good deer browse plants to create a hedgerow with. All of these can be grown from rootstock or seed, or they can be purchased from a nursery. French mulberry (American beauty berry), provides both browse and fruit. Other game species and song birds eat the fruit of this shrub. Blackberry is another desirable wildlife plant that often grows in the hedges. Privet may develop in these hedgerows, and while it is readily eaten by deer, it must be intensely managed to contain it within the hedgerow and prevent it from spreading.

Fertilizing hedgerows can improve plant growth and quality.

Managing wildlife openings by utilizing native plant species is a very cost-efficient method. Species such as blackberry, dewberry, Verbena and partridge pea, as well as stems from many hardwood species, will provide browse for deer and rabbits. Seeds from grasses and other herbaceous plants provide food for turkeys and quail. These sites also attract insects that are the main food of young turkeys and quail. Plots can be managed by periodic clipping; this is important to prevent the plot from becoming too thick for the game birds while promoting growth of new stems. This past spring one of my small ½-acre plots that I had planted in winter grass and clover grew up with a lot of Verbena and Rubus that was being heavily browsed by deer. Why spend time and money to clip, plow and replant this plot with summer forage, when the deer were utilizing the native browse that was very abundant?

USE WISE JUDGMENT WITH WILDLIFE PLANTINGS

As previously mentioned, food plots have become big business. There are a lot of seed types to choose from, most of which are promoted to grow bigger and better deer, and many of these varieties greatly increase the cost for plantings. Since the major goal of most clubs is simply to make plantings to attract and harvest deer, a lot of money is spent on expensive seed to attract deer. Thirty years ago everyone planted ryegrass for deer. The ryegrass attracted deer and hunters killed deer over the ryegrass, many of which were pretty nice bucks. As the seed business developed, more expensive varieties of seed were marketed and promoted. The craze for big deer seems to have gone a bit too far. Why dominate a plot with one or two species of forages for deer, when with a little thought and planning, the plot can be developed and managed for other species of wildlife as well?

One question clubs or landowners should address concerning their deer planting program is how much growth, weight and antler development are your plantings yielding. Years ago I worked with a landowner that had 1,000 acres, half of which was farmed with corn, soybeans, sweet potatoes and winter wheat. Yearling bucks averaged 150 pounds and all 2-year and older bucks weighed 200 pounds or more. When the farming stopped with the creation of the 1985 Farm



The dream of every turkey hunter prior to opening day; two gobblers displaying for five hens in the plot with the sawtooth oaks prior to the 2009 Spring Season. The yellow flowers are turnips and mustards; deer will eat these flowering stems.

Bill, yearling buck weights dropped to 120 pounds the very first year. Over time the weights continued to decline, despite the development of a food plot program. If your program is not increasing body weights by 20 pounds or more in each age class, then you are probably spending a lot of money for nothing. A weight gain of five pounds does not do much for growth and development. To really produce results, food plots must be done on a large scale like an agricultural operation. From an economic standpoint, this is really not feasible for the average club or landowner. That is why a sound timber management plan is so important.

In recent years I have adapted a strip planting system in my wildlife planting program. Rather than planting the entire plot in one or two forages, the plot is planted in strips utilizing several species of forages. Ryegrass is generally frowned upon these days, but the fact is, ryegrass is inexpensive, works well in a variety of soils, and is easily planted. If fertilized when planted and nitrated once it comes up deer will come to it and eat it. Turkeys will also eat the seed heads in the spring. Perennial ryegrass is planted with crimson and white clover in some strips and this works really well for both deer and turkeys. Both the clover and ryegrass will produce seed (if allowed to reseed), thus reducing seed costs the following year. Sometimes just clover strips are planted, using crimson and white clover. Turnips and mustards are also planted in the strips, providing food for wildlife and also food for the table. These strips, which serve as winter feeding sites, are interspersed between rows of sawtooth oaks and other fruit trees such as pears, crabapples, black cherry and mayhaws. All of these produce fruit that wildlife will eat. In addition to these orchard trees, the hedgerows of native and wildlife shrub species provide more food and cover. More plant diversity means more year-round habitat for all game species.

Planting hardwood and soft mast tree species within plots adds diversity to the plot, but such plantings should be considered long-



This photograph shows the diversity created with a strip planting program. The clipped spring turkey strip is on the far left, turnip and clover strip on the right of it and a row of sawtooth oaks with rye grass planted on both sides of the oaks.

