Andrew McMurtrie

The Public Interest in Private Lands

Why it benefits Tennessee's wildlife and sportsmen to invest in private lands habitat.

by Mark Gudlin

The daily wildlife ebb and flow rolls on through the picture window of Frank and JoAnn Gillingham's Henderson County home.

First, the deer appear at dawn to nip the tender twigs and fruits of the wild plum and apple trees. In the mid-morning, a flock of wild turkeys search for insects and seeds in the meadow, followed by a pair of squirrels chasing each other along the patio wall. Later, the butterflies and hummingbirds flit among the blooming wildflowers. Finally, the wood duck and blue-winged teal land in the shallow water area in the early evening.

The effort to transform their farm into a "wildlife haven" was one of the best investments the Gillinghams say they've made. Their dream was enabled by the technical know-how provided by the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency (TWRA) and United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) private lands biologists and through cost-share assistance by USDA that helped it become affordable. Now in "maintenance mode," they continue their habitat management activities on their own.

For many other private landowners as well, bountiful and diverse wildlife on the farm provide innumerable hours of viewing recreation, nature learning opportunities, and often the chance to harvest tasty table fare throughout the hunting and trapping seasons.

Undeniably, the approximately two million acres of public lands in Tennessee protect and preserve some of our state's most unique and scenic lands, waterways, and wildlife. However, more than 90 percent of Tennessee's land is privately owned.

Charged with managing all of the state's wildlife, the TWRA cannot adequately address many wildlife species by working on public lands alone. For the 1.58

(above) There are approximately two million acres of public lands in Tennessee, however more than 90 percent of Tennessee land is privately owned. (photograph by Andrew McMurtrie)

Frank Fiss

(above) Helping guide landowners to install conservation practices that filter sediments, pesticides and excess nutrients from entering our streams result in cleaner water and better fishing.

Mark Gudlin

(above) The vast majority of hunting in Tennessee occurs on private lands.

Conservation Programs Used Most Commonly in Tennessee.

Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) – primarily geared towards cropland and marginal pastureland along streams, sinkholes and waterways. Contracts of 10 to 15 years that provide combinations of practice cost-share, extra incentives, and annual payments for removing land from production.

Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) – cost-share only, although some practices include "foregone income" in the payment to partially offset taking land out of production. Most rural lands are eligible; program is utilized most by landowners that own land not primarily used for crop or livestock production (but it can be used on those lands).

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) – targeted at working agricultural lands, but most commonly used by lands used for livestock production. Cost-share only, except for some practices that include a foregone income offset.

Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) – utilizes mainly 30-year and permanent easements in which suitable lands are restored to wetlands and/or bottomland hardwoods.

million acres of TWRA managed lands (which includes lands leased or co-managed) about 84 percent is forested, 6 percent is wetland, and only 6.5 percent is in field habitat, half of which is cropped. For species like the bobwhite quail, Bachman's and grasshopper sparrows, meadow jumping mouse, and northern pine snake, suitable native grassland habitats on private lands need to be addressed in order to maintain commonly occurring, and in the case of bobwhites, huntable populations.

The manner in which private lands are used significantly impact public environmental benefits, from the air we breathe to the water we drink, swim or fish in, to the long term agricultural and timber productivity potential of our land to the aesthetics of forests and fields in the countryside we view on a Sunday afternoon drive or a float down our favorite river or stream.

Most of TWRA's past wildlife successes, including white-tailed deer, wild turkey, otter, and Canada geese, involved releasing animals in existing sufficient habitat and protecting them from illegal or overharvest. For several species like wood ducks and bluebirds, erecting nesting boxes where natural sites were limited, was the key. For recovery of many other nongame wildlife and declining hunted species like bobwhites, large-scale restoration of specific habitat types must occur before true success can be realized. Accomplishing this in the face of increasing human populations and many detrimental land use practices make this an even more formidable task.

In recent years, more funding has been available on an annual basis in Tennessee through USDA conservation programs that can improve wildlife habitat than the amount of the entire TWRA budget. My responsibilities in TWRA are to coordinate with USDA and other state and federal agencies to improve the wildlife potential in private lands assistance programs.

