

LOUISIANA FOREST STEWARDSHIP NEWSLETTER

Summer 2011

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Cavity Nesters

Story by Jeff Duguay, Jimmy Ernst and Cody Cedotal

What do prothonotary warblers, red-headed woodpeckers, tufted titmice, Carolina chickadees, eastern screech owls and eastern bluebirds have in common? These birds, along with many others, are all cavity nesting birds that are native to Louisiana. A cavity nesting bird is one that raises its young inside a nest cavity. These can be natural cavities, such as an opening created by a woodpecker or disease, or man-made, as in a nest box. Regardless of the type of cavity used, cavities are necessary for at least 29 species of birds that breed in Louisiana.

Historically, cavity nesting birds relied on natural cavities, and as cavities decreased in number from large-scale clearing of forests and draining of forested wetlands, so did cavity nesting species. The ivory-billed and red-cockaded woodpeckers are currently on the endangered species list, primarily as a result of habitat destruction. Leaving or creating snags (dead trees) or artificial nest structures may accommodate some species. In Arizona, for example, the number of cavity nesting birds declined by about half after conifer snags were removed during timber harvest (Scott 1979). In young pine plantations in the South, bird populations were increased by creating snags using herbicides (Dickson et al. 1993). Inserting artificial cavities into living pines has worked successfully for the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker (Conner et al. 2001).

The majority of cavity-nesting birds are insectivorous. Because they make up a large proportion of the forest-dwelling bird population,



Carolina chickadee feeding chicks in cavity.

Photo by Patrick Coin, bugguide.net



Photo by Patrick Coin, bugguide.net

Artificial nest box for a red-cockaded woodpecker being installed in a living pine tree.

Photo by Eric Baka, LDWF



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Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

Prothonotary warbler



Eastern screech owl

Photo by Wendy VanDyk Ewan, forestryimages.org

they play an important role in the control of forest insect pests (Thomas et al. 1975). Woodpeckers are especially important predators of many species of tree-killing bark beetles (Massey and Wygant 1973).

Foresters and recreation managers are now more aware of the aesthetic and economic values of nongame wildlife, including cavity-nesting birds. In summer of 1977, for example, the U.S. Forest Service established a national snag policy requiring all regions and forests to develop guidelines to "provide habitat needed to maintain viable, self-sustaining populations of cavity-nesting and snag-dependent wildlife species." These guidelines also include "retention of selected trees, snags and other flora, to meet future habitat requirements" (USDA Forest Service 1977). Recommendations for cavity retention in bottomland hardwood forests can also be found in *Restoration, Management and Monitoring of Forest Resources in the Mississippi Alluvial Valley: Recommendations for Enhancing Wildlife Habitat* developed by the Lower Mississippi Valley Joint Venture Forest Resource Conservation Working Group in 2007.

In addition to being critical for nesting, cavities also provide many species of birds a safe harbor during inclement weather. During cold weather or storms, many species of birds seek shelter in cavities, which reduces their rate of heat loss and provides protection from the elements.

The prothonotary warbler is a small, active, insect eating bird that inhabits southeastern wooded swamps. Males have a golden-orange head, black bill and olive back, while females have a yellow head. The tail and wings of both males and females are blue-gray. They are one of only two warbler species that nest in cavities, the other being Lucy's warbler which occurs in the southwestern United States. Prothonotary warblers nest in natural cavities found in wooded swamps. They will also utilize artificial nest boxes placed in these same areas.

Prothonotary warblers have experienced long-term (1966-2007) population declines in Louisiana (Sauer et al. 2008). Along with the prothonotary warbler, red-headed woodpeckers and Carolina chickadees are also experiencing long-term population declines in the state. Red-bellied woodpeckers and eastern bluebirds, on the other hand, have experienced long-term population increases (Sauer et al. 2008).

Something that almost anyone can do to help cavity nesting birds is to provide nest boxes in appropriate habitat. The key things to remember are:

1. use the right size and design for the appropriate species,
2. place the nest box in the correct habitat type and
3. use a predator guard to keep predators out.

