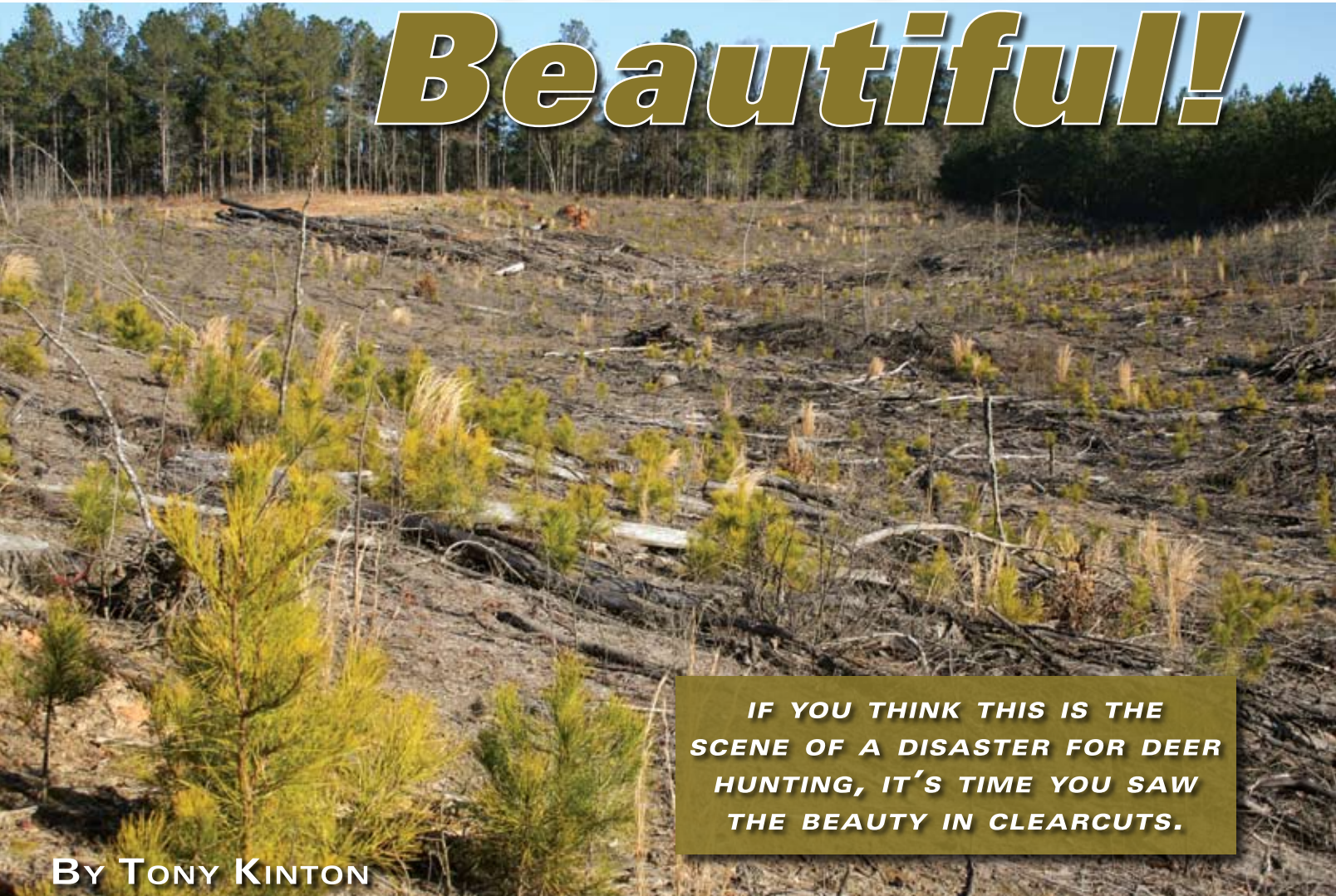


CLEARCUTS Can Be Beautiful!



IF YOU THINK THIS IS THE SCENE OF A DISASTER FOR DEER HUNTING, IT'S TIME YOU SAW THE BEAUTY IN CLEARCUTS.

BY TONY KINTON

The reaction varies but generally always carries an element of shock, regret, lament.

“This place will never be the same.”

“Our deer herd is doomed.”

“I just don’t think I can come back here. This place is pretty and a clearcut will just make it unbearably ugly.”

The comments go on and on.

And some of them are accurate: The place will never be the same, and a new clearcut is anything but pleasant to view. But in the midst of inevitable change brought by a timber harvest and the removal of trees that perhaps once made a particular spot breathtaking to look at, unexpected benefits and opportunities can emerge. This is particularly true as it relates to whitetails. That dreaded clearcut, a common stage in a logical cycle of timber management, can be, in a strange sort of way, beautiful!

