



Birds of a Feather

Diverse partners restore a landscape across boundaries.

By Michelle Burnett and Gwyn Ingram



Forest Service Chief Gail Kimbell and Enoree District Ranger Beth LeMaster with John R. McGuire award. (Ricky Wrenn photo)

When European settlers moved into the South Carolina piedmont, they navigated lush woodlands teeming with wildlife. American Indian inhabitants of the area routinely burned off the forest undergrowth, creating open forested areas of mature pine and hardwoods and lush meadows of bunch grasses, forbs and flowers. Bears, deer, elk and even bison roamed the landscape; the grasslands were rich with rabbits, wild turkeys and quail; and the trees were filled with songbirds.

But the nature of the landscape would change with its settlement; land was cleared for farming and the lush woodland habitat steadily diminished. Much of the piedmont forests would rapidly transform into farmland and remain as such into the depression years, when many farmers pulled up stakes and moved on.

In the subsequent years to the present, suitable habitat receded with the spread of urban areas and the changing of agricultural practices. The propagation of non-native grasses for livestock fodder introduced those foreign species to wild lands. Once established, they out-competed native warm season grasses which provided habitat for quail and certain songbirds; the area suffered declines in those species.

Because any change in an ecosystem has a ripple effect up the chain, land management professionals recognized a need for action, and so the Indian Creek Wildlife Habitat Restoration Initiative was born.

Partnerships, Partnerships, Partnerships!

In 2004, the US Forest Service (USFS), SC Department of Natural Resources (SCDNR) and USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) first came together to discuss what would become today an approximately 16,000-acre project including national forest (8,300 acres) and private lands (7,700). The

initiative is a cooperative partnership comprised of state, federal and local agencies; private landowners; and conservation organizations (Clemson University Cooperative Extension Service, East Piedmont Resource Conservation and Development Council, National Wild Turkey Federation, NRCS, Newberry Soil and Water Conservation District, Quail Unlimited, SCDNR, South Carolina Forestry Commission, USFS and 21 private landowners).

Its main purpose is to restore and improve habitat for species that depend on grassland and similar habitats to the point where it resembles landscape the European settlers saw when they first arrived in the area.

Improving Wildlife Habitat and Forest Health

The partners are working toward the goal of improving wildlife habitat and forest health on both national forest and private lands in a variety of ways, including: encouraging and facilitating implementation of management practices on national forest lands; contacting all private landowners within the initiative area and encouraging them to participate; maintaining an ongoing cost-share program for private landowners through the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (through NRCS), the National Forest Foundation and other sources; implementing an aggressive and effective public relations and outreach plan; monitoring and tracking habitat improvements; monitoring populations of select wildlife species; and serving as a model for public/private land partnerships through integrated resource management, applied science and public education.

If You Create the Habitat, They Will Come

Various land management practices within the project area target creation of habitat for species such as bobwhite quail, Bachman's Sparrow, Henslow's Sparrow, Loggerhead Shrike and other species that benefit from early successional habitat. Activities that help create this habitat include selective harvesting, prescribed burning, selective herbicide application and native warm season grass establishment. Through use of the Wyden Amendment, the Forest Service is able to burn adjacent private land when burning agency land.

To date, the accomplishments in the project area on private lands include: native warm season grass establishment (44.1 acres); native warm season grass no till (68.1 acres); prescribed burning (1,028 acres in 2006; 668.2 acres in 2008); timber stand improvement (741 acres); and debris removal (logging decks-19.5 acres).

On national forest lands, accomplishments include: National Environmental Policy Act approved on 3,305 acres of regeneration and 5,083 acres of thinning; and prescribed burning (2,501 acres in 2006; 2,160 acres in 2007).

Setting a National Example

Such numbers alone attest to the project's success, but it seems that creative collaboration is not just its own reward. On November 14, Forest Service Chief Gail Kimbell and Southern Region Regional Forester Liz Agpaoa traveled to the Sumter National Forest to honor the employees of the Enoree Ranger District for

the Indian Creek Wildlife Habitat Restoration Initiative.

The National Association of Forest Service Retirees (NAFSR) presented the district with the national John R. McGuire Award for outstanding work in natural resource management. The award is named in honor of John R. McGuire, who served as the 10th Chief of the Forest Service from 1972-1979, and helped draft the National Forest Management Act. The NAFSR is a nonprofit organization of former agency employees who are dedicated to the promotion of the ideals and principles of natural resource conservation on national forests.

"This project represents the joining of people from all disciplines to tackle an issue that transcends property boundaries," said Francis Marion and Sumter National Forests Forest Supervisor Jerome Thomas. "It is a fine example of bringing to the table each of our different perspectives and moving forward effectively with a common goal. It is through partnerships like this that we can hope not only to promote a wider understanding of our goals as an agency, but also to gain a more personal understanding of the hopes and concerns of the public."

Looking Toward the Future

The most important and unique attribute of the overall initiative remains the integration of work across adjoining public and private lands and the benefits that will be realized from this partnership. The project is a true example of how partners can come together with a common goal to manage on a landscape scale that slows or reverses declining breeding populations of particular wildlife species that flourish in early seral stage habitats.

While 21 landowners are currently involved, the potential exists for up to 43 private landowners to participate. Given the accomplishments of the award-winning project thus far and the resourcefulness and creativity of its participants, it is undoubtedly only a matter of time before more private landowners join the exceptional partnership that makes the Indian Creek Wildlife Habitat Restoration Initiative such a great success.

For more information contact Gwyn Ingram at 803-561-4007