Without predator guards, nest success will be very low. A predator guard is a metal skirt that prevents predators from reaching the nest box. It is placed 6 inches to 1 foot below the nesting box. Page 4 provides designs for artificial nest boxes, along with plans for a predator guard that can be used with all nest boxes. These nest boxes can be used by the species mentioned in this article, including several others.

The following sections detail some general instructions for constructing, installing and maintaining artificial nest boxes. Specific species may require some minor alterations to the following recommendations.

CONSTRUCTION

It is best to use untreated, decay-resistant wood such as cypress, cedar or redwood. Some pressure treated wood contains chemicals that can be toxic to birds. A well built box should last 10 years or more if properly maintained. Boxes made of pine or other woods usually last no more than two or three years. Never paint or spray the inside of a box with a wood sealer. Painting or treating the outside is acceptable as long as it is allowed to dry completely before installing. For maximum durability, use galvanized, ring-shanked nails or galvanized or brass wood screws to assemble nest boxes. This type of hardware will last much longer than common steel nails which rust more quickly. Sealing each joint of the box with carpenters glue will prevent the boards from loosening up as the wood expands and contracts.

Many species of birds will nest multiple times throughout the breeding season, and most do not use old nests. Therefore, it is necessary to clean each box out after young birds fledge. To provide access for this task, it is best to hinge the roof or one side of the box with cabinet-style hinges and some type of basic locking mechanism such as a hook-and-eye latch. This will allow easy access for cleaning and inspecting. Some birds such as wood ducks, kestrels and owls do not build nests, so wood chips or shavings have to be added to the box. Ventilation and drainage of the nest box are also quite important. Proper ventilation can be achieved by drilling $\frac{1}{4}$ inch vent holes in each side of the box about 1 inch below the top, or by leaving a small gap between the sides of the box and the roof. To allow moisture to escape the box, drill three or four $\frac{1}{4}$ inch holes in the floor of the box, or simply cut the corners off of the floor prior to assembly. For assembly, the floor of the box should be enclosed within the sides of the box and the sides should be attached to the front of the back board, not to the edges of it.

Nest boxes built for a particular species must have the proper size entrance hole: too small and the desired birds will not have access; too

large, and other, often undesirable birds may take over the box. Hole diameters for each species are given in the plans for each box. It is important to never put a perch on a nest box. Perches are not necessary and only serve as a "handle" for predators to use to gain access to the eggs, nestlings and/or adult birds. They also provide a place for starlings or house sparrows to perch and harass desired birds until the birds abandon the box.

INSTALLATION AND MAINTENANCE

It is ideal to mount nest boxes on posts or metal poles and install predator guards whenever possible. Always mount the boxes solidly to the mounting surface with lag screws or other similar fasteners. Only wrens will use a box that is suspended from a branch or overhang that allows it to swing. Avoid placing nest boxes in thick vegetation, or under branches that would allow predators such as snakes, raccoons, or squirrels access to the box. Clear vegetation from under and around the box. If mounting on a tree, remember to allow for tree growth when fastening and place a 2-3 feet high sheet metal wrap around the tree trunk, below the box. This will provide some protection from predators, though it is not as effective as mounting the box on a pole with a cone-type metal guard. Nest box predators include snakes, raccoons, foxes, squirrels, other birds and domestic or feral cats. Cats are a serious threat to songbirds and kill many each year. Do not allow free-roaming cats in the area where nest boxes are established.

Since most birds are territorial while nesting, nest boxes should be placed well apart from one another to prevent conflicts. A good rule of thumb is no more than four small boxes, or one large box per acre. Do not place nest boxes near feeders. Bluebird nest boxes should be at least 100 yards apart. Wood duck boxes should be placed out of sight from one another to prevent "dump nesting." This happens when more than one hen lays eggs in the same box.

