LOUISIANA FOREST STEWARDSHIP NEWSLETTER

FALL/WINTER 2008 VOL. 4 ISSUE 1 2008/2009

THE ROLE OF FIRE IN LAND MANAGEMENT TODAY

Story by Latimore Smith

Fire has been a natural ecological process for untold millennia in the forests, woodlands, savannas, prairies, marshes and other habitats in the land now called Louisiana. Fire is a crucial ecological force that renews and sustains natural habitats and associated wildlife and plants. Prior to human habitation, fires started from lightning. Once people colonized the area thousands of years ago, fires were ignited by both lightning and native americans. The majority of the land area that now comprises Louisiana burned on a regular basis, and a long and impressive group of natural habitats evolved under the force of these fires. Some of these include the longleaf pine forests and savannas that once dominated the uplands and flatwoods of the southern and central part of the state. Shortleaf pine/oak-hickory forests once dominant in the central and northern uplands, coastal prairie on the prairie terrace in the southwest and most coastal marshes. Many smaller-scale natural community types, such as hillside seepage bogs embedded in hilly longleaf pine forests and calcareous prairies often embedded in shortleaf/hardwood forests, are dependent on regular fire. Even some cypress swamps and bottomlands burned occasionally in very dry times.

To give some perspective on the extent of fire historically, it is probable that of the 30 million acres or so that comprise our state, several million acres burned in an average year as recently as 150 years ago. It is also probable that in some years, over half the state burned from lightning caused fires and Indian burning. It was a true "terra del fuego" (land of fire).

-Michael Bath

Drip torches utilize a mixture of gasoline and diesel to ignite fires.
-Cody Cedotal, LDWF

All of this burning over such large areas and over long periods of time produced adaptations in the plants and animals inhabiting these places. Many of Louisiana's natural ecosystems are critically dependent on periodic fire for their survival. Many species evolved with fire over time, to the point that now a large number of our native species are fire-dependent, either directly, such as those that depend on fire as a stimulus for reproduction (in the case of many fire-adapted native plants), or those that depend on the habitat conditions created by fire (e.g., open pinelands important to many animals).

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Louisiana Forest Stewardship Newsletter
Fall/Winter 2007
Volume 3 Issue 1 2007/2008
Baton Rouge, LA 70806

Editor: *Cody Cedotal, Forest Stewardship Biologist*
Layout: *Becky Chapman, Publications Officer*

This public document was published at an average cost of $600.40. Approximately 1250 copies of this document were published at an average printing cost of $600.40. The total cost of all printing of this document averages $600.40. This document was published for Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, 2000 Quail Drive, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 70808, by LSU Printing Services, to provide information on the Louisiana Forest Stewardship Program. This material was printed in accordance with the standards for printing by state agencies established pursuant to R.S. 43:31. Printing of this material was purchased in accordance with the provisions of Title 43 of the Louisiana Revised Statutes.

The lack of regular fire, burning in the places, in the ways and at the times of year that it did historically, has been widely recognized by conservation scientists as one of the major threats to biodiversity (native plants and animals) in the U.S. This is especially true in the southeastern U.S. where, for example, longleaf pine forests, one of the most dominant historical forest types of the Gulf and Atlantic Coastal Plains and arguably the most fire-dependent, have been severely reduced by lack of fire and conversion to other land uses.

Fire does many things that maintain and promote particular habitat conditions. It kills invading or off-site shrubs and trees, stimulates flowering/seeding by many plants, favors the establishment and growth of fire-resistant trees (e.g., longleaf pine, shortleaf pine, upland oaks), removes the smothering litter layer, promotes high native plant diversity in the herbaceous ground cover and creates open conditions favored by many game and non-game wildlife species.