Before delving into the beauty and benefits of clearcuts, let’s set aside any discussion regarding whether or not to implement a clearcut. That question has been covered thoroughly in previous issues of this publication. Clearcuts might be the preferred option in a number of timber-management situations, or they might be the only option – as with insect infestations (see the preced-

ing article on gypsy moths for just one example). Additionally, the decision to clearcut is often not under the control of hunters. These individuals lease hunting lands from individual landowners and/or timber companies, and cutting schedules are seldom a part of the lease agreement. As a result, the hunter must deal with whatever comes his or her way. Some hunters view a new clearcut as a reduction in the value of the leased land. Certainly, if the loggers appear in November and start cutting in the vicinity of your favorite stand, this is not a good thing. Yet, there is a silver lining to the dark cloud. So let’s attempt to calm any unreasonable fears held by hunters and replace them with a long list of positive attributes common to clearcuts.

IMMEDIATE ACTIVITY

Perhaps the first thing to look at in this list is the use of clearcuts by deer; this can be almost immediate.

“Deer are curious animals,” said Les Shelby, a registered forester with May and Associates from Brandon, Mississippi. Les has managed the timber on my land for several years now. He is also an avid outdoorsman and understands my goals as these relate to a solid and productive relationship between timber harvest and

wildlife. (Editor's Note: For more about Tony's 210-acre property in central Mississippi, refer back to "The Joys of Small Acreage" in the October 2005 issue of *Quality Whitetails*).

"Once a site is disturbed, deer tend to investigate," Les said. "Many times we have checked logging operations and found deer tracks all around the loading areas and throughout the clearcut area."

Whether or not this immediate use benefits the hunter in actually collecting deer depends a great deal upon when the clearcut is made. If no hunting seasons are open, there are obviously no hunting opportunities created by this stage of curiosity when the skidders stop for the day. Still, it indicates that deer are there and active and can be a productive time for some glassing and observing.

THE FIRST FALL

But fast forward a few months. Give the site a spring and summer. This time span can transform that dismal collection of dirt and left-over debris into a thing of true beauty where white-tails are concerned.

The very act of disturbing the soil and opening the ground to sunlight creates a growing phenomenon. Seeds that have lain dormant for years will sprout, and many of these are highly favored by deer, greatly increasing the diversity of forage and browse species available. Hunters who cringed at the thought of finding a clearcut on their hunting lands may find themselves gravitating to that clearcut for some serious hunting. Almost without exception, deer will be there in the fall after a clearcut has had the

advantage of one spring/summer growing season. Food should be abundant, and deer frequent the site. Visibility for hunting is



Far left: The author was watching a clearcut and using his Sharps rifle when he filled a doe tag.

Left: This big doe, taken by the author with a 54-lb. bamboo and osage stickbow, left the tangle of a clearcut sanctuary and eased into a stand of oaks adjacent to it.

Top: The author took this doe from a newly-established food plot on the edge of a clearcut. He used a .54-caliber flintlock for the hunt.

also much improved.

"We have noticed one thing," adds Les. "Once the clearcut is completed, deer stands seem to appear out of nowhere around the edge or in the middle of the harvested area. This indicates to me that hunters can see the deer better and/or there are more deer in these areas than before the harvest due to improved browse."

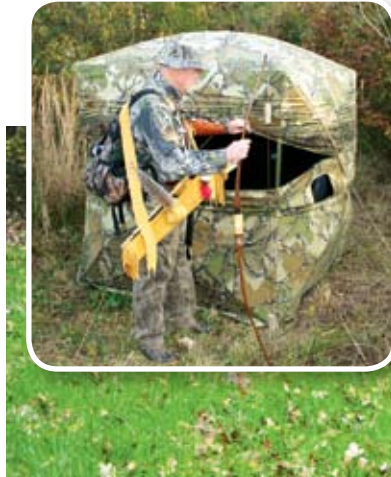
THREE YEARS IN

Move forward in time again on this same site. Let's go three years or so. There is still some browse; there may be quite a bit in fact, depending on the the height of the vegetation and the community of species that develops (site-specific problems with invasive plants, for example, may reduce forage diversity more quickly). But there is also cover. Ample and desirable cover, which will be used extensively by deer. This begins a stage and usage that may last for 10 or more years, depending upon when the stand is to be thinned. At that point the bedding cover can again become productive browse and continue the cycle of deer use. But let's not get ahead of ourselves. Let's go back to that three-year-old stand found in the original clearcut.

Continued.

One function of clearcutting is to begin a new stand of trees, and these often are a variety more desirable for that specific site. In many cases, particularly across the Southeast, the tree of choice is the loblolly pine, but regardless of what tree is established in the clearcut, the site will progress in a rather predictable fashion.

