

Prescribed Fire: What the Doctor Ordered

James Earl Kenamer, Ph.D., NWTF's chief conservation officer, discusses burning issues.



Question: What is a prescribed fire?

Answer: Prescribed fires are safe and manageable fires that are set intentionally under desirable conditions to burn forest debris, control understory vegetation, and manage native grasslands. Without prescribed fire, unwanted plants and trees will overtake the forest floor and grasslands. The absence of prescribed fire allows hazardous fuels to build up causing the forest floor to become susceptible to devastating wildfires.

Question: How are prescribed burns conducted?

Answer: Some prescribed burns are ignited by dropping pingpong balls from **helicopters**. These ignite on impact. Other fires are lit from ground level using **drip torches**. However they are ignited, prescribed fires are closely monitored by trained land managers to ensure the fires are effective and safe.

Question: How are prescribed fires different from fires that are known to cause damage to homes and property?

Answer: Wildfires cause damage to thousands of acres and devastate homes every year. When ignited, these fires are difficult to control due to unfavorable weather conditions including low humidity, high temperature and high winds, and unnatural fuel loads. Prescribed fires are conducted when weather conditions are favorable. They burn during favorable weather conditions, which include high humidity, low temperature and low winds and are less likely than wildfires to spread. Using prescribed fire as a habitat management tool significantly reduces the chance of a wildfire occurring in the immediate area.

Question: What is the difference between dormant season prescribed burns and growing season burns?

Answer: Dormant season burns are conducted from December to February when no new foliage is growing in the forest; growing season burns are conducted between March and July.

Question: With wild turkey hens nesting in the spring, why would land managers burn in areas where wild turkey nests may be destroyed?

Answer: Growing season burns are often a controversial topic because wild turkey hens nest in the spring, and their nests may be destroyed during a burn. Some believe nest loss will harm turkey populations, but the benefits of improved habitat far outweigh the few destroyed nests. In fact, even if a nest is lost, up to two-thirds of hens will likely re-nest.

Question: In what ways do prescribed burns help wildlife?

Answer: Fire is a wonderful tool, and a natural part of life. It removes fuel that causes wildfires and clears the ground so native grasses and plants that benefit wildlife can grow. It also prevents woody vegetation from overtaking a forest floor, which would prevent wildlife from nesting and foraging for food.

Question: How does burning positively impact wildlife species besides wild turkeys -- especially any threatened or endangered species or species of special concern?

Answer: If used properly, prescribed fire is one of the most beneficial and cost-effective habitat management tools available to land managers. Some populations of birds, mammals, reptiles and amphibians have declined in the absence of fire. Prescribed fire maintains early stages of plant succession that many game and threatened and endangered species require.

Question: Is it true that wildlife avoid areas that have been burned?

Answer: Many species of wildlife depend on prescribed fire to provide suitable habitat. Turkeys, white-tailed deer and other wildlife are often observed feeding in blackened fields even as the ashes are still smoldering.

Question: The NWTF technical committee and NWTF passed a resolution for the organization regarding prescribed fire several years ago. What has the NWTF done to show support for this management practice?

Answer: In addition to signing the prescribed fire resolution, NWTF state and local chapters have spent nearly \$383,000 to help fund prescribed fire projects to improve more than 273,000 acres since 2002. Volunteers donate money through the NWTF's Hunting Heritage Super Fund program to further the work that government agencies do on the ground.



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Did you know?

In 2008, the USDA Forest Service conducted prescribed burns or wildland fire use on more than 1.6 million acres of land throughout the U.S. Nearly 801,000 of those acres were burned during the growing season.

In the Southeast alone, the reduction of fire has accelerated decline in:

Birds: Bachman's sparrows, loggerhead shrikes, prairie warblers, Henslow sparrows, painted buntings and Northern bobwhite quails

Mammals: Sherman's fox squirrels and Southeastern pocket gophers

Reptiles/Amphibians: Eastern diamondback rattlesnakes, Eastern indigo snakes, black pine snakes.

What is wildland fire use?

Wildland fire use is when fire managers allow a natural fire to burn into an area that has been designated for prescribed fire to accomplish resource management goals. In other words, if a wildfire breaks out near an area that is slated for prescribed fire, land managers can use the wildfire to burn the designated area.