Fire effects on habitats and associated species are governed by a number of variables, including how often fires burn through an area (frequency), the time of year fires burn (season) and how hot fires burn (intensity). The natural frequency of fire in some native fire-maintained habitats can be estimated as follows: once every 1-4 years in longleaf pine forests and savannas and embedded habitats (estimate derived from many lines of evidence); once every 5-10 years in shortleaf pine/oak-hickory forests; once every 1-5 years in coastal prairie; and once every 20-30 years in mixed hardwood–loblolly pine forests. These estimates are an oversimplification since frequency was variable historically over time with changes in climate (that affected, for example, lightning frequency, extent of droughts and how far and "deep" fires burned) and other factors, but these estimates are good rules of thumb. In general, when more frequent burns occur, the forests will be more scenic, open and park-like (trees over grass), and the native ground cover of grasses and wildflowers will be more dense and diverse.

In recent years, many pine forests have not been burned on a regular basis. The resulting dense layer of underbrush increases the potential for timber damage if a wildfire occurs on the property, offers poor wildlife habitat, impedes forest management activities, increases management costs and decreases aesthetic value.
-Cody Cedotal, LDWF

Regular prescribed burning in pine forests can improve wildlife habitat for many species, improve aesthetics, reduce forest management costs, improve forest health, and minimize timber damage if a wildfire should impact the property.
-Cody Cedotal, LDWF

MANAGING WITH FIRE TODAY

We can obviously no longer allow wildfires to burn as they once did; we have created a world that we are obliged to manage. Since the turn of the 20th century, fire has been aggressively suppressed in forests and grasslands to protect public safety, property and natural and cultural resources, and to prevent what was thought to be the destruction of our natural and cultural resources. All fires, whether started by nature (e.g., lightning-caused) or by humans, were considered bad because they were thought to damage soil, impair water quality, threaten wildlife and decrease timber value. Fire exclusion practices resulted in many places with forests plagued by a variety of problems, including overcrowding of trees and brush resulting from the encroachment of species normally suppressed by fire, vulnerability of trees to insects and disease and inadequate reproduction of certain species.

The recognition of the importance of fire in many habitats was slow to come about, but as evidence accumulated, eventually it became clear by the middle of the 20th century that fire was an essential ecological process and conservation management tool.

In natural resource management today, we must use prescribed fire to duplicate the effects of natural fires and restore and maintain desirable habitat conditions. Prescribed burning benefits game, nongame and endangered wildlife species by enhancing wildlife habitat. Many specialized habitats in the state, such as bogs, glades, woodlands and various kinds of prairies, require regular and periodic fire for perpetuation. Scientists that study fire-dependent natural habitats state that we would likely lose many types of native plants and animals without the appropriate use of prescribed fire in these habitats.

In addition to conservation benefits, prescribed burning has many beneficial effects in commercial forest management. It helps to prepare sites for replanting and natural seeding, helps control insects and diseases, and can be used to increase forest productivity.

In the broadest sense, prescribed burning may be defined as the intentional application of broadcast fire to existing vegetative fuels (natural/wild, planted or agricultural) under specific environmental conditions and following appropriate precautionary measures such that the fire is confined to a pre-determined area and accomplishes one or more planned land management objectives. It is carried out by experienced land managers on both public and private lands throughout Louisiana, and is widely used statewide in natural resource and conservation management, and by agricultural interests (such as by sugar cane farmers).

One major benefit of prescribed fire is that it reduces the risk and severity of wildfires, potentially reducing the loss of life and property. Withholding fire from fire-maintained habitats, such as pinelands, results in a heavy accumulation of fuels (dead and living) that can cause fires to be catastrophic. Such wildfires threaten property and

Fire lines protect certain areas from fire. Some can also be managed as wildlife openings. In this case, fallow disking this interior fire line would provide good brood habitat for Northern bobwhites and Eastern wild turkey located between this pine forest and hardwood drain from year to year. However, prior to burning, the area should be disked to expose bare mineral soil. Fire lines located along roads or around young pine forests should be disked more frequently to provide maximum protection from wildfire.
-Cody Cedotal, LDWF

Many threatened and endangered plants and animals depend solely on fire-maintained habitats.