Within approximately three years of the initial clearing, the site will be covered in vegetation tall enough to hide a deer – and much taller in many cases. These areas then become viable bedding locales for deer. In addition to the primary trees for a future harvest, there will be other volunteer species, along with briars and brambles and all manner of tangles that impede walking. Deer seek out these spots because they are less likely to be disturbed there, and that moonscape clearcut of three years back becomes a holding site for neighborhood whitetails. It will remain so for several years. Visibility from stands along the clearcut's edge is now gone, but this opportunity is traded for new benefits.



Clearcuts provide opportunities for establishing new food plots (below). Ground blinds (left) are a great way to hunt clearcuts with limited treestand sites.



THE SANCTUARY PHASE

A good practice at such times is to set these tangles aside as sanctuaries. Stay out. And keep disturbance on the perimeters to a minimum.

On my property there is a horseshoe-shaped block of woods that contains approximately 60 acres. The block is surrounded on three sides by a woods road and on the other side by a small creek – the terminal point of my property. The north end of the block is 36 acres of pine plantation that drops to a stand of hardwoods and a food plot down near the creek. Those 36 acres are a sanctuary. No one goes in there, and the only traffic on the roads comes from a small tractor or two at planting time. If I had to select one spot on the entire property that would almost assure a hunter of getting a shot, it would be where that plantation (sanctuary) gives way to the hardwoods. And it started 12 years back as a clearcut.

Though the clearcut no longer provides a stand site of its own, as a sanctuary it creates multiple “satellite” hunting opportunities on trails and destination sites surrounding this high-quality cover.

PATTERNS CHANGE – FOR THE BETTER

Do new clearcuts change deer travel patterns? Logic would say they do, but a recent clearcut on my land doesn't support this. The cut is relatively small, 21 acres. It, like the block just mentioned, has a woods road on three sides which was in existence long before the clearcut. The cut stops at the end of a long hollow in a stand of hardwoods.

For years I could count on finding two or three active trails crisscrossing the area that is now clearcut and saw deer from time to time in the woods along these trails. One trail always contained a line of scrapes, and I collected a buck along this trail one year. Sightings of a deer or two per hunting session were common. Then came the clearcut!

Two hunting seasons have now passed. From a stand at the north edge of the cut along the woods road I saw 17 deer the first morning I hunted it. These were using the most common trail from days past when the hollow was covered in woods. One morning I saw five bucks on that trail, more than I saw during some entire seasons before the cut was made. Seems the deer have not changed their travel patterns at all, at least not in this small area. And while I have actually taken only one deer from that 21-acre

Clearcut Benefits

Proper habitat management is important for successful deer management programs. In forested environments habitat quality is partly governed by the tree species present and their range of age classes. A range of age classes is important as mature forests only produce 50 to 100 pounds of browse per acre while early successional habitats, such as those created by clearcuts, can produce 1,000 to 2,000 pounds of browse per acre. Given the average deer eats approximately 2,000 pounds of forage per year, it is clear that early successional habitats provide a lot more forage and can sustain many more deer than mature forests.

cut in the two years it has been so cooperative, I have very much enjoyed the shows that came practically every morning and afternoon I visited the area. One, maybe two more years, and it will be covered over with vegetation – just in time to create another sanctuary to replace the one in the 36 acres that will be ready for thinning. With foresight and planning, a land manager can coordinate small, strategically placed clearcuts every couple of years to ensure that each stage of benefits – from stand site to sanctuary – is always available.

THE PROVERBIAL BLANK SLATE

What about other attributes? If permission can be obtained from the landowner to do so, a clearcut presents an ideal opportunity for planning and implementing new food plots. The hub-and-spoke pattern is a good one, and a clearcut is the perfect place to establish it. Open lanes radiate outward from a central stand site, and these lanes are kept open and planted in forage crops after the surrounding cover has regenerated.

The same can be said for developing or relocating roads and firebreaks. The ground is relatively clear and receptive to new avenues of travel. Additionally, you can see the lay of the land far better after a clearcut and make more accurate decisions regarding the placement of these roads, firebreaks and plots.

And certainly don't neglect this perfect opportunity to put in specific mast trees and/or mast/fruit-tree plots. Mast trees can be clustered about in the opening and are sure to be appreciated by hunters in future years. The clearcut gives that freedom. And plots of mast or fruit trees can be strategically situated along those new roads so that the plots can be tended and maintained. This was likely not an option when the land was filled with mature timber. That unsightly clearcut made it all possible.

Clearcuts are generally dreaded. They do change the land, but that change can often be for the better. And they do take a bit of getting used to from a visual standpoint. But viewed in the proper perspective, these inevitable happenings in the timber industry – and thus the hunting world – can indeed be beautiful. When faced with a clearcut, look for the opportunities and you will find the beauty!



About the Author: Tony Kinton of Carthage, Mississippi, is an outdoor writer who has published more than 2,000 articles in state, regional and national magazines. He is the editor of *Mississippi Wildlife Officer* magazine and the hunting editor for *Primitive Archer* magazine. He has published four books, and he has hunted big game in 16 states, four Canadian provinces, and South Africa.

About This Article

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