

## Reduction in Rice Acreage Causes Concerns for Waterfowl Habitat

Projected 2006 rice acreage figures in the state's 23 rice-producing parishes show a 159,914 acre decrease from 2005 levels. Farmers planted 488,674 acres of rice in 2005, compared to a projected 2006 figure of 328,760 acres. Poor prices, increased costs and the damage from Hurricane Rita have all taken a devastating toll on the rice-producing areas of our state, with the most damage suffered by the southern parishes. Current drought conditions are causing further economic strain by raising pumping costs. Vermilion Parish shows the biggest drop in acreage, with 2005 production levels at 76,361 acres, compared to an estimated 30,500 acres in 2006.

Loss of rice production, in terms of wildlife, is a critical factor in habitat loss. Flooded fields provide excellent habitat for a host of waterfowl, wading birds, shore birds and other wetland wildlife. Rice farmers have long helped the conservation community by their rice management practices. Operation Quackback, organized by rice farmers, provides a method whereby flooded rice acreage can be documented, based on parish and statewide totals. These figures are important, considering the many wildlife-related programs tied into the present Farm Bill. Lower statewide totals in rice production will almost certainly have an effect on acreage reported under Operation Quackback.

## Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries Commission Approves Changes in Upcoming Hunting Season

- Although the season limit for deer is still set at six, only three of these may be antlered bucks and three antlerless deer. The limits include all methods of take, except for antlerless deer harvested on lands enrolled under the Deer Management Assistance Program (DMAP) and Landowner Antlerless Deer Tag Program (LADT), because they do not count towards a hunter's season bag limit. Daily bag limit is one antlered and one antlerless deer (when legal) except on some federal refuges and national forests where the daily bag limit is one deer per day.
- Deer hunters, regardless of age or license status, must obtain a deer tag harvest card prior to hunting and possess it while deer hunting. Immediately upon harvesting a deer, kill data must be documented on the card. A harvest report must be filed with LDWF at the end of the season, even if no deer were taken.
- Except in Iberville, Iberia, Assumption, St. Martin, St. Mary, West Carroll, Plaquemines, St. Bernard and portions of East Carroll parishes, hunters on private lands will be able to harvest antlerless deer the entire season. Public lands, including WMAs or national forests and refuges, will still adhere to specified either-sex days.
- Bobcats now can be taken year-round by big-game license holders during daylight hours. The limit is one per calendar year. The ruling applies only to private property and does not include WMAs or federally owned lands and refuges.

In an attempt to raise money to cover the cost of the new tagging program, a bill was recently introduced into the legislature that would have allowed for bonus tags to harvest deer above the state-set annual bag limit. The measure called for bonus tags to be sold at a cost of \$20 for a doe tag and \$25 for a buck tag. Even though hunters would be limited to three bonus tags per year, opponents were able to defeat the legislation, arguing that the proposal gave greater opportunities for wealthier individuals to harvest additional deer. Another measure designed to raise the cost of hunting and fishing licenses to cover these costs was pulled from consideration when faced with significant opposition.

## Waterfowl Season Arrangements To Be Set

The Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries Commission is currently taking comments on various options for setting the waterfowl season segments and zones for the next five years. Choices that are available from the United States Fish and Wildlife Service include:

- The current system of two zones, east and west, with split seasons (two segments).
- Three zones with no split seasons, providing a continuous season within each zone.
- No zones, but rather a statewide season with three segments (split seasons).

Regulations can only be changed every five years, and Louisiana has reached the end of its current five-year program. Comments can be made by contacting the LDWF Web site at [www.wlf.louisiana.gov](http://www.wlf.louisiana.gov).

## Domestic Cats Pose Serious Conservation Dilemma

Nesting birds and various small mammals that we find around our landscape this time of year face a serious threat in many areas from a predator that is often quite common around our homes. The domestic cat (*Felis catus*) originated from an ancestral wild species in Europe and Africa and followed European colonists to North America several hundred years ago. Since that time cats have not only become cherished pets but also semi-wild predators, reaching numbers nationwide as high as 100 million. Such levels in almost any ecosystem would have a serious impact on wildlife populations. Studies have shown that diets of free-ranging domestic cats are comprised of 70 percent small mammals, 20 percent birds and 10 percent other small animals (snakes, lizards, frogs, etc.).

Since domestic cats are not native to North America, their prey is confronted with dealing with a predator that they have not evolved defensive mechanisms to avoid. Cats differ from other wild predators in additional ways. For instance, they are protected from disease, predation and competition – all factors that tend to control the numbers of wild predators such as bobcats, foxes, raccoons and coyotes.