Photos by David Moreland

term habitat management. It generally takes fruit trees three to five years to start producing fruit. Another thing to keep in mind is that other species of wildlife will eat the fruit, not just the ones you are targeting. Several years ago I planted a cluster of native pear trees in a small opening in a pine plantation. When the trees finally produced a lot of fruit, my excitement level rose as I made preparations to set up a lock-on deer stand. When I went to set the stand up, three gray squirrels jumped out of the pear trees into the pines. The fruit was basically gone and I never set the stand up. While the deer were not benefiting too much from the pears, the squirrels had another source of a high quality food to keep them going during late summer and early fall.

In the spring, I plant grain strips that are left standing during the fall and winter. These strips provide feeding strips for game as well as cover strips for game birds in the summer and fall. Spring forages that work well includes sorghum, Egyptian wheat, partridge pea and millet. Generally in January or early February these grain strips are cut, providing feeding strips for turkeys and quail. Heavy browsing by deer can reduce or even eliminate partridge pea from the strip. Grain species have worked especially well in attracting turkeys. Quail have not responded to this strip planting program. However, I did jump a pair of quail that were in one of these managed plots in late August, so maybe it is starting to work for Mr. Bobwhite. I am confident that habitat conditions for quail and other wildlife will improve once some of the pine stands on the property are thinned and prescribed burning is implemented.

In closing keep in mind that forest management and management of native plant species is the most economic way to provide food for wildlife. Develop a good forest management plan and work the plan. Wildlife plantings do not have to cost an arm and a leg to be effective. The past two hunting seasons I have had the good fortune to harvest five adult bucks and two adult gobblers as a result of this strip planting program on the small properties that I manage. I have also enjoyed watching and photographing many different species of songbirds in these plots. I believe I am accomplishing my wildlife objectives during these times of recession in a cost-effective manner within the confines of a retirement budget.

David Moreland is a retired LDWF Deer Program Manager and Biologist.

STRIP PLANTING BASICS

- Manage the plot utilizing different types of forage strips to create diversity within the plot.
- Spring planting strips provide forage for deer in the spring and food and cover for quail and turkeys in the fall and winter. Winter strips provide forage for deer in the fall and winter and cover and seed for quail and turkeys in the spring.
- Plant spring strips with grain forages, such as sorghum or millet, or legumes such as partridge pea or Illinois bundle flower.
- Planting winter strips with winter grasses, clovers, brassicas, turnips and mustards provides forage for deer and for the table.
- Strips with just native forages reduce seed costs and can be fertilized to improve plant quality and growth.
- Manage native strips with periodic clipping and/or shallow disking; native strips can provide cover or bedding sites for deer within the plot.
- Develop hedgerow strips within the plot using native shrubs such as French mulberry, elderberry and arrowwood; hedgerows provide food and cover for wildlife.
- Develop orchard strips or clusters of fruit or mast trees using sawtooth oaks, black cherry, pears, mayhaws, crabapples and red mulberry.



Wire cages visually demonstrate the degree of deer browsing or utilization in a plot. This plot has clover, Timothy grass and rye grass.



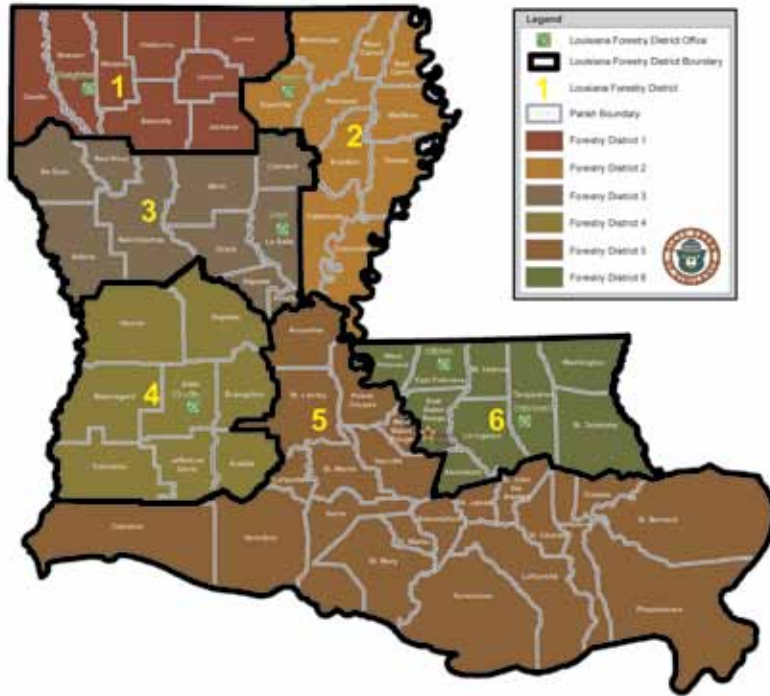
A mixture of crimson and white clover flowering in a winter strip planted in a plot. These clovers will reseed, thus eliminating the need to buy new seed next year.