Once a nest box is installed, periodic maintenance and cleaning will ensure that the box is in optimum condition for nesting birds. Boxes need to be checked in late winter just before nesting season, and any necessary repairs should be made at that time. They should also be checked periodically during the spring and early summer. In spring, wasps may inhabit nest boxes. By removing the new, small wasp nests as they appear you can avoid a more serious problem later in the summer. You can also monitor any activity during the nesting season. Seldom and quietly opening the box to check for a nest or look in on a brood of nestlings will not cause the parents to abandon the nest. Once or twice a week is acceptable. If a hatchling were to fall out of a nest, it is OK to pick it up and place it back in the nest. The idea that a mother bird will abandon a baby if it is touched by humans is a myth. In fact, most birds have such a poor sense of smell, that they would not even know the young bird had been handled.

Most birds complete nesting by mid summer. At the end of nesting season, clean out the boxes and inspect them again for any damage. Some nest boxes can provide a home or shelter for birds or other animals during the fall and winter. If you find insects in a nest box, do not use a household insect spray, as it can be toxic to the birds. Instead, put a pinch of sevin dust in the box or use 1 percent rotenone powder or pyrethrin spray. This maintenance and upkeep does not take very much time and can be rewarding when watching a brood of young birds fledge from a box you have provided.

For additional information on constructing, installing and maintaining nest boxes, a copy of *Building and Maintaining Nest Boxes for Birds and Small Mammals* can be provided at your request. Contact Cody Cedotal, FSP Biologist at (225) 765-2354 or via email at ccedotal@wlf.la.gov

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Nest box for eastern blue bird used successfully for 12 years and counting.

