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PART 3:

Fallacies of Food Plots for producing **MORE TURKEYS**

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In the previous two installments of this series, we dispelled the most common misconception regarding the role of food plots in wildlife management—that you can feed your way into big bucks and plenty of quail. Whereas food plots are useful tools that can be used to enhance nutritional quality and availability of a property *food frequently is not the limiting factor!* And the amount of acres that must be put into food plots to raise the nutritional plane of selected species is beyond most landowners. Simply providing food will not help you achieve your wildlife management goals in most cases. As we pointed out, to produce large antlered deer (which seems to be what most people want), it is much more effective to use harvest management to shift the age structure of your deer population to that of older (three to seven years old) bucks. Once a deer reaches maturity, more resources (i.e., energy), are allocated to antler development rather than growth and maintenance as in younger deer. For quail, habitat structure is important—maintaining early succession plant communities over much of your property. Quail need areas that are relatively open at ground level with an annual grass and forb plant community overhead. You can't feed your way into large antlered deer or abundant quail; other factors must be considered. The same is true for turkeys.

Think Outside the Plot

On the first day of class in my senior level wildlife course, we discuss two approaches to wildlife habitat management: *attracting wildlife* and *producing wildlife*. Attracting wildlife is a commonly practiced and accepted form of habitat management. Depending upon your objectives, that may be all that you need to do. Attracting wildlife works just fine....*as long as there is wildlife to attract!* If there isn't any wildlife within the vicinity to attract, food plots used as attractants will undoubtedly produce disappointing results. All animals need a home in which to live; and the better suited that home is, the better they will do in terms of surviving and reproducing. As we discussed in the previous article about quail, creation of the proper habitat structure (a home) outside of the food plot is the pathway to producing more wild quail. In simple terms, you need to *"think outside the plot"* to achieve your wildlife objectives in many cases. Chances are, your property is no exception to the above axiom.

Attraction vs. Production

Attracting wildlife is oftentimes mistaken for producing wildlife. There is a distinct difference between the two, and it is at times difficult for some people to fully understand and appreciate. For example, chufa is an excellent turkey food and is commonly

“ *Food plots are supplemental practices—practices that should be used in addition to existing habitat and population management practices.* ”

planted as a winter/spring food source. Turkeys congregate to areas where chufa is planted to take advantage of this nutritious and relatively easy-to-obtain food source. Obviously, these birds are coming from somewhere, either from other areas of your property or from adjacent properties. These birds are being *produced* elsewhere. Intuitively, one would think that they've produced more turkeys because they consistently see birds on a chufa field during the hunting season. But this is in all likelihood not necessarily so. You've likely just *attracted* turkeys to the area, giving you the impression that you've produced turkeys. But have you really produced *more* turkeys? Probably not. Sure, the chufa plot has contributed to some extent to the nutritional needs of turkeys, and improved body condition can lead to increased nesting effort. But has it really contributed to the production of turkey, particularly survival and reproduction? Or more specifically, did this chufa plot *measurably* enhance the two main drivers of turkey populations: nest success and poult survival? Likely not. Similar to quail, turkeys need proper habitat outside of the food plot to survive and successfully reproduce. As professional wildlife biologists, we spend our time on managing habitat to produce more turkeys, not just attracting them.

Addressing the Survival Bottleneck

Adult turkeys generally have high survival rates. In fact, by far the number one cause of death of mature toms is hunters. Starvation of adult turkeys is an extremely rare occurrence, especially in the Southeast. So, to produce turkeys, you need to concentrate on enhancing habitat to improve the survival “bottleneck” – nest success and poult survival. Nest success in turkeys is highly variable, ranging from 30 to 65 percent on average, but may be as low as 15 percent in some areas. Poult survival is generally low, with as

many as 80 percent of poults dying before they reach 14 days of age. Being two weeks old is important because that's when poults become capable of flight and can then roost off the ground. Having proper nesting and brood rearing habitat will help increase both nest success and poult survival. In fact, quality nesting habitat, and especially brood habitat, are usually limiting on most properties. Turkey poults are very similar to quail chicks in their habitat needs and food requirements. Foods, such as grain crops, have limited value because during the first few months, turkey poults eat insects to gain protein needed to grow feathers and put on body mass. So during this time, we look mainly at managing habitat to produce abundant insect populations that are easily accessible to poults.