Left - Gopher Tortoise *-Chris Evans*

Right - Manyflowered Grasspink *- Tony Pernas*

firefighter and public safety, impair forest and ecosystem health and degrade air quality. The state's growing population is resulting in urban development directly adjacent to and within fire-prone forestlands; such areas are referred to as wildland-urban interface areas (WUI). Prescribed fires reduce the intensity and magnitude of wildfires by reducing the accumulation of flammable fuel (e.g., dead branches, brush, needles, leaves) on the forest floor. Fire, used as a land management tool, "thins" out available fuels, reducing the chance that natural or man-caused fires will spread quickly over long distances and become unmanageable. With the periodic application of prescribed fire, the threat of uncontrollable, catastrophic wildfires can be reduced significantly, helping to protect firefighter and public safety, property and natural and cultural resources.

ARE YOU READY TO BURN?

You may own property that would benefit from prescribed fire for any number of reasons. From the above discussions, you can deduce that the list of reasons to conduct prescribed burning can be lengthy indeed. It could be that you want to enhance your timber stand and promote the growth of desirable trees. Or you may want to promote open pineland conditions favorable to many kinds of wildlife, such as northern bobwhites. You may own property that supports a rare or special natural habitat type such as longleaf pine forest or savanna, shortleaf pine/oak-hickory forest, or even prairie or bogs. It may be that you simply desire to improve the aesthetic appeal of your land by creating the park-like conditions many find so attractive, or you may wish to control overloading of fuels in your forests to reduce the chances of catastrophic wildfire. All of these objectives can be achieved effectively and cost-efficiently by the careful application of prescribed fire.

GETTING THE BURN DONE

If you have determined that prescribed burning would benefit your property, you can either hire a professional private prescribed burner or the Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry (LDAF) to do the burning, or you may conduct the burns yourself if you are prepared to do so.

Hiring out Prescribed Burning

The current cost to hire a private contract burner or LDAF to burn property generally runs from $20 to $30 per acre, depending on the locality and conditions of the area to be burned. There are several programs that provide cost-share assistance for prescribed burning and related activities. The Forest Productivity Program (FPP) and the Forest Lands Enhancement Program (FLEP) are administered by LDAF and provide 50-75 percent cost-share to Louisiana landowners for prescribed burning and fire line establishment. Another avenue for cost-share assistance is through the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program administered by the Natural Resource Conservation Service. The objectives of the burn and site conditions will dictate which program a tract will qualify for and cost-share rates that apply. To arrange to have your property burned by LDAF or apply for cost-share assistance for prescribed burning, simply contact the LDAF or Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) office in your area (*see end of article)*. They should be notified well in advance of the time you would like to have your property burned. Private contract burners are also available, but not common at this time. You should be able to locate a private burner by talking to the local LDAF foresters or LDWF biologists, the Louisiana Forestry Association, or forestry consultants in your area.

Doing the Burning Yourself

We strongly recommend that anyone planning to do their own burning become a Certified Prescribed Burn Manager (CPBM) under Louisiana law. While you may burn your land legally without this certification, there are numerous advantages of being certified. The training you obtain from this one-day course in understanding many aspects of fire, prescribed burning and smoke management is critical. The course covers the basic details of prescribed burning as indicated below.