Photo by Cody Cedotal, LDWF

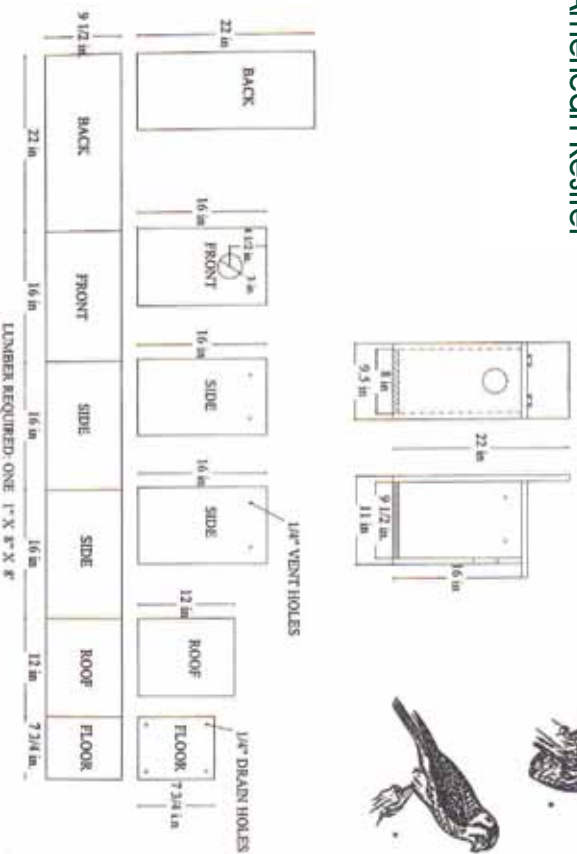


Eastern blue bird

Photo by Allison Crosby, Flickr

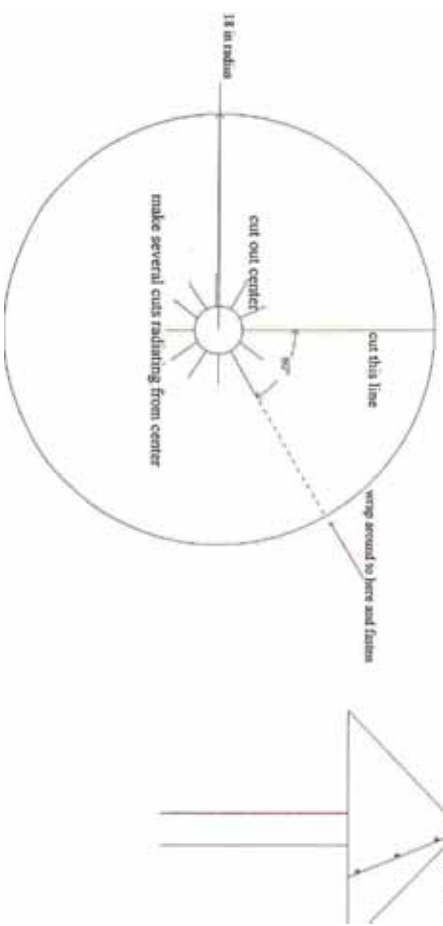
Nest Box Plans

Eastern Screech Owl
American Kestrel

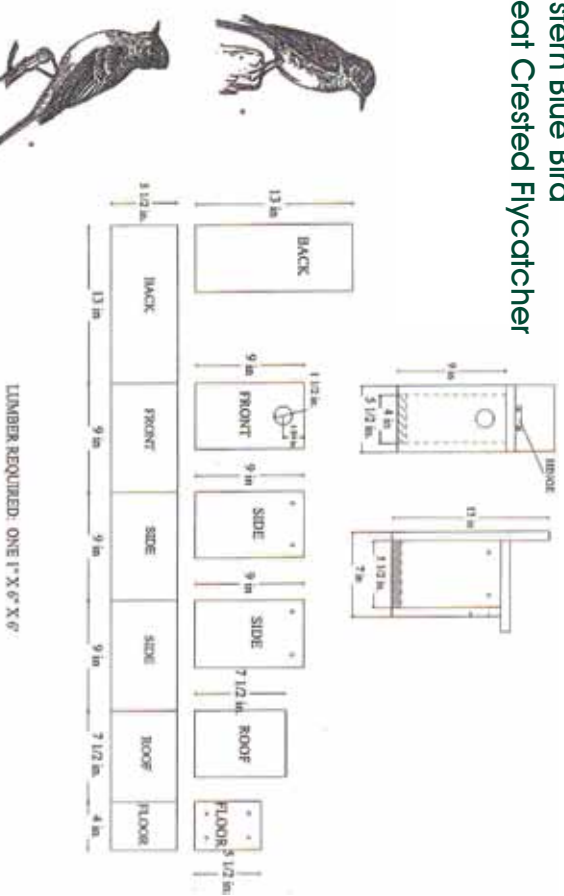


Predator Guard

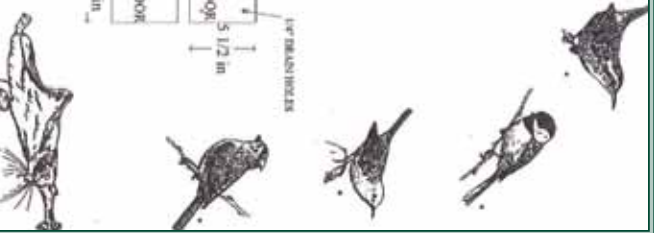
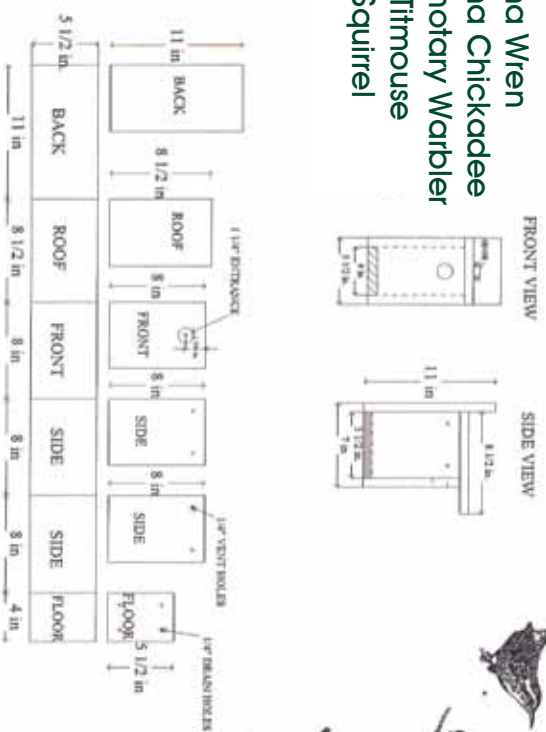
Use 26 gauge galvanized sheet metal
Cut to a 36 inch circle (18 in. radius)
Cut out a 2-3 inch circle from center
Make several 2-3 inch cuts around center cutout
Cut where indicated and wrap around to form a cone
Rivet or bolt together
Slide over post and use hose clamp to secure
Install guard before attaching box!