A ten point adult buck for the freezer and a good mess of greens for the family table are evidence that the strip planting program is working.

NEW CONTACT INFORMATION

The recent efforts to decrease budget deficits and streamline state government has resulted in many changes to both the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) and the Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry (LDAF). To become more efficient, some offices were closed and districts were merged by both agencies. As result, much of the contact information for agency foresters and biologists published in the past is now incorrect. This is the most recent organizational structure for both LDAF and LDWF and gives updated contact information for region and district offices. Please refer to these when contacting your local Private Lands Biologist or Unit Forester in the future.



L.a. Department of Agriculture & Forestry State Forestry District Map

District 1
740 Covington Rd.
Haughton, LA 71037
318-949-3225

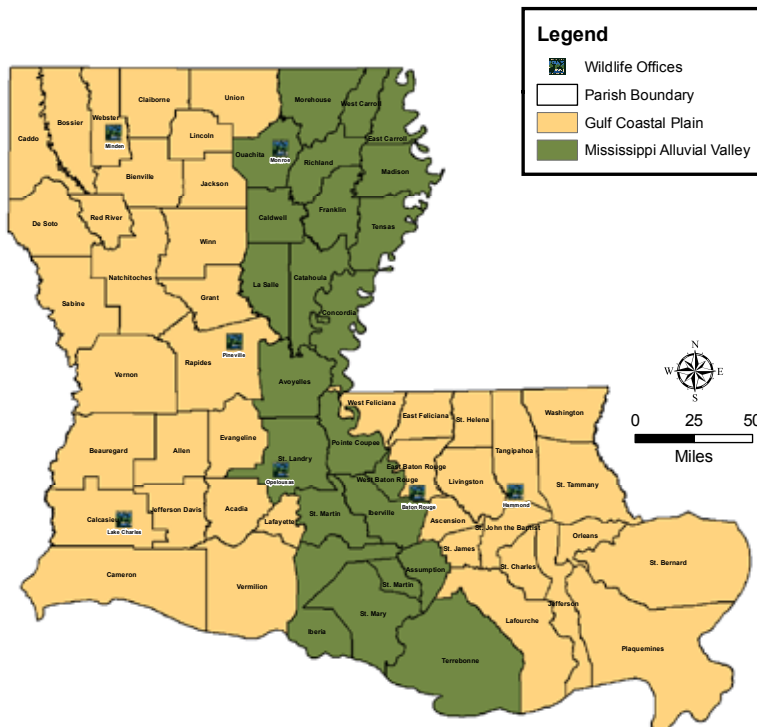
District 4
9418 Hwy. 165
Oberlin, LA 70655
337-639-4978

District 2
754 Hwy. 80 East
Monroe, LA 71203
318-345-7595

District 5
10221 Williams Dr.
Clinton, LA 70722
225-683-5862

District 3
215 Hangar Rd.
Jena, LA 71342
318-992-1400

District 6
47076 N. Morrison Blvd.
Hammond, LA 70401
985-543-4057



L.a. Department of Wildlife & Fisheries Ecoregions Map

Alexandria
1995 Shreveport Hwy.
Pineville, LA 71203
318-487-5885

Lake Charles
1213 N. Lakeshore Dr.
Lake Charles, LA 70601
337-941-2575

Baton Rouge
P.O. Box 98000
2000 Quail Dr.
Baton Rouge, LA 70898
225-765-2800

Minden
9961 Hwy. 80
Minden, LA 71055
318-371-3050

Hammond
42371 Phyllis Ann Dr.
Hammond, LA 70403
985-543-4787

Monroe
368 Centurytel Dr.
Monroe, LA 71203
318-343-4044

Opelousas
5652 Hwy. 182
Opelousas, LA 70570
337-948-0255



Photo by Jeff Boundy

Louisiana pine snake

La. Pine Snakes: What good are they?