Furthermore, domestic cats often have a dependable supply of supplemental food provided by humans and are therefore not influenced by changes in populations of prey. Native predators, however, will decline when prey becomes scarce because of inherent ecological controls built into most predator/prey relationships.

The densities of domestic cats are also not limited by territoriality, which is often the case in our native predator populations.

All these factors allow domestic cats to exist at much higher densities than native predators, creating a considerable threat to some local wildlife populations. To practice good wildlife stewardship in dealing with domestic cats, the following practices are recommended:

- Keep only as many cats as you can feed and care for.
- Keep cats indoors.
- Neuter whenever possible or prevent from breeding.
- Locate bird feeders in locations that do not provide cover for an ambushing cat.
- Don't dispose of unwanted cats by releasing them into rural areas.
- Eliminate sources of food and garbage that attract stray cats.

## Plant Species Profile

### Sunflower (*Helianthus spp.*)

Approximately 30 different sunflower species in the genus *Helianthus* grow in Louisiana. Sunflowers are, however, one of only four major crops of global importance native to the United States. Blueberries, cranberries and pecans are the other three. Native Americans used wild sunflowers for food and medicine for at least 8,000 years. When explorers sent seed from the New World back to Europe, the sunflower was treated mainly as a garden flower. It was not used as an edible crop again until it reached Russia, where over time the seeds were bred for high oil content and improved disease resistance.

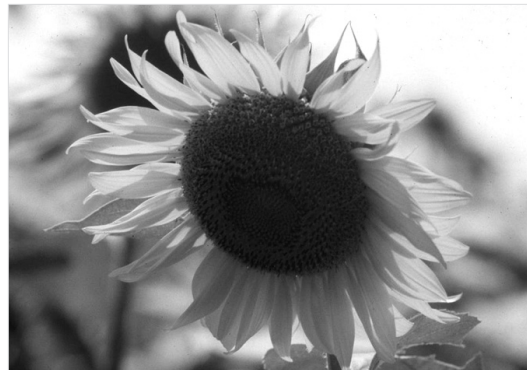
This early work led to the first sustained U.S. commercial production of the oil-seed type of sunflower. Any of these varieties are preferred for wildlife plantings. As opposed to the confection or non-oil varieties, the black oil-seed varieties can tolerate a wider range of drought and cool weather, and they are adapted to most soil types. Seeding rates should average 5 to 7 pounds per acre on 28- to 38-inch rows. Planting dates can vary from late March to early July, taking into account that maturity is reached in 100-120 days, and later plantings are more susceptible to insect damage.

Yields can reach 1,200 pounds of seed per acre. Sunflowers are one of the true "ice-cream" plantings that can be established as part of a dove management plan. Planting dates are often set around the various season splits to allow for maturity one or two weeks prior to the season opening.

As with most warm-season plantings, weed control is often necessary. Treflan, Prowl and Spartan are herbicides labeled for weed control on sunflowers. Recent genetic engineering techniques have provided Clearfield sunflower varieties that can be treated with the herbicide Beyond.

Rotating fields will help greatly in reducing potential weed and disease problems, and, where deer populations are present, sunflowers must often be protected from browsing as soon as plants emerge.

As with any planting to attract doves, crop manipulation can enhance the availability of seeds whether from mowing, burning or applying herbicides. To avoid illegal baiting where people hunt, do not reintroduce sunflowers or any other grain to a field. Only seeds from crops planted in the area may be present.



## Critter Corner

### Tree Squirrels (*Sciurus Spp.*)



Undoubtedly, no other animal has stirred such a love-hate relationship around our homes and gardens as that of tree squirrels. The eastern gray squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*) and fox squirrel (*Sciurus niger*) are the two species found in Louisiana. Depending on where you live in the state, you'll find two subspecies of gray squirrels and three subspecies of fox squirrels. The nominate race of the eastern gray squirrel lives in the northwestern portion of Louisiana, while the darker subspecies known as *S. c. fuliginosus* lives in our more southern parishes. Throughout the central and northern parishes, specimens tend to show intermediate color characteristics between the two subspecies. Eastern gray squirrels, regardless of their origin, are often referred to as simply gray or cat squirrels.

The three subspecies of fox squirrels vary drastically in size and color. The western one-third of Louisiana is occupied by *S. n. ludovicianus*. These animals are characterized as the largest of all subspecies, with a massive skull and slightly paler coloration than the more eastern subspecies.

The bottomland hardwood forests of the Tensas, Mississippi and Atchafalaya floodplains in the eastern and central-southern portions of the state are home to the smaller, darker subspecies *S. n. subauratus*. Melanistic individuals are so common in this subspecies that in local populations, they often outnumber the normal color phase.

