

Lead Studies and Human Health

In early 2008 a study was conducted by the Peregrine Fund (a conservation organization based out of Boise, Idaho) that involved documenting the effects of spent lead bullets on harvested deer from several western states. As a precursor to the group's findings, it was noted that during the 2007-2008 hunting season 212 game meat donation programs were in 46 states and four Canadian provinces. They estimated that donated venison during that year provided 25 million meals to people in need. Included within that number are the countless meals provided by the Louisiana Hunters for the Hungry Program, which process hundreds of deer carcasses for food banks across the state. The study cautioned that consumers of game meat hunted with lead shot or with standard lead rifle bullets are at risk of lead exposure and concluded that meat donation programs could reduce the risk of lead exposure in their beneficiaries by accepting meat only from hunters who use nonlead ammunition and bow hunters.

A major rebuttal to this information was documented in a 2008 study by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). The CDC found that the average levels of lead in hunters tested was lower than among average Americans. Children under 6 who consumed venison had lead levels less than half that of the national average. Their studies revealed insignificant differences in lead levels between those who consumed wild game harvested with traditional ammunition and nonhunters in the control group. The CDC study concluded that game harvested with traditional hunting ammunition does not pose any human health risk and was safe for consumption. Like most red meat, venison is an excellent source of protein, zinc and iron that is lower in calories with about one-third less fat than beef.

Upcoming Feral Hog Seminar Planned for North Louisiana

The Ark-La-Miss Wildlife Group has planned its fifth wildlife management symposium for Saturday, Feb. 14 at the Louisiana Tech University Student Center in Ruston, Louisiana. The program, "Wild Pigs: Biology, Problems, Threats, Control, and Hunting," will focus on a wide range of issues dealing with the presence of feral hogs in our state. The following topics will be covered by the foremost wildlife experts from various universities and conservation organizations:

- Basic biology of feral hogs
- How feral hogs predate other species
- How feral hogs compete with native wildlife
- How feral hogs pollute streams and affect stream fauna
- How feral hogs carry diseases that may transmit to other animals
- Techniques for controlling feral hogs, including a display of various trap designs

The cost to attend the one-day program is \$25, which includes lunch. To receive a copy of the program along with registration information, please contact me, Don Reed, via e-mail at dreed@agcenter.lsu.edu or call my office at 225-683-5848

2009 Turkey Hunting Season Dates Proposed

The upcoming close of deer season in our state has one bright spot for many outdoor enthusiasts, including me. Late January means we are getting closer to the opening day of the 2009 spring turkey season. The recommended statewide opening date is set for Saturday March 28. The season will extend to April 26 in Area A, April 19 in Area B and April 12 in Area C. Daily and season bag limits are one and two, respectively. A special private-lands youth hunt for those 17 years of age and younger and hunts for wheelchair-confined hunters are proposed for March 21 and 22.

A proposal this year would require that all turkey hunters, regardless of age or license status, obtain tags prior to hunting. Upon making a kill, hunters would be required to immediately tag their harvested gobbler before moving and report their harvest within 72 hours to receive a confirmation number for validation. Just as was done during the 2008-09 deer season, hunters may validate their kill by telephone or on the Internet at www.wlf.louisiana.gov.

Wildlife Species Profile

Purple Martin (*Progne subis*)

Purple martins are the largest member of the swallow family measuring from 7 ¼ to 8 ½ inches in length. Males are a glossy purplish black with a fairly long, moderately forked tail. Females are much duller and lighter gray below, with a light gray forehead.

It is estimated that more than 1 million Americans have housing erected for attracting purple martins. The birds historically used natural cavities in trees and rocks for nesting but the alteration of many habitats has made these areas scarce. Native Americans were some of the earliest users of artificial cavities by erecting hollowed gourds on poles that had the proper hole sizes for attracting purple martins.

Housing for purple martins should be erected approximately four weeks after the first "scouts" have returned for the season. In Louisiana, purple martins begin to return by Feb. 1 but first arrivals can be earlier or later than this date, depending on the homeowner's location in the state. Returning scouts seldom switch to new housing, and a high degree of site fidelity drives them to return to the same housing each year. Houses that are erected too early will often attract undesirable nest competitors such as house sparrows or European starlings. Nesting structures should be kept in a usable condition throughout the summer since purple martins have been known to nest as late as mid-May in Louisiana.

If a successful nesting is carried out, females will nest only one time each spring. Failed nesting attempts, however, will promote re-nesting efforts. This process begins a few weeks after first arriving at a suitable site. One to six eggs (average four) comprise a clutch, and incubation lasts approximately 16 days. Young fledge from the nest approximately



28 days after hatching and begin to acquire their own food. Feeders or watering sources are not necessary in managing for purple martins. These birds consume only flying insects which means they literally eat and drink on the fly.

Location and maintenance of housing structures are the two most important aspects in successfully attracting purple martins to an area. Houses should be placed at least 30 feet from human dwellings and at least 40 feet from any trees that are higher than the nesting structure. Houses should be mounted on poles at a height of 10-20 feet in the most open areas available.