Since June 2007, TWRA and NRCS have jointly supported four Private Lands Biologists (PLBs) that work out of NRCS offices in each region of the state to develop habitat plans for landowners and guide them to financial assistance, if desired. Each TWRA PLB works in concert with a NRCS Area Wildlife Biologist, and together they have influenced Tennessee's success in securing increased funding for several USDA conservation programs and have assisted in restoring tens of thousands of acres of wildlife habitat on private lands. They not only work one-on-one with landowners, but also conduct periodic land management workshops often sponsored by

Mike Hansborough

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(above) Frank and JoAnn Gillingham and a recently prescribe burned portion of their native grass and wildflower stands. Inset shows how beautifully the wildflowers came back two months later.

UT Extension, Soil Conservation Districts, and wildlife organizations. A number of other states with successful private lands programs have similar cooperative biologist positions.

Water quality is a critical and growing concern for humans and is essential for most wildlife. Many of the state's at-risk wildlife are aquatic, primarily fish and mussels. Providing assistance to landowners to restore adequate herbaceous or forested buffers, to limit sediments and excess nutrients from entering streams, is offered through most USDA and state habitat cost-share programs. In addition to seeking clean waters that support quality fishing experiences in our streams and reservoirs, over one in three Tennessee anglers fished at least once on private ponds or lakes sometime during their annual expeditions in 2008.

Participation in habitat programs does not obligate landowners to open their property to public access. So in addition to the general public benefits and wildlife population aspects mentioned, why should sportsmen support TWRA license dollars being spent on private lands when

Recent conservation program successes include:

* Restoration of over 30,000 acres of wetlands and bottomland hardwoods under the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP). Some rare and declining bottomland hardwood and wetland wildlife species have been documented on several WRP sites including the barking treefrog, crawfish frog, southern cricket frog, Swainson's warbler, prairie warbler, and green heron.
* Over 5,000 acres of high quality bobwhite habitat (with several thousand acres more in the contract approval process) restored under CRP's State Acres For Wildlife Enhancement program in 20 middle and west Tennessee counties. Several monitored sites to date are showing a good response by bobwhites and other grassland songbirds.
* Over 53 miles of livestock exclusion fencing of streams and almost 200 acres of tree or grass buffers restored under the Tennessee Landowner Incentive Program in several high priority aquatic watersheds with imperiled or federally listed species.

Lee Wilmot

(above) The first "Land and Wildlife Expo" was held on the Opryland grounds in August 2011. This new annual event targets showcasing land management technical assistance, equipment, habitat practices and other resources available to landowners and land managers.

open public access is not required?

Approximately 75 percent of deer and turkey hunters hunt private land exclusively, and 77 to 89 percent of all quail and rabbit hunts occur on private land. Hunting access on private lands is widely recognized as an increasing problem for hunters in light of an increasingly urban landscape and decreasing farm size. For landowners to be willing to share hunting access, whether through leasing or free permission, the abundance of the harvestable populations is a big factor (anyone remember what it was like getting permission to hunt wild turkeys when they were scarce?).

When wildlife populations (the resource) are more abundant, landowners are generally more willing to share the resource and allow access to a wider circle of friends and family (part of the hunting public) or even the responsible hunter that politely approaches the landowner to ask permission. While some landowners will always be resistant to allowing any type of hunting or fishing access on their property, increasing the abundance of wildlife on private lands is a major first step in increasing hunter access opportunities, whether by simple permission or Agency funded access programs. Additionally, more people are purchasing land for the primary purpose of wildlife recreation.

Increasing ways for landowners to affordably improve wildlife habitat and land conservation will continue to be a goal for TWRA's private lands efforts. Together, private landowners and agencies like the TWRA and USDA can help secure the welfare of our state's fish and wildlife and hunting and fishing heritage.

Mark Gudlin is TWRA's Private Lands Liaison, coordinating with USDA and other government agencies and conservation organizations to increase wildlife habitat on private lands. Mark has worked with various wildlife and habitat programs for most of his 28-year career.

Where Can I Get Help?

In addition to writing habitat plans, biologists also assist landowners to secure specialized native grass seed drills and spray rigs and help them calibrate the equipment so habitat establishment and management efforts are successful.

Whether your property is urban, backyard or relatively small (less than 10 acres) and you simply need information you can implement yourself, or need a written management plan for larger tracts, TWRA has a wealth of management information at www.twraprivatelands.org and www.tnwildlifehabitat.org.

Also included is a listing of private lands biologists and other resource professionals for each county under "Who to Contact for Technical Assistance."