Planning and Preparation
- Types of Fire (head fire, back fire, flank fire) and fire behavior
- Burn objectives (hardwood control, wildlife, fuel reduction, etc…)
- Assessing conditions (fuel loads, forested area or grassland, tract size, ect..)
- Identify smoke sensitive areas
- Type and timing of prescribed burns
- Written plans of action or burn plans
- Equipment needed
- Establishing fire lines

Conducting the Burn
- Check for desired weather conditions
- Fire Weather Forecast
- Notification needed (LDAF)
- Smoke management concerns
- Implementing the burn plan
- Monitor closely for changing conditions
- Mop up

A head fire being set by LDWF personnel on Sandy Hollow WMA. This area is burned every 1-2 years to encourage a grassy understory and improve habitat for Northern bobwhites. Fuel levels and other conditions in this area are such that many different types of fire (head fire, back fire or flank fire) can be used safely due to frequent burning.
-Chris Davis, LDWF

Back fire being used to reduce fuel levels in a young pine stand. Back fire is the safest type of fire for these conditions because of low intensity and flame heights.
-Mike Perot, LDWF

Smoke management should be a primary concern in all burn plans, since it can affect areas many miles away.
-USDA Forest Service

Another important advantage of the CPBM course is the liability protection that is provided to private burners under the law. This law was passed by the Louisiana legislature in 1993 and is called the "Certified Prescribed Burner" law. The act stipulates that Certified Prescribed Burners are held to the same standards of proof of negligence in court as any other professional. Most recently, one-day CPBM courses have been taught twice a year, once at LSU in Baton Rouge, and once at Louisiana Tech in north Louisiana, though there are additional courses that may be offered depending on demand. To become a CPBM you must complete this course, supervise five prescribed burns (either before or after the course) and have received other formal or informal training in prescribed burning (either before or after the course). For more information on becoming a CPBM in Louisiana, call the LDAF Office in Baton Rouge at 225-925-4500.

Regardless of whether or not you plan to become a CPBM, you should become very familiar with fire and how it behaves in different fuels and under different conditions before you start your own burn program.

When planning and preparing for a burn, first determine the primary objectives of the burn, such as hardwood and brush control, wildlife habitat enhancement or fuel reduction, and then determine the current fuel and "structural" conditions in the area to be burned. To meet specific burn objectives, burns should be conducted during the appropriate season (winter vs. spring/summer; more on this later), and under the particular weather conditions and fuel moisture levels on the day of the burn that will best produce the desired results.

For example, if a pine-dominated stand has not burned in many years and the primary objective is to reduce a heavy shrub/brush mid-story and understory layer, it is often best to burn with a few cool, "wet" winter burns initially (1–2 years apart) to gradually reduce both standing brush and the heavy needle litter layer without causing excessive mortality of desirable trees. The follow-up burn regime in this scenario will be driven by response of the area to the early fires and desired conditions down the road. In another example, if the primary objective is to promote native grasses and herbaceous wildlife food plants in a pine stand that has burned a fair bit in recent years and lacks a heavy mid-story/understory, then the best time to burn is in the early to mid-spring.

Obviously, there are many variations on when to burn and under what conditions to burn to achieve desired objectives over time. Ideally, you will have the opportunity to consult with a natural resources expert very familiar with the multitudinous effects of fire prior to devising your overall burn plan.

THE CASE FOR GROWING SEASON BURNING

The effects of the season of burn, burning in the "dormant" season (winter) versus the "growing" season (spring or summer; also called the "lightning season"), are quite dramatic and have only in recent years begun to be appreciated by many land managers in the southeast. The dormant season in Louisiana may be considered to extend from the time of the first "killing frost," usually sometime in November, until the time most of the plants begin to "break bud," usually around early March in south Louisiana. What has been learned is that winter burns have very different affects on the plants than do spring burns. For one thing, repeated winter burns will not kill brush outright, but will cause it to continually re-sprout as a low brush layer, whereas spring burns, repeatedly conducted every year or two soon after "green up" will eventually kill much of this brush. Another example is that the response of grasses and forbs is also very different after burns at different seasons. Many plants flower and seed much more prolifically

following early to mid-spring burns compared to winter burns. These differences in habitat and component species response to fires at different seasons is a key consideration in management of fire-adapted habitats in the South today.