Areas east of the Mississippi River into the Florida parishes are home to the well-marked race of fox squirrels known as *S. n. bachmani*. These individuals are characterized by their large size and the presence of a patch of white on the nose and varying amounts of white on the ears, toes and tips of the tail.

Few other wildlife species can cause such a wide array of problems as tree squirrels. Squirrels damage trees by chewing bark from branches and trunks, and their voracious diet for nuts, fruits, vegetables, flowers and buds, wreak havoc in yards and gardens. Their habits of gnawing on wires, wood siding and lead vent pipes cause additional problems to homeowners, along with the raiding of bird feeders.

Fox and gray squirrels breed at 1 year of age during two distinct breeding periods in mid-December to early January and again in June. The gestation period is around 43 days, and an average of three young comprise a litter.

Squirrels prefer to nest in tree cavities, but in the absence of cavities, they will construct leaf nests with a frame of sticks and dry leaves. They usually line them with leaves and bark strips from ornamental trees in surrounding yards and neighborhoods.

The close association of these animals with our forested urban environments, along with their game status has created a management dilemma for homeowners. As game animals, squirrels are protected within specific hunting season dates and bag limits. Even with this option, local firearm ordinances often make it illegal to discharge a firearm at any time within city limits.

Outside of legally hunting squirrels during the established open season, lethal control is an option in only two instances: (1) when squirrels enter a residence or other building, homeowners have the option of using lethal control to deal with the problem, and (2) commercial pecan growers can obtain a 30-day permit to use lethal control on squirrels damaging their crops.

Although many repellents are labeled for squirrel control, most are not developed for use on food crops. Like all repellents, their usefulness is limited by time and weather conditions. Trying to exclude squirrels from an area is a hard task when dealing with such a nimble critter, making live-trapping and relocation the best option for homeowners.

There is probably no easier animal to trap than a squirrel. Unshelled pecans have proven to be the best bait to use for this purpose, and success is almost guaranteed when pre-baiting is used. This technique involves placing pecans on the outside of a live trap until animals have become accustomed to the presence of the trap and then placing the bait inside. Trapped animals should be removed a considerable distance (at least one mile) and then released. Regulations require that landowner permission be given where animals will be released.

## Wildlife Species Profile

### Eastern Cottontail (*Sylvilagus floridanus*)



The Eastern Cottontail is often referred to as simply the cottontail rabbit or cottontail. Populations are such that they are one of the most common mammals in Louisiana. During favorable years, populations can reach as high as 10 million. Cottontails are found most frequently in fairly open country, pastures and grassy areas adjacent to croplands and throughout the upland forested regions of our state.

Regardless of the habitat type, one word determines the presence or absence of rabbit populations – cover. Cover must be present in sufficient types and amounts before any other management activity can be successfully implemented. In providing this critical component, managers must look at providing what is needed for nesting cover, resting cover and escape cover.

Nesting cover is needed for females to successfully give birth and care for their young. Resting cover is needed for providing a place for rabbits to “lay low” and avoid predators during the times when they are inactive and not feeding. Escape cover is needed for rabbits to quickly avoid predators during times when they are feeding or traveling in more open areas.

Immediately following timber harvesting operations, logging debris is usually present in sufficient quantity to provide some of the cover needs. The potential of these sites is not fully realized, however, until the plant successional process allows grassy areas, briar thickets and low-growing shrub thickets to become established. Rabbits thrive best where these types of vegetative components come together, forming what wildlife managers refer to as an “edge” effect.

Cottontails have a tremendous fecundity, and where the necessary habitat is provided, populations will expand quickly to fill the area. The breeding season extends almost throughout the year, peaking from February to mid-October. The litter size in Louisiana ranges from one to seven, with birth occurring following a 28-day gestation period. Females may produce as many as six litters per year and come back into estrus as soon as birth occurs.

The young grow rapidly because of the exceptionally rich milk that the nursing mother provides. The milk contains 13 percent butterfat content, which is about four times as rich as the average cow’s milk consumed by humans. After three to four weeks, the young are weaned and on their own, allowing a female bred shortly after parturition to deliver another litter.

The Eastern Cottontail is one of our most sought-after small game animals. The harvest by hunters conservatively represents that portion of the population that would be eliminated by some other factor such as natural predation, adverse weather or disease. Even with a liberal season extending from early October to late February, only this surplus is removed from the population.

## 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

Visit our Web site:  
[www.lsuagcenter.com](http://www.lsuagcenter.com)



Louisiana State University Agricultural Center  
William B. Richardson, Chancellor  
Louisiana Agricultural Experiment Station  
David Boethel, Vice Chancellor and Director  
Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service  
Paul D. Coreil, Vice Chancellor and Director

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of Congress of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the United States Department of Agriculture. The Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service provides equal opportunities in programs and employment.