Story by Jeff Boundy

I had about 20 more gallons to pump. The guy at the next pump, noticing my Wildlife and Fisheries truck, had a captive audience and asked, “You a game warden?” In my response I indicated that I am a biologist. He quickly asked, “You a deer or duck biologist?” “Nope. I’m a reptile biologist,” I replied. This threw the man off course, and he had to think a bit to come up with another question. “What are you doing up here?” he asked. “Checking snake traps,” I responded. That threw him again. “Killing ‘em?” he asked. I suppose he figured trapping snakes was like trapping coyotes or nutria. “We’re trapping to check for pine snakes. The federal government wants to put them on the Endangered Species List. If that happens, it will hurt the timber industry up here,” was my response. The gas pump didn’t click off until my boot got splattered with 87 octane. “Well, what good are they?” he asked. The tables had turned; his question threw me. I thought a moment. “They’re a really nice looking snake,” was all I could offer. The man stared at me as I climbed into the truck, convinced he was looking at one grade-A nut job.

A look at some old black-and-white photographs of northern and central Louisiana convinces me that our foresters are correct: much of that country was originally covered in stands of giant pine trees. It was a land of sand, fire, grass and longleaf, known as the Trans-Mississippi Sandhills. As all unique habitats, it has a unique array of plants and animals, a few of which are endemic to that area. One of those species is the Baird’s pocket gopher, a pickle-sized rodent that seems almost to be half head. The beady-eyed, myopic beasts spend nearly their entire lives just below the surface, tunneling through the sand and pushing up low mounds around plugged burrow entrances. A unique animal in a unique habitat usually presents a unique dinner for a unique predator. Enter the Louisiana pine snake, literally, its pointed snout and muscular body designed to push through the sand plugs in gopher burrows with surprising speed. The nearly 6-foot long pine snake is closely related to the Texas and black rat snakes of our state, but is much more stout and muscular. Attempting to restrain one can be a physical challenge as the brutes force one’s fists apart with their accordion-style movements.

But it’s just another snake. Indeed, just another snake that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has on its Endangered Species Candidate List. The Louisiana pine snake is rarely seen, even historically. In fact, it was not discovered until 1920; even in the “old days” it was rare. The late Henry Fitch, who surveyed for snakes in 1948 and 1949 on what is now Fort Polk and the Red Dirt Management Area, found only two. By the year 2000, it was estimated that fewer than 180 Louisiana

pine snakes had been found in the wild, and that includes its range in east Texas. Its scarcity got the attention of those who seek what should be protected, and the pine snake made the Endangered Species Candidate List about 15 years ago. At that point, money was made available to determine whether the pine snake should be or not be an official endangered species. A trio of researchers descended upon one of the pine snake’s core populations in Bienville Parish. Craig Rudolph of the Southeastern Forest Research Station established a trapping study by scattering dozens of 4-by-4-foot box traps about the area. Each trap had a funnel into each side, with 75 feet of hardware cloth drift line leading out, intended to intercept and direct wandering snakes towards the funnels. John Himes, a graduate student at LSU Shreveport, conducted a radio telemetry study on a couple dozen of the snakes trapped by Craig. Around the same time Steve Reichling of the Memphis Zoo initiated a captive breeding program.

As research progressed, it was learned that Louisiana Pine snakes spend over **90 percent** of their lives in pocket gopher burrows, within a few inches of the soil surface. They are active from April to November, and eat pocket gophers, supplemented with an occasional cotton rat. Though quite large, females lay only three to six eggs. But, the eggs themselves are large, about the size and shape of a hot dog. We also learned that baby pine snakes, raised for two years in a zoo, quickly died in the wild. Without traps, it is nearly impossible to find a pine snake. In two years of wandering about the densest population of pine snakes, John Himes never, ever encountered one without the aid of his radio receiver. And when I say dense, I mean in a good span we trapped one pine snake for every 560 trap-nights!

Many questions still need answers. We still don’t know how many pine snakes there are, what their survival rate is, and if their populations are increasing, decreasing or stable. Do they utilize the pine plantations which now dominate the landscape? First thoughts on this matter are that pine snakes eat pocket gophers; therefore we need to make sure there are plenty of pocket gophers. Pocket gophers disappear from closed-canopy pine plantations, thus, such plantations may be bad for pine snakes.

So now what? To list, or not to list? Putting the Louisiana pine snake on the Endangered Species List would mean that the land it inhabits would become critical habitat, officially giving the federal government authority over the use of that land. This action would impact Louisiana’s timber industry and many private landowners directly. A proactive approach is required. A cooperative agreement between many timber companies, the USDA Forest Service, the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, a couple of zoos, and several conservation/preservation groups has recently been signed. In principle, the agreement establishes a network of people interested in ensuring the Louisiana pine snake need not be listed as an endangered species – zoos are breeding them, timber companies are doing low-impact harvest in core areas, and the Forest Service and LDWF continue to monitor their populations and learn more about them.