There has been concern on the part of many natural resource managers in the South that spring or summer burning may be detrimental to certain game and non-game birds. While this may be a legitimate concern, it must be pointed out that birds associated with fire-maintained habitats have faced the benefits and perils of fire for eons. If spring or lightning-season fires were as common as historical data suggests, birds of pinelands and other fire habitats in the South could survive only if they developed methods for adjusting to the temporary set-backs created by fire.

The most direct impact of spring burning on birds is typically loss of a nest, but recent studies suggest the number of nests potentially affected by lightning-season burning is smaller than many believe. Loss of a nest to fire is also similar to the losses created by predators and bad weather, and few long-term consequences are likely to occur for nesting birds when spring burns are incorporated into a comprehensive burn program that rotates burns on large managed areas. Benefits of spring burning may include improved breeding habitats in subsequent years, increases in fall food availability and potential improvements to adult and juvenile survival.

Other practical considerations have led some managers to use spring burning more extensively. Lightning-season fires can be more effective in restoring grass and forb ground cover in areas where hardwood shrubs and brush have become a nuisance. Lightning-season burns create good conditions for natural pine seedling establishment in fall and winter. Seed production for longleaf pine in particular is variable from year to year, and years with good seed crops can be difficult to discern very early in the calendar year. Spring fires also provide the open ground-cover conditions that improve longleaf germination and establishment. Finally, lightning-season fires provide a broader window in which burns can be conducted, and this could lead to a much-needed increase in the acreage burned each year.

Despite the many advantages of spring or growing season burning, winter burning is better than not burning at all, and in some cases is the best time to burn to achieve certain objectives.

SUPPORTING PRESCRIBED FIRE IN LOUISIANA

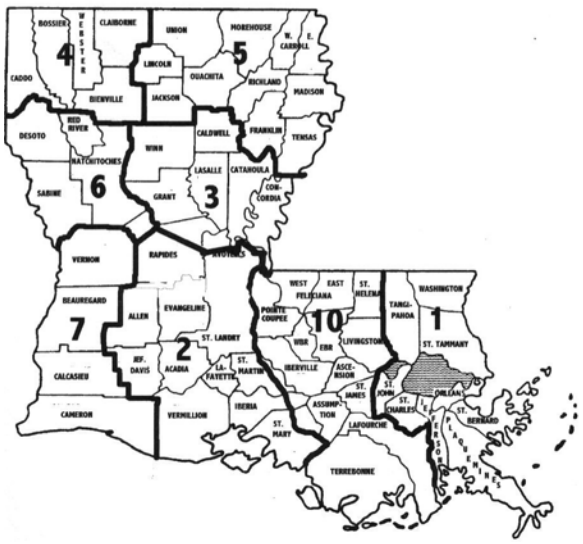
Many organizations, such as Prescribed Fire Councils now present in many states, are working to defend the use of fire and promote a wider use of fire for all its many benefits. One major impetus for the formation of the Louisiana Prescribed Fire Council (LPFC) is that the use of prescribed fire in the state has been declining in recent years due to a variety of factors, including an expanding population uneducated about the role and use of fire, concerns about liability, a general lack of appreciation for the benefits of prescribed fire, a lack of professional practitioners and other reasons. A major goal of the LPFC is to increase prescribed burning in the state for its many benefits. If you have a stake in prescribed fire, please consider joining the LPFC.

Latimore Smith is the current Chair of the Louisiana Prescribed Fire Council. For more information on the LPFC please contact Smith at latimore_smith@tnc.org.