Eastern Blue Bird
Great Crested Flycatcher



Carolina Wren
Carolina Chickadee
Prothonotary Warbler
Tufted Titmouse
Flying Squirrel



Prescribed Burning Initiatives: Making Progress

Story by Cody Cedotal

In past issues of the *Forest Stewardship Newsletter*, there have been numerous articles in detailing the importance of prescribed burning to native habitats and a multitude of wildlife species. Many readers may also remember mention of the West Gulf Coastal Plain (WGCP) and East Gulf Coastal Plain (EGCP) Prescribed Burn Initiatives in the Spring 09 and Fall 10 issues, respectively. These initiatives were developed to address a decline in prescribed burning activities throughout Louisiana in the past several decades. To improve habitat for wildlife and encourage additional burning throughout the state, the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) has gained approval and funding for two separate State Wildlife Grants. This funding is supplemented with funding from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to fully fund (100%) a prescribed burn on those tracts that qualify for the program. Louisiana's Wildlife Action Plan is used as a guide to identify critical habitats, species of concern and priority areas for ranking criteria. Tracts are ranked according to designated priority areas, desired habitat types, habitat conditions, tract size, location relative to other tracts that are burned regularly, threatened and endangered species, and frequency of past prescribed burning. Those tracts ranking the highest are given priority and funded for burning. Funding includes application processing, development of a management plan for the tract, development of a burn plan, fire line installation, conducting the prescribed burn, and post-burn monitoring.

The WGCP Prescribed Burn Initiative was initiated in 2008. Funding is derived from a State Wildlife Grant of \$50,000 and a USFWS grant of an additional \$60,000. The project incorporates all or portions of 26 parishes in western Louisiana with a more specific priority area of all or parts of 10 parishes. A cooperative agreement was developed between LDWF and the Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry for developing burn plans, fire line installation, and conducting prescribed burns on approved tracts. To date, applications have been received and processed for 47 tracts totaling 7,992 acres. After ranking, 23 tracts (5,577 acres) have been approved for prescribed burn funding. In the 2009/2010 burn season, six tracts were completed totaling 1,005 acres. In the 2010/2011 burn season, one tract was completed totaling 670 acres.

In September 2010, a State Wildlife Grant for \$50,000 was approved for the EGCP Prescribed Burn Initiative. The priority area for this grant was set to include seven parishes in southeast Louisiana. The protocol was changed somewhat to accomplish prescribed burning objectives. Private contractors/consultants were utilized for developing burn plans, fire line installation, and conducting prescribed burns on approved tracts. Applications have been received and processed for 20 tracts totaling 3,185 acres. After ranking, 16 tracts were approved for burning totaling 2,498 acres. In January 2011, the entire grant amount was dedicated with four separate contracts totaling 2,498 acres of prescribed burning for the region. At the end of the 2010/2011 burn season, all 16 tracts have been completed for a total of 2,462 acres.