Successful purple martin management requires that houses be accessible for cleaning and maintenance. Sparrow and starling nests must be aggressively removed from martin houses. These non-native species are extremely competitive and will

prevent purple martins from using any housing that is otherwise properly located. Large nests that completely fill the nesting compartment are indications of nesting sparrows. Purple martin nests are generally flat, being no higher than the threshold of the box opening. If eggs are present, the small brown-speckled eggs of the English sparrow are easily distinguishable from the larger pure white purple martin eggs.

Purple martins are neo-tropical migrants and return each year to wintering areas in Central and South America. Birds that use the Louisiana flyway come from areas throughout the central United States to form masses of 1 million or more individuals that gather in areas of south Louisiana prior to beginning the long journey across the Gulf of Mexico. They are among the earliest migrants with most out of Louisiana by early to mid-September.

Critter Corner

Brown-headed Cowbird (*Molothrus ater*)

The brown-headed cowbird, or simply cowbird as it is often called, is approximately the size of a house sparrow (6-8 inches in length). The entire head, neck and upper breast of males are buffy brown while the rest of the plumage is a metallic green-glossed black. Females are a dark buffy brown above and smokey gray below with a throat patch that is white or pale gray.

The brown-headed cowbird was once a bison-following species of the Great Plains that moved eastward throughout the 1800s as forests were cleared. It is now common across North America in both breeding and wintering populations.

Cowbirds have the dubious distinction of being a nest parasite, with females laying their eggs in nests constructed by other avian species. It has been theorized that this trait evolved from centuries of following bison herds to feed on the insects flushed from the ground as these large animals traveled in their seasonal migrations. Female cowbirds were never able or willing to invest in the time to build their own nests and instead found the nests of other species in which to lay their eggs. As bison herds disappeared and cowbirds made their way to the eastern United States, their habit of nest parasitism remained as part of their reproductive cycle. Their eastward movement was encouraged by increased forest openings from European settlers.

More than 200 different avian species are known to have nests parasitized by the brown-headed cowbird. Once a nest is chosen, a female cowbird will lay one of her eggs, which is gray with brown markings. Her eggs are usually distinguishable from the smaller eggs of the nest-building female. Some parasitized species simply abandon their nest or build a new nest on top of the old one.

Other species with large bills, such as bluejays or robins, will remove the foreign egg from their nest. More than 150 species, however, are known to serve as suitable foster parents, brooding and feeding all young that are hatched. Cowbirds develop rapidly and hatch in only 10 to 13 days, which, on average, is about one to six days sooner than the others in the nest. The young cowbird hatchlings begin a voracious demand



for food, and females will often forgo caring for their own young to meet these demands. This type of "chance" egg-laying leads to only 3 percent of cowbirds eggs hatching and reaching adulthood. A low survival rate is compensated by females having the capacity to lay 40 or more eggs each nesting season.

Control Measures: Brown-headed cowbirds are considered a nuisance species in Louisiana and can be taken year-round during legal shooting hours if they are depredating or about to depredate agricultural crops or wildlife. They are grouped along with black-birds, crows and grackles in this regard.

Cowbirds favor forest edges, and forest fragmentation has led to a great increase in these edge habitats and a subsequent reduction in forest interior habitats that cowbirds will not penetrate. Forest management efforts aimed at increasing the amount of habitat in the forest interior is a way of protecting many of our threatened songbirds in North America from depredation by brown-headed cowbirds.

Plant Species Profile

Mayhaw (*Crataegus opaca*)

The mayhaw, also known as riverflat hawthorn is a member of the plant family Rosaceae that is native to the southeastern United States. It grows to be a small tree 20 to 30 feet high with thorny branches and elliptic-to-oblong leaves, 2 to 3 inches long. The foliage is dark green above with a rusty pubescent undersurface along the veins. The bark on mature trees is thin and flaky with a distinct salmon-colored inner bark. Beautiful pinkish flowers cover the trees in February and March. Fruit turn a bright red to reddish yellow color upon ripening in mid-April through early May. The fruits are a depressed, globose, apple-like pome about one-half to two-thirds of an inch in diameter. Cultivated varieties of mayhaw often have fruits much larger than this.

Historically, mayhaws were harvested by outdoor enthusiasts throughout the backwoods sloughs, swamps and river bottoms of Louisiana. While usually found in low, wet, slightly acid areas, mayhaws produce their best growth on good upland soils in full sun.

My first experience with gathering wild mayhaws came from boat trips down the Pearl River near the small town of Angie, La. in the early 1980s. A rise in the river each spring would deposit backwater in mudflats that were thick with mayhaw trees. A dip net and bucket were the only things needed to scoop as many pounds of fruit from the water as desired.

Accessibility to these types of areas, along with the clearing of woodlands has led to a big increase in commercial and home orchards producing fruit from grafted mayhaw trees.

Mayhaw fruits are relished by man and beast alike. While not fit for human consumption as a raw fruit, processed mayhaws are utilized in some of the South's finest jelly, pie, coffee cake and ice cream recipes. Almost any wildlife species in our state will readily use mayhaw fruit when it is available. It is highly recommended for landowners looking to establish high-quality long-term food sources for attracting white-tailed deer and other wildlife.



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