LA Wildlife & Fisheries Regions

Region 1: (318) 371-3050
Region 2: (318) 343-4044
Region 3: (318) 487-5885
Region 4: (318) 757-4571
Region 5: (337) 491-2575
Region 6: (337) 948-0255
Region 7: (225) 765-2360

LA Department of Agriculture & Forestry - District Map



District 1: (985) 543-4057
District 2: (337) 639-4978
District 3: (318) 495-5218
District 4: (318) 949-3225
District 5: (318) 345-7579
District 6: (318) 357-3126
District 7: (337) 463-7801
District 10: (225) 683-5862

-LDWF file photo

Species Highlight: American Woodcock

Story by Fred Kimmel

Unless you spend a lot of time walking through wet woodland thickets in the winter or have watched the sky low on the horizon during the first and last few minutes of daylight, you may not have seen a woodcock in Louisiana. Woodcock are technically a shorebird, like snipe, plovers and terns. However, woodcock will seldom be found on a mudflat or shoreline. Instead young or scrubby woodland is the woodcock's preferred haunt.

Woodcock are well adapted to life in the woodlands. Their coloration makes them extremely difficult to see when they sit motionless among the leaf covered forest floor. They have a long bill, which is used to probe in the soil for earthworms, their primary food. The eyes of a woodcock are large and placed far back on their head so that they have a wide field of vision that enables them to avoid predators.

Typical woodcock habitat is similar throughout the woodcock's range. Whether the bird is in Minnesota or Louisiana, it chooses the same type of habitat. The species that comprise the habitat are different, but the structure of the habitat is virtually identical. Woodcock prefer areas of thick vegetation which offer little ground cover but dense overhead cover. The sparse ground cover allows this bird to move freely and feed while the overhead cover protects it from predators.

Woodcock are migratory, spending the winter in the southern United States and the remainder of the year in latitudes north of Tennessee and North Carolina. The majority of woodcock that winter in Louisiana migrate in the spring to the upper midwest states of Wisconsin, Michigan and Minnesota, although significant numbers migrate to the northeastern U.S. and Canada. Woodcock usually leave Louisiana in February and begin arriving on the northern breeding grounds in late March or early April. Each year a few woodcock remain in Louisiana to nest, but they are the exception.

Although it begins on the wintering grounds, the unique courtship behavior of woodcock is accelerated upon reaching the breeding grounds. At dusk and dawn, male woodcock move to openings in the forest or to fields and begin their courtship display. These openings are known as "singing grounds." The courtship display begins with the male woodcock alighted on the ground, emitting a nasal sounding "pent." This call is made every 2-4 seconds for about one minute. Then the male takes flight and begins a 45-60 second aerial display. The male woodcock flies in a spiral pattern above the singing ground and makes a warbling call. At the same time, the outer primary feathers on his wings are making a distinctive whistling sound. At the end of the flight, the male alights back at the singing ground and begins again.

The purpose of this courtship behavior is to attract females. Prior to nesting, females will visit the singing ground for breeding. Woodcock are polygamous, and a female may visit up to three males per evening. Even once nesting is begun females will continue to visit the singing grounds, although only sporadically.

For the males, there is a cost to this courtship behavior. Dominant males that do most of the displaying are vulnerable to predation during this period of high visibility and experience relatively high mortality. However, subdominant males are usually nearby and quickly fill the void if a predator takes the displaying woodcock.

Female woodcock lay four eggs in a leaf-lined shallow depression on the ground. Young hardwood stands, particularly aspen, are the preferred nesting habitat. Incubation lasts 21 days and the young woodcock leave the nest immediately following hatching. The broods will remain with the female woodcock for about five weeks and then disperse.

In late September and October, woodcock begin leaving the northern regions of their range. Timing of migration is dependent upon the latitude and weather. Woodcock often move ahead of a strong cold front.

Woodcock begin migrating into Louisiana in October with numbers peaking around Christmas. The number of woodcock in Louisiana and their distribution depends on weather. Cold, wet weather is needed to bring large numbers of birds into the traditional wintering grounds of south and central Louisiana. In this traditional wintering range, woodcock tend to be associated with bottomland hardwood habitat containing thick understory vegetation such as switchcane, rattanvine and blackberry, as well as dense stands of oak saplings. During warm

Good woodcock habitat usually contains very dense underbrush associated with wet soils.
-LDWF file photo

winters, large numbers of woodcock will often remain in north Louisiana along thickly vegetated drainages in the piney woods.