These prescribed burn initiatives have the potential to be a valuable tool for improving habitat for species of concern and increasing the use of prescribed burning across the Louisiana for many years. However, to ensure the long-term success of the program, follow-up burns are necessary. Prescribed Burning Initiative landowners are encouraged to utilize other cost-share programs such as the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) to conduct follow-up burns so that these tracts continue to be burned regularly and habitat remains optimal. In addition to this, landowners not selected for the initiative are also encouraged conduct burns utilizing these same cost-share programs.

LDWF is continually working to improve delivery, efficiency and effectiveness of these prescribed burn initiatives. We are working to complete prescribed burning on all approved tracts in the WGCP Prescribed Burn Initiative in the 2011/2012 burn season so that additional funding can be obtained. Efforts are underway to gain additional funding for continued burning under the EGCP Prescribed Burn Initiative, and we will hopefully be accepting new applications for this area soon. If you or someone you know has a tract in southeast Louisiana that may qualify for the program, please contact the LDWF Hammond Office: 985-543-4777.

Photo by Cody Cedotal, LDWF



Before: Conditions on a tract in St. Tammany Parish prior to burning. Heavy midstory of gallberry and other woody shrubs limiting growth of understory plant species.

Photo by Jimmy Ernst, LDWF



After: Same tract approximately one month after burning. Moderate control of midstory has been achieved allowing for grasses and forbs to become established in the understory. Habitat is improved for grassland bird species such as northern bobwhites and Bachman's sparrows, as well as other wildlife species. Continued prescribed burning on a two to three year cycle is necessary to maintain these conditions. Note: The broadleaf plant in the center of the photo is pitcher plant, a rare, fire-dependant plant species in Louisiana.

Wildlife Diseases & You

Story by James M. LaCour D.V.M.

Ataboy! Your vigilance under the giant hickory tree on opening day has paid off again. Just after daylight Mr. Bushytail appears like clock-work and upon the crack of the .22 he is on the ground. Once you retrieve your trophy, however, you notice a pecan-sized lump under the skin near the shoulder blades. What is it? Is the squirrel safe to eat? Does he have a contagious disease? Maybe the guys at the camp will know.

This scenario plays itself out over and over again each year during the hunting season. Wild animals suffer from a myriad of diseases, some of which may affect humans. It is important to recognize conditions which may render your game unsafe to eat as well as those which merely cause "blemishes."

SQUIRRELS & RABBITS

In the aforementioned scenario, the squirrel suffers from what is known as a "wolf." This is a *Cuterebra* species fly larvae which commonly affects squirrels and rabbits. Many old-timers wouldn't shoot a squirrel or rabbit before the first frost because of these "wolves." The fly commonly lays its eggs in holes or burrows where the animals come in contact them. The fly larvae enter the animal and migrate through the tissues until they come to rest under the skin where they will mature and eventually fall out to continue their life-cycle. The latter part of this life cycle coincides with the fall of the year and as such the early part of hunting season. The parasite is confined only to the skin at this



A squirrel exhibiting pre-emergent Cuterebra larvae ("wolves").



Cuterebra larvae dissected out of lesions. These larvae are confined to the skin and do not affect the meat of the squirrel.

time of year and will be removed upon skinning the animal. These animals are safe to eat. Squirrels harvested in the spring of the year do not often have wolves as the fly larvae are just beginning their cycle.

Squirrels and rabbits may also have fleas. These external parasites may be noticed in certain areas of high squirrel or rabbit density, or may be found in suburban-type areas with high cat and dog populations. The fleas themselves may harbor diseases such as plague or typhus which are contagious to humans through flea bites. Fleas will rapidly leave a dead animal, therefore if you kill a squirrel or rabbit with fleas simply hang it in a tree for a little while or immerse it in water to remove the fleas. If you stuff the animal into your game bag before ridding it of fleas you will rapidly acquire a bunch of hitchhikers.

Rabbits have been known to be infected with a bacterial condition known as Tularemia. This condition will make rabbits sick and is contagious to people via wound contamination when dressing rabbits. These rabbits may exhibit signs of depression and lymph node and liver enlargement. This is where the old saying of "if it won't run don't eat it" originates.