So, what good are they? As I mentioned earlier, they are really nice looking snakes. This example with the Louisiana pine snake should serve as a reminder to all of us, biologists, foresters and landowners, that we do not fully understand the role and contributions of all species and habitats to the complex world we live in. Maybe that is a benefit. Humility.

Jeff Boundy is an LDWF Biologist.



Baird's pocket gopher

Photo by Dr. Guy Cameron

Judge Bob and wife Julie Murphy



Developed boat landing for river access



Boardwalk leading from home to boat landing on the river.

Property Highlight: Murphy Property

Story by Cody Cedotal

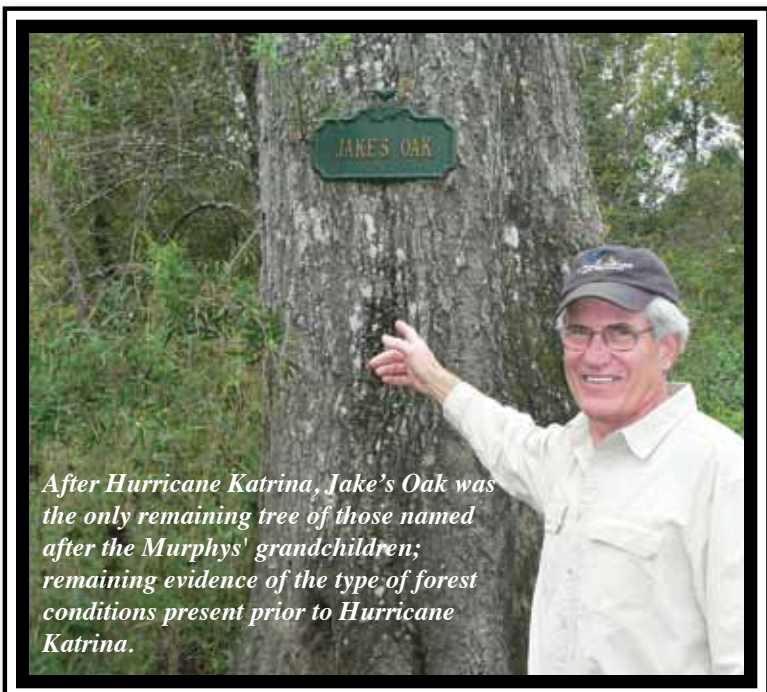
Photos by Mike Buchar

Nestled along the quiet Bogue Chitto River in Washington Parish lies the beautiful home and property of Judge Bob and wife Julie Murphy. The Murphys own two tracts located very near one another totaling 110 acres of riverfront hardwoods and open pastures. Over the years they have been very active in managing their properties for timber and wildlife resources as well as recreation. Horseback riding, deer hunting, woodcock hunting, waterfowl hunting, fishing, tubing and gardening are just some of the activities family and friends enjoy on the property.

Unfortunately in 2005, Hurricane Katrina severely impacted the area destroying many of the mature hardwood stands on the tract. The Murphys took swift action, quickly replanting those damaged areas with numerous oak species and other hardwoods. Their efforts have been successful and a young hardwood stand has become established on the site for future forest and wildlife management benefits. Currently they are actively involved in controlling invasive species such as Chinese tallowtree and Chinese privet that have also become established as a result of the disturbance. Other management activities include expanding the trail system to improve access for horseback riding and woodcock hunting, maintaining wildlife openings and maintaining wood duck nest boxes.

These are just some of the many activities that have been and are being implemented on the property to enhance wildlife habitat and recreational opportunity. Adjacent are some photographs of the Murphy properties taken in October 2009. The properties have since been recognized as Certified Stewardship Forests #286 and #287. Congratulations Judge Bob and Mrs. Julie on a job well done!

Cody Cedotal is the Forest Stewardship Biologist for LDWF.



After Hurricane Katrina, Jake's Oak was the only remaining tree of those named after the Murphys' grandchildren; remaining evidence of the type of forest conditions present prior to Hurricane Katrina.

Louisiana Department of Agriculture & Forestry
Mike Strain DVM, Commissioner

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Louisiana Forest Stewardship Newsletter

Property Highlight: *Murphy Property* (continued)



Early morning view of the Bogue Chitto River, one of Louisiana's scenic rivers.