Wintering woodcock have distinctly different daytime and nighttime habitats. Daytime habitats are generally moist woodlands with a high stem density. Structure, rather than species composition is the key element that determines suitability of a site for woodcock. Woodcock spend the bulk of their time walking and foraging for food. They prefer clean ground to allow effective movement, with dense overhead cover to provide protection from predators. Commonly utilized cover includes sapling stage regeneration, blackberry thickets, switchcane thickets and tangles of vines.

Louisiana land managers can help provide habitat to wintering woodcock. Daytime cover is created by active forest management. Harvest cuts, thinning, timber stand improvement and creation of openings can benefit woodcock. While primarily a forest dwelling species, woodcock will also use old field habitat where goldenrod, giant ragweed or blackberry provides the requisite stem density. In short, practices that create a thicket will help woodcock.

Soil moisture is a key component of woodcock habitat. Earthworms comprise the largest part of a woodcock's diet. Moist soil allows woodcock to probe the soil with its bill and capture earthworms. Dry soil conditions make probing difficult for woodcock and causes earthworms to burrow deep, out of reach of the woodcock's bill.

At dusk, many woodcock will leave their daytime habitat and fly to nighttime field habitat where they will remain until dawn. Nighttime field habitat comes in many forms, harvested soybean fields, sugarcane fields, pastures and, in the pine regions of Louisiana, new clear-cuts. Fall-plowed corn fields are usually avoided. The characteristics of a good nighttime field habitat are similar to those of good daytime habitat. Adequate moisture and sparse ground cover are the most important requirements. Providing fields in close proximity to daytime habitat can enhance woodcock habitat.

The reason for nighttime use of fields is not well understood, since woodcock can, and do, feed in their daytime habitats. In addition, not all woodcock fly to a field every night. Research conducted on Sherburne Wildlife Management Area in south-central Louisiana indicates that the frequency of field use by individual birds can be highly variable. In some winters, radio-tagged woodcock used fields nearly every night. In other years, the birds flew to fields only about 30-60 percent of the nights. Perhaps earthworms, which are the staple of the woodcock's diet, are more abundant in these fields. This behavior may also be a way of avoiding avian predators such as owls, since open fields contain few perches and the woodcock can take advantage of its wide field of vision. Regardless of the specific reason, we must assume that nocturnal field use benefits woodcock. Otherwise, they would have evolved away from this behavior which consumes energy and exposes them to predators during their flight to the field.

Prescribed burning is one of the best methods for creating a good nighttime field for woodcock. Burning removes layers of grass and dead vegetation, but will leave a few scattered stalks and patches of cover that provides desirable vertical structure. A low-lying field containing scattered areas of standing water throughout the winter is the best site for nighttime woodcock habitat. Wet fields dominated by broomsedge or goldenrod provide excellent nighttime habitat when burned.

Although prescribed burning is a preferred method of creating nighttime habitat, mowing or grazing can also produce good results. Portions of wet fields should be kept closely mowed or grazed throughout the winter months in order to be attractive to woodcock.

Woodcock are hunted throughout Louisiana by a small group of dedicated hunters who specialize in seeking out these secretive and challenging game birds. Woodcock hunting is usually done with a pointing dog such as a Brittany spaniel, English setter or English pointer. A controlled flushing dog such as a springer spaniel or Labrador retriever can be productive as well. Woodcock hold well for a dog on point and although they are relatively slow flyers, quick reflexes are needed because the thickets in which they are typically found afford hunters little time to react before the bird disappears. Woodcock have an uncanny ability to flush in an unexpected direction or fly behind a tree just as a hunter pulls the trigger.