DEER

Deer hunters must also be aware of several conditions. The first one that we will address is one which has not been recognized in Louisiana yet, Chronic Wasting Disease. This disease is classified as a spongiform encephalopathy (similar to "mad-cow" disease). The disease is considered to be caused by an infectious particle called a prion. These particles are smaller than viruses. Infection of animals by these prions causes sponge-like holes in the brain which result in neurologic disease in the animals. These animals are characterized by weight loss and may exhibit signs of drooling, mental dullness, circling, staggering or being down and unable to rise. Although transmission of the disease to people has not been documented, contact with nervous tissue (brain and spinal cord) from affected animals should be avoided. People are susceptible to a condition known as Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease which causes neurological lesions similar to those seen in deer and other animals. Scientists are still studying the relationship between these diseases. It should be noted, once again, that although this disease is present in some states, it has not been documented in Louisiana. The Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries is constantly conducting surveillance for this disease across the state, and should be contacted if deer exhibiting the signs mentioned above are noticed.

Deer may also be infected with Epizootic Hemorrhagic Disease (EHD). EHD is a virus which causes ulceration of the mouth, bleeding and weight loss. Some animals may recover from infection and may exhibit horizontal cracks or rings on their hooves. EHD is not consid-



This buck exhibits signs of chronic Epizootic Hemorrhagic Disease (EHD) infection. His rumen has been scarred by the disease and cannot absorb water and nutrients properly. He is basically "starving to death on a full stomach." This deer will not survive the winter.



Photos by James LaCour D.V.M., LDWF

Cutaneous fibromas of deer are wart-like growths that typically affect young deer. This young buck exhibits mild fibromas on its front legs. The fibromas eventually fall off and are rarely of major significance to the health of the animal. The carcasses of affected deer are safe for human consumption.

ered to be contagious to people, and deer which have recovered from infection are safe for human consumption.

Deer will sometime exhibit raised, dry, scaly lesions which may range from tiny "finger-like" projections to cauliflower-sized lesions. These are cutaneous fibromas, or "warts," and are caused by a Papilloma virus. Cutaneous fibromas are generally a transient condition and typically spontaneously regress after several months. The warts are not contagious to people and the deer are safe to eat.

Many deer will have lice and ticks on them. The lice are species-specific which means that they may get on you but will not live on you. They will only "set up shop" on a deer. Ticks, on the other hand, may attach themselves to the hunter and can cause several tick-borne diseases such as Lyme disease. Lyme disease in people may be exhibited by fever, joint pain, fatigue and a rash near the site of the tick bite. In addition, the deer can have keds, or wingless flies, on them. These keds are approximately the same size as the ticks, but move much more rapidly. They pose no hazard to humans.

FERAL HOGS

Hunting feral hogs has grown in popularity as the number of hogs has increased. Hogs carry several diseases of which we need to be aware. The first disease is Brucellosis. This disease is caused the bacteria, *Brucella suis*. This is a venereal disease of pigs, but contact with blood or reproductive tissues from recently infected hogs may result in a condition of people known as Undulant Fever. This disease results in a high, recurring fever in people and may also be associated with fatigue and joint pain. Meat from infected hogs is safe to eat after thorough cooking.

Hogs are also carriers of a condition known as Trichinosis. This disease is caused by an organism called *Trichinella spiralis* and causes microscopic cysts in the muscle tissues. This organism is contagious to people through ingestion of under-cooked pork and results in muscle aches in people. Proper cooking kills this organism and renders the meat safe to eat.

RABIES

All mammals may contract rabies. Rabies is spread from animal to animal (or animals-people) through contamination of bite wounds with infected saliva. Skunks, raccoons and opossums are considered the major carriers of rabies, but bats and other wildlife can harbor the disease as well. If bitten by an animal, you should report this immediately to your physician. If possible, the animal should be euthanized without damaging the brain. Submitting the animal on ice for testing may prevent you from having to take the post-exposure rabies treatments.