Habitat Is Home

Managing outside of food plots is important for turkeys. Although extremely adaptable to a wide range of habitat conditions, turkeys do prefer open areas, perhaps about 10 to 25 percent of a property in well-dispersed openings which provide grasses, forbs, and subsequently insects. Nesting habitat can be highly variable for turkeys. However, some portion of the property should consist of herbaceous cover with some woody brush (shrubs). Recent cutovers and young plantations offer good nesting cover. Nesting hens need to be concealed from above and from the sides. Brood-rearing habitat includes grassy-weedy areas such as openings, right-of-ways, lightly-grazed pastures, and open (thinned) pine stands which are prescribed-burned on a frequent (two to five year) rotation. Oftentimes, roadsides can be managed for quality brood habitat by daylighting roads and then mowing or discing (preferred) roadsides periodically. With average yearly home range size between 1,000 to 3,000 acres, what your neighbor is doing on his/her property is important. In other words, what your neighbor



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does land management-wise for turkey habitat will affect the number of birds on your property....for good or for bad!

Food Plots Have a Place

Food plots are useful tools in the box of habitat management techniques. And in no way were these three articles meant to downplay the role of food plots in wildlife management. Unfortunately though, many wildlife enthusiasts have become fixated on the belief that food plots are the answer to their wildlife objectives. In some limited cases, food plots may be the answer, but in most cases, it isn't. **Food plots are supplemental practices—practices that should be used in addition to existing habitat and population management practices.** Food plots can effectively enhance nutritional quality or attract wildlife. They can also be used to increase hunter-game species interactions. However, placing all of your efforts in creating abundant food will often produce poor results given that wildlife, including deer, quail, and turkeys, do more than eat!!! To effectively manage wildlife and wildlife habitat is a bit more involved than just planting something. Luckily, there are plenty of resources available online and through outlets such as the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, Alabama Cooperative Extension System, and the Alabama Wildlife Federation that are available to assist in managing your property for wildlife. When in doubt, it's always a good idea to seek the guidance of a competent wildlife biologist. A wildlife biologist is trained to manage wildlife just as a medical doctor is trained to diagnose illnesses! We hope that you found these articles addressing common misconceptions of food plots in wildlife management interesting, enlightening, and thought-provoking.

UPCOMING SEMINARS

Managing Hardwoods

May 7, 2009 | Tyler, Alabama

Managing Land for Bobwhite Quail

June 6, 2009 | 8 am - 4 pm | Autaugaville, Alabama

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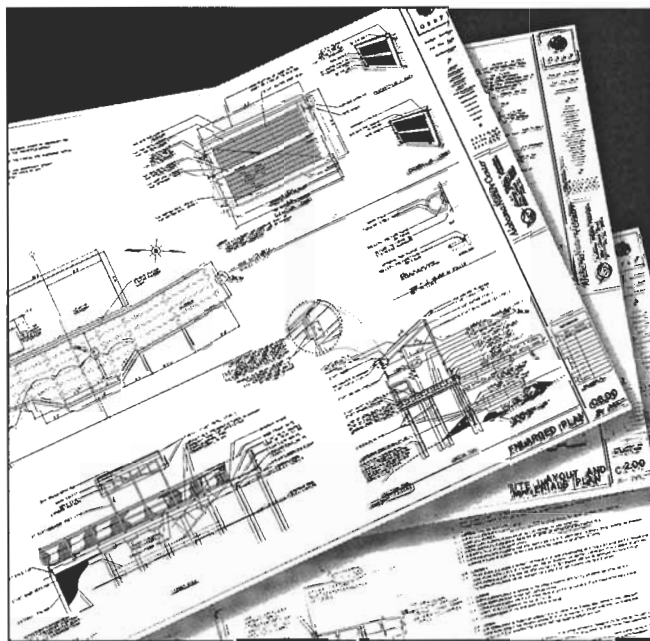
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