The secretive nature of woodcock makes surveying their population very difficult. The only time these birds make their presence known is during courtship when the males are actively displaying. A survey has been devised to take advantage of this opportunity by counting singing males. The Singing Ground Survey, as it is known, is run during the spring on over 750 routes in the woodcock's traditional northern breeding range. This survey provides a long-term index of woodcock abundance. Woodcock abundance as measured by the singing ground survey has shown a steady decline since 1968. The rate of decline has been 1.2 percent annually.

The precise reasons for the apparent decline in the continental woodcock population are not known, however most biologists agree that habitat deterioration in the breeding regions is probably the most important long-term factor. Short-term declines can sometimes be linked to weather such as drought or late freezes that limit nesting and reproductive success. Ideal nesting habitat for woodcock consists of young hardwood stands, particularly aspen, and scattered openings. Over much of the landscape, the forest has matured, resulting in deteriorating habitat for woodcock and other early successional forest birds. Timber management activities, such as thinning and the careful use of clearcutting are needed for regeneration of the young forest required by woodcock.

When you are in the woods this winter take some time to watch the sky during the first and last light of the day and perhaps you will get a glimpse of a woodcock as it makes its way between its day and night habitats. If you are lucky, you may even witness the courtship flight of a male woodcock and be treated to one of nature's best-kept secrets.

Fred Kimmel is an Upland Game Program Manager for LDWF.

Portions of this article originally appeared in the Dec/Nov 1998* Louisiana Conservationist *Magazine as "Woodcock – Denizens of the Woodlands."

Andy Kimmel and Buddy, a Brittany spaniel, on a successful hunt at Sherburne WMA.
-Fred Kimmel, LDWF

Employee Highlight

Story by Cody Cedotal

Many readers may remember back to the Fall 2005 issue of the Forest Stewardship Newsletter, when the employee highlight article focused on then Assistant Management Branch Chief and State Stewardship Coordinator for the Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry (LDAF) Office of Forestry, Mike Thomas. During this past year along with many other personnel changes, Mike Thomas has been promoted to Management Branch Chief for LDAF. This move left the Assistant Management Branch Chief/State Stewardship Coordinator position vacant, until recently.

In September 2008, Michael Buchart (Mike) was named Assistant Management Branch Chief and the State Stewardship Coordinator for LDAF. LDAF is the agency responsible for administering the Forest Stewardship Program (FSP) and the State Stewardship Coordinator is the person responsible for supervising this task.

Mike attended Louisiana State University (LSU), where he graduated in 1979 with a Bachelor of Science Degree in Forestry and Wildlife Management from the School of Forestry, Widlife and Fisheries. He started working with LDAF in 1981 as a hardwood management forester in Lafayette, La. In this position, Mike was responsible for addressing hardwood management issues for private landowners throughout the state. In 1985, Mike moved to Baton Rouge, La. and was promoted to supervise the Forest Products Marketing, Utilization and Development Program where he was responsible for facilitating development of Louisiana's forest resources and associated businesses both domestically and internationally. It was a job that required much dedication and travel. Throughout his career with the department, Mike has been involved with biomass energy development, emergency preparedness, safety and loss prevention, loss claims management and numerous special projects.

Mike, his wife and his three children currently reside in Baton Rouge. He occupies much of his free time hunting, fishing and spending time with his family on his houseboat in Bayou Plaquemine. Having been so active in forest management in Louisiana throughout his 27-year career with LDAF, I am sure the transition to State Stewardship Coordinator will be seamless. I look forward to the opportunity work with him and continue to advance the Forest Stewardship Program in the future. Just be sure to clarify which "Mike" you want to speak with when you call the Office of Forestry in Baton Rouge.

Mike Buchart with a nice buck harvested in West Baton Rouge Parish

Louisiana Forest Stewardship Newsletter

Louisiana Department of Agriculture & Forestry
Mike Strain DVM, Commissioner
Office of Forestry
Post Office Box 1628
5825 Florida Blvd.
Baton Rouge, LA 70806

NON-PROFIT
PERMIT NO. 965
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
BATON ROUGE, LA