

Agreement Made to Supply Equipment and Technical Advice

A memorandum of understanding was recently signed between the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF), the State Association of Resource Conservation and Development Councils (RC&D) and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

The agreement was made to help in restoring Louisiana's grassland wildlife habitat. LDWF will provide specialized grassland drills needed to plant the delicate grass, legume and wildflower seeds, and local RC&D councils will assist by making the actual rental agreements with landowners to obtain the equipment. NRCS personnel will provide the on-farm technical assistance related to establishment techniques, drill operation and planning seed mixtures. The lack of specialized equipment needed to plant these small seeds is one of the biggest impediments to the restoration of grassland systems in Louisiana. The loss of these habitats has caused a precipitous decline in many grassland dependent wildlife species including the Northern Bobwhite.

Specific program details can be obtained by contacting:

- Fred Kimmel, LDWF
(225) 765-2355 or
- Scott Edwards,
RC&D Acadiana Coordinator
(337) 896-0362, ext. 3

White-tailed Deer Field Days Set for March

Two field days are scheduled in South Louisiana to look at a variety of white-tailed deer management issues. Programs are set for March 22 in Assumption Parish and March 28 in Lafayette Parish. Personnel with the LSU AgCenter and the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries will present programs on food plot preparation and maintenance; native browse plants utilized by white-tailed deer; using a necropsy for determining herd health issues and breeding dates; and how to manage for a quality deer herd. For specific program information contact Stuart Gauthier in Lafayette Parish (337-291-7090), Rick Louque in Assumption Parish (985-369-6386) or Don Reed at the Idlewild Research Station in East Feliciana Parish (225-683-5848).

Time to Remove Corn Feeders

The opening of the 2007 spring turkey season is scheduled for March 17 with a special youth weekend. The statewide regular season opens the following Saturday on March 24. On many areas across the state, corn feeders were in use as a legal means for attracting deer during the 2006-07 season. Although the current season closed around the end of January, many land managers leave their feeders up and running to provide food during the late winter months. While providing nutrition at a critical time of the year, anyone planning on hunting turkeys on these same areas should have all feeding devices removed by March 1, along with any traces of feed on the ground. Baiting turkeys on an area is strictly illegal. "Even though no bait can be found on the ground at the time a hunt is made, an area is considered baited for 15 days after the complete removal of the bait. An exception to the baiting law is found where hunting over standing crops or food plots that have been manipulated for wildlife management purposes is legal, provided that grain has not been removed and then returned to the field. As an example, it would be legal to hunt turkeys over a corn field that has been mowed down, scattering corn over the area. It is also legal to hunt further than 200 yards from any baited area or deer feeder."

CP33: Habitat Buffers for Upland Birds

Conservation Practice 33 is a program under the Conservation Reserve Program within the United States Department of Agriculture Farm Service Agency. The practice is intended to create and maintain habitat for the Northern Bobwhite and other species with similar habitat needs. The program provides food and cover for targeted species adjacent to field edges of eligible cropland. Plantings that are specified in the participants USDA conservation plan include a mixture of native grasses, forbs, legumes, wild flowers and shrubs. Buffers have long been regarded for their benefits in reducing soil erosion and protecting water quality. Research has shown that the use of grass and herbaceous buffers in widths of 30 to 120 feet around croplands have a tremendous impact on habitat quality for a variety of wildlife species. Louisiana has been allocated 7,000 acres for enrollment into the program until December 2007. At the present time, enrollment in the state stands at approximately 400 acres. Certain eligibility requirements must be met regarding cropland location, adaptability to the establishment of bobwhite habitat and cropping history. In addition to the wildlife benefits that are gained, establishment reimbursement costs and annual rental payments for the length of the contract make this a win-win program for both wildlife and landowners. Specific details regarding CP33 can be obtained by contacting your local Farm Service Agency.

Critter Corner

Mediterranean Gecko (*Hemidactylus turcicus*)

While made famous in the television world by the lizard-like character in the Geico auto insurance advertisements, the real-life Mediterranean gecko is far from a fan favorite among homeowners in our state. I receive more complaints and pleas for help in dealing with this transplanted critter around Louisiana than any other amphibian or reptile species. Mediterranean geckos are not found naturally in any part of the United States. As the common name implies, these creatures are native to the Mediterranean regions of Europe. The first geckos to enter Louisiana probably came by cargo ships unloading at the Port of New Orleans. Their entry is speculated to have occurred around 1945. Geckos have the ability to hide in cracks and crevices of structures, allowing their survival during the occasional subfreezing weather that hits the area. Although it is seldom that an introduced species does not displace any native species

with similar habitat requirements, the Mediterranean gecko is an exception. Geckos are unique in that they are nocturnal insect feeders that live on the sides of buildings. They are small lizards, usually being no greater than 5 inches in length. The most characteristic identification features are the scattered dark spots on a light-colored, warty dorsum. The nearly transparent body, along with large lidless eyes and pads at the end of each toe, give the animal an almost pre-historic looking appearance. Since entering Louisiana, they have spread throughout the state, although their numbers are much greater in the southern parishes. They are almost exclusively associated with human structures, becoming active at night on the walls of buildings, patios and window screens. They tend to be especially active where light attracts insects, such as at windows. Females generally produce two hard-shelled

eggs per clutch with two or three clutches produced each year.

Control measures. Mediterranean geckos probably more than any other species tend to bring out unfounded fears over the threats that these creatures pose to humans. Their strange appearance is likely the reason that homeowners often insist that all individuals must be eradicated from around the home or workplace. The gecko's diet of roaches, flies, ants, mosquitoes, spiders and bugs, however, should actually make it a welcomed resident around our homes. As with all amphibians and reptiles, there are no poisons labeled for controlling Mediterranean geckos. Outside populations should be left intact because of the benefits they provide. Those that find their way inside the home are easily captured by placing glue boards in locations around the room where the critters were spotted.

