Louisiana
Wildlife News
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LSU AgCenter Research & Extension

Feral Hogs Continue To Be Major Problem In Louisiana

Landowners around the state are experiencing increasing problems with feral hogs on lands that they own, manage or lease. To collect data on the scope of the problem in Louisiana, the following Feral Hog Population Assessment survey was developed in a joint effort between the LSU AgCenter and the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries. Anyone who has been impacted by the activities of feral hogs is asked to please complete the survey by no later than March 1, 2008. There are two methods by which this survey may be taken:

1. Respondents may download, print and mail the completed document to Dr. Michael Kaller, School of Renewable Natural Resources, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, La. 70803. Click here to download the pdf.
2. The survey may be completed using an on-line survey program. This program can be accessed at the following address http://www.zoomerang.com/survey.zgi?p=WEB227D3TF6Y75

The results obtained from the survey will be used to document the damage caused by feral hogs and also guide research needs to address the problem. An upcoming issue of Louisiana Wildlife News will summarize these results.

Wildlife Species Profile: Fox Squirrel *(Sciurus niger)*

The fox squirrel, or red squirrel as it is often called in Louisiana, is found throughout our state except along coastal marshes and some isolated chenieres. The three distinct subspecies that occur in Louisiana are easily distinguishable by their color differences. *Sciurus niger ludovicianus* occupies the western one-third of Louisiana. It is the largest of the subspecies with a red coloration that is lighter than the other subspecies. *Sciurus niger subauratus* occupies the bottomland forests of the Tensas, Mississippi and Atchafalaya floodplains in the eastern and central-southern parts of Louisiana. It is the smallest of the subspecies with a darker red coloration.

In certain localities, a melanistic phase will equal or outnumber the normal color phase. These black individuals are many times mistakenly thought to be a different species by hunters who bag them. *Sciurus niger bachmani* is the eastern most subspecies of the fox squirrel characterized by a large size and the presence of a patch of white on the nose, along with varying amounts of white on the ears, toes, and tip of the tail.

Although fox squirrels are common to abundant throughout nearly all the wooded portions of the state, they have a habitat preference markedly different from that of our gray or cat squirrel. Fox squirrels prefer more open woods with a midstory that is either absent or much less dense. Gray squirrels, however, tend to occupy woods that have a midstory dense enough to prevent seeing the ground from the overstory.

The breeding biology of fox squirrels in Louisiana centers around two major periods. Early breeding begins in late December and early January. A second spring period begins in May and June. Young produced from the early rut are represented as subadults in the fall hunting season that follows, whereas young born from the spring rut are represented as juveniles at that time. Females 2 years of age are capable of producing two litters a year with an average litter size of three. After a 45-day gestation period, young are born naked with eyes and ears tightly closed.

A noticeably different activity pattern is present between gray and fox squirrels. Whereas gray squirrels are most active in the early morning hours, fox squirrels tend to move more around midmorning with other peaks around midday and late in the afternoon.

Practically every kind of vegetative food that grows beneath the soil or in the treetops is consumed by fox squirrels. Hard mast production from oaks, hickories and American beech make up most of their diet in the fall and winter months. Reproductive success and productivity is often linked to mast production from the preceding year. Where gray and fox squirrels occur together, the smaller gray squirrel will often out-compete and usurp any available habitat.

Critter Corner:
Nutria *(Myocastor coypus)*

Nutria are large, dark-colored semi-aquatic rodents native to South America. Their webbed hind feet along with valves on their nostrils and mouth that seal out water while swimming, make them highly adaptable to life in the water. In addition, the mammae or teats of the female are located high on the sides, which allow young to suckle while in the water. The original range of the nutria was south of the equator in temperate South America.

The animals were introduced into Louisiana and other parts of North America between 1900 and 1940 for fur farming opportunities. When these operations failed, individuals were released into the wild. Introductions into Louisiana were aided by hurricanes in the late 1940s, which dispersed the animals over large areas of the coast. These accidental and intentional releases led to the establishment of widespread and localized populations throughout the eastern and southern United States. Cold climatic conditions are the main factor limiting the range expansion of nutria northward. Populations are most dense along the Gulf coast of Louisiana and Texas.

Nutria in the wild generally have a life span of less than 3 years, whereas captive animals have been known to survive for as long as 20 years. In summer, nutria will usually live on the ground in dense vegetation, but during winter they often use burrows located in vegetated banks of natural and man-made waterways.

One reason for the prolific rate at which nutria can overtake an area is that they breed throughout the year in Louisiana and other areas of the Southeast. Nutria reach sexual maturity at age 4 months, and females cycle into estrus every 2 to 4 weeks. Gestation ranges from 130 to 132 days, and, following birth, females usually breed again within 48 hours. Litter sizes range from one to nine individuals and young are precocial (being totally furred and active at birth).

The feeding habits of nutria have them vastly overrated as agents in controlling nuisance aquatic plants. Nutria often will eat vegetation that is beneficial to soil stability in many coastal areas, while passing up nuisance plants such as water hyacinths and alligator weed. The invasion of nutria into areas north of our Louisiana coast has led to agricultural losses in sugarcane and rice fields. Nutria will normally eat about 2.5 to 3.5 pounds of food per day, but in sugarcane fields they often gnaw and cut many more stalks than they consume.

Control measures. Nutria are considered outlaw quadrupeds in Louisiana and can be legally taken year-round without a permit during daylight hours only. Shooting with small caliber firearms and trapping with either leg-hold or Conibear kill traps are the recommended ways to reduce nutria populations in an area. Another approach at addressing the problem began in 2002 when the Coastwide Nutria Control Program (CNCP) was initiated. The program was designed to stimulate nutria removals in selected coastal areas where damage was greatest. The initial protocol called for a $4 incentive payment to be paid to registered trappers/hunters for each nutria tail delivered to established collection centers. This approach was taken when historical records indicated that in 1976 Louisiana trappers removed a record 1.8 million nutria worth $15.7 million. This number fell to 20,110 nutria removed during the 1999-2000 trapping season. The value of individual nutria pelts fell to less than $2 per pelt.

Changing fur markets worldwide, especially in Russia led to the drastic drop in demand for nutria pelts. The CNCP initiative has been quite successful with 375, 683 nutria removed under the program in 2007. Incentive payments for removals have increased to $5 per tail.

Plant Species Profile:
Crimson clover *(Trifolium incarnatum)*

Crimson clover is a cool-season annual plant native to the Mediterranean region but widely planted throughout Louisiana and the Southeast as a food plot component for attracting deer and turkeys. The plants have dark green oval leaflets covered with dense hairs on the leaves and stems. Where grazing pressure is absent, plants will reach heights of 1-3 feet. When spring flowering occurs, brilliant crimson flowers appear on long heads that mature from bottom to top. Crimson clover is best utilized in food plots by mixing with one or more cereal grains such as wheat, oats or cereal rye. Plants are also used for cattle pasture and roadside beautification projects. When planted as pure stands in these situations, 20-30 pounds of seed per acre should be used. Seeding rates can be reduced to around 10 pounds per acre when planted in combination with cereal grasses. Deer will feed on crimson clover when first appearing as young plants, but its greatest benefit is many times reached in the spring when turkeys relish both the succulent green growth and flowering heads.

Planting dates for crimson clover in Louisiana are from Sept. 1– Nov. 1. As with all legumes, an innoculant that is specific for crimson clover should be applied to the seed prior to planting. Crimson clover is fairly tolerant of soil acidity, but, as with all legumes, low soil pH will greatly reduce yield and nutritional value of plantings. As with all food plots, soil samples should be taken and results analyzed for fertilizer and lime requirements.

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