"Rice breast" is caused by Sarcocystis protozoal organisms encysting in the muscle tissues of waterfowl.

DUCKS & GEESE

Ducks and geese harvested may exhibit a condition known as Sarcosporidiosis or "rice breast." These animals exhibit lesions in the breast meat which may resemble one to hundreds of yellowish rice-grain sized lesions. These lesions are caused by encysted protozoal organisms. Both freezing and cooking kill the organisms, rendering the meat safe for human consumption, although breasts with numerous lesions may not be very appetizing.

TURKEYS

Turkeys will often show signs of avian pox virus infection. These lesions appear as "warts." Mild cases may result in unthriftiness of the bird. Severe cases with numerous lesions around the eyes, mouth and nares may be fatal to the bird. This virus is transmitted by mosquitoes and other flying insects, as well as direct contact. It is not contagious to people.



Photo by James LaCour D.V.M., LDWF

This turkey exhibits severe Avian Pox infection. This infection was fatal to the turkey due to starvation from blindness and severe external and internal infection of the upper GI tract.

Overall, the vast majority of wildlife in most situations is healthy and safe to eat. These animals make nutritious and delicious table fare. By taking a few simple precautions, the hunter can ensure good table fare while at the same time minimizing the risk of disease.

1. Field dress animals by removing the viscera as soon as possible.
2. Get the carcass on ice as soon as possible. This reduces bacterial growth.
3. Trim areas of the meat which may be contaminated with ingesta from the animal's stomach or intestines.
4. Wear gloves or at least wash hands thoroughly after cleaning game.
5. Immediately clean any wounds obtained when cleaning game and apply topical antibacterial preparations under a bandage.
6. If you become ill within several weeks of handling game, report this to your physician.
7. Use common sense. If an animal looks diseased, avoid handling it and do not consume the flesh. Never eat an animal that has lymph node enlargement or abscesses. If possible report diseased animal sightings to your regional wildlife biologist.

Happy hunting and enjoy!

James M LaCour D.V.M. is the State Wildlife Veterinarian for LDWF.

Louisiana Department of Agriculture & Forestry

Mike Strain DVM, Commissioner

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Louisiana Forest Stewardship Newsletter

Habitat Corner: *Turkey Brood Habitat* Story by Cody Cedotal

Photos A and B illustrate distinct differences in habitat quality for wild turkey broods. Shortly after hatching, young poults require a significant amount of protein in their diet for growth and development. The sooner young poults can reach flight, the better. The ability to fly provides them increased safety from predators. The two most common sources of protein for turkeys are insects and seeds. Many areas that appear overgrown or unsightly to humans provide excellent foraging habitat for turkeys young and old. Native plant diversity is high, and vertical structure in these areas is improved, attracting numerous insect species and providing increased seed production. Roadsides, rights-of-way, small fields, thinned timber stands and other openings often provide this type of habitat because of the increased amount of sunlight reaching the ground. Hens routinely nest near and bring their broods to these areas because of the amount of insects and seeds found there. This type of habitat also provides escape cover from the many predators out for a quick and easy meal.

So, which photo illustrates better quality brood habitat for turkey? If you guessed B, you are correct. As landowners and managers, a few simple modifications to normal activities can create improved habitat conditions for turkeys and reduce maintenance costs on a property at the same time. In areas dominated by bahia and other sod-forming grasses, fallow discing and possibly herbicide treatment will be necessary to disrupt the dense sod layer and stimulate growth of native grasses and wildflowers from the seed bank. Probably the most important and easiest modification that can be made is to delay bushhogging or mowing in these areas as long as possible. Many of us already practice this activity during spring to minimize nest destruction. However, sometimes little thought is given to the quality of habitat young poults will find once they hatch. On most sites, cutting only one time in the fall is all that is required to maintain these open areas and provide quality habitat. Keep in mind, when it comes to turkeys and many other species; overgrown and unsightly to us is quality habitat to them.



Photos by Cody Cedotal, LDWF