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Wildlife Species Profile

Northern Bobwhite (*Colinus virginianus*)

The Northern Bobwhite is the most widespread of the six species of quail found in the United States. The familiar bobwhite whistle heard each spring is the signal given by males in their quest to attract a female. Courting pairs are initially formed in March and April for a breeding season that extends from May to September. Multiple nesting attempts are the norm, contributing to the bird's high reproductive potential. Nests are incubated by males and females, but nesting duties are rarely alternated. Nesting sites are usually associated with some form of grass cover with scattered woody vegetation enhancing the site. Females lay approximately one egg daily until a clutch of around 12 to 15 eggs is produced. The male or female will begin incubation within two to five days of the last egg laid. Incubating adults are highly susceptible to predation during this time with the accompanying adult killed in approximately 25 percent of nest failures. Females incubate approximately three-quarters of all nests, making them more susceptible to predation. Depending primarily on habitat conditions, 55 percent to 70 percent of nests are destroyed by predators, mowing activities or weather events. After an average 23-day incubation period, hatching occurs, and the precocial young are quick to leave the nest. Hatchlings are taken to open insect-rich "bugging" areas for them to meet the protein needs of their diet.

Chicks are flightless for the first two weeks, making this period the most critical time for survival. The tenacious efforts that adult bobwhites make to protect their young during this time make them twice more likely to fall victim to predators than when incubating. By late summer, birds begin to exhibit the characteristic night roosting habit of forming a circle on the ground with tails together and heads pointed outward. This roosting method is believed to have social, predator avoidance and heat conservation implications. Quail would prefer to escape on foot rather than take to the air, which makes them more vulnerable to avian

predators. Coveys are formed in late summer when birds begin to intermix between broods, comprising groups of 20 to 30 individuals. As the season progresses from fall to winter, food supplies are depleted, and as much as 80 percent of the early fall population may be lost to natural mortality. As spring arrives, longer days and better weather conditions trigger covey breakup followed by the onset of breeding.

Since the 1960s quail numbers have declined at an average annual rate of around 3.6 percent. In the mid 1800s and early 1900s, agricultural practices were for the most part done in a patchwork fashion in which small farms were carved out of large expanses of forestland. Annual burning of cutovers and open pine forests, along with associated grazing of livestock, created a mosaic of early successional habitat. Quail flourished simply as a by-product of these habitat manipulations. As human activities accidentally created optimal habitat during one time period, changes in agricultural and other land use practices led to population declines in future times. Habitat losses, along with declining habitat quality, are the biggest reasons for this decline. Advanced natural succession, intensive monoculture farming, more intensive forest management practices, loss of open grasslands and reduced use of prescribed burning are all reason for the decline. While hopefully never reaching the point of needing protection by way of the Endangered Species Act, in many part of their former range quail have already become threatened as far



as providing the numbers needed for a successful hunt. Put-and-take hunting operations have become a popular method for providing quail to individuals seeking to pursue what many have called the Grand Southern tradition. These operations, although providing recreational income to landowners and an often guaranteed shot at one or more coveys of quail, fail to provide a solution to the much greater problem of creating favorable habitat over a landscape so that natural quail numbers might respond. The USDA Farm Service Agency has an excellent program called CP33- Habitat Buffers for Upland Birds. This initiative was undertaken to provide early successional native grass buffers along agricultural field borders. Specific information on the program itself is found in an earlier article of this newsletter.

Plant Species Profile

Red maple (*Acer rubrum*)

Although oaks as a group are likely the most important tree from a wildlife food standpoint in the fall and winter, maples could easily fit that category in the spring. The *Acer* genus is important by being one of the first trees to break buds and produce fruits in the late winter and early spring. In Louisiana, blooming occurs from February into March, with scarlet fruits one-half to three-fourths inch long appearing soon afterward. This is a time of year when most wildlife foods are scarce, and squirrels, songbirds and a host of game and nongame species seek this nutritious food source.

Red maple reaches a large size. The Louisiana champion red maple is more than 14 feet in circumference and 79 feet tall. The leaves have a distinct cordate to palmate shape and are about 3 to 5 inches long. The leaves are also 3- to 5-lobed with sharp angles between the lobes. The red maple common to the upland areas of the state is known as hill red maple. A subspecies common in many bottomland hardwood areas of the state is known as Drummond red maple. The major distinguishing characteristic in this subspecies is the dense tomentose pubescence that is found on the leaf undersurface. Maples as a group are dioecious in their flowering habits, meaning that male and female flowers are found on separate trees. It is for this reason that only female red maple trees exhibit the brilliant scarlet double-samara fruits, indicating that spring will arrive soon. The wood of red maple is utilized in furniture, woodenware, boxes and wood pulp. In the fall, red maple leaves turn a brilliant red or yellow, making it a favorite as an ornamental or shade tree. In addition to the fruits being a much-needed early food source for wildlife, young saplings provide palatable and nutritious browse for white-tailed deer and cottontail rabbits.



Louisiana Wildlife News

Dr. Don Reed
Associate Professor (Wildlife)
Idlewild Research Station
(225) 683-5848

Reviewers:

Dr. Michael Chamberlain
Associate Professor
School of Renewable Natural
Resources

Dr. Dearl Sanders
Professor & Resident Coordinator
Idlewild Research Station

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Louisiana State University Agricultural Center
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