



Just an Old DEAD TREE

*By Joel Glover, Wildlife Biologist
Alabama Department of Conservation, Wildlife and Fisheries Division*

If you would like to know how to manage your property to reach your objectives of providing optimal wildlife habitat, you should ask someone who knows. How about a landowner whose property has been certified as a TREASURE Forest, has won the Helene Mosley Award, been recognized as the Tree Farmer of the Year, and has hosted numerous tours and educational activities? Not a lot of folks meet those criteria, but there are a few around and it has been my good fortune to visit most of these properties. During such visits, I've attempted to give a tip or two, but mostly I have been educated by the landowners as to what works and what doesn't.

One thing most of these landowners have in common is that they understand wildlife management involves a lot of trial and error. Just because a technique works great in one locale does not mean it will work at all in another. An example of this is a situation I have discussed several times with my good friends, Jerry and Genelle Brown . . . when I was a young avid bowhunter in north Alabama, I would often look for an area of oak leaf hydrangea over which to set up my deer stand. There, the deer would readily browse the shrub; however, in central Alabama I have yet to see where deer have even given the plant a test nibble. This is true with many practices. While one landowner raves about their great success with a cool season planting, another may tell you they will never plant it again. There are numerous variables involved with all aspects of wildlife management, yet

with a lot of schooling and 26 years of experience I still can't unravel many of the mysteries.

I do realize that if you never try a new technique, you will never know whether or not it will achieve your objective. At the same time, you should never put all your eggs in one basket.

Until I saw how well it worked for feeding and concentrating deer, I would not have recommended to anyone to fertilize kudzu. Okay, I still don't recommend it, but I have seen it work. A rather unique feature on Jerry's property is a large crater-like area that is filled with kudzu. A road encircles the area, allowing him to contain the plant in the "bowl." I think they have lost count of the number of deer they have taken from the stand overlooking the kudzu bowl. I wouldn't recommend it anywhere else, but it works great there.

I must admit I was a little surprised the first time I saw a landowner have the power company come and install a power line across their property, *not* to supply power, but to provide a place for doves to sit! However, it proved to be a great addition to the field and an excellent way for the owner to assess the number of doves using the area.

Granted, not all experiments are successful. Have you ever tried to distribute lime with a broadcast spreader, mixed your clover with wheat and covered it all an inch deep, or planted grain sorghum too thick? Some things just do not work well, but many landowners will confirm that you generally learn more

Photo by Joel Glover



from the failures than you do the successes. The sharing of these landowners' results have taught me a lot.

One of Jerry's latest wildlife success stories is just an old dead tree. And it isn't a tree that died naturally. It's a tree that Jerry killed – on purpose. Now this guy is a TREASURE Forest landowner and Tree Farmer from way back, so why is he killing a mature saw-log-size pine tree? Well, to create cavities, of course!

In forested habitats, cavity-nesting birds may account for 30-45 percent of the total bird population. These species are largely dependent on "snags" for nesting, roosting, foraging, and other functions. Snags are often a rich source of food providing three foraging areas including: external surface of the bark, the cambium layer, and the heartwood of the tree.

While primary excavators are those species that actually carve nesting and foraging cavities in snags, the cavities they create can have a long lifespan with many various users. Secondary cavity users inhabit either natural cavities or cavities abandoned by other species. Chickadees, bluebirds, wood ducks, titmice, great crested flycatchers, nuthatches, barred owls, screech owls, and kestrels often utilize cavities created by woodpeckers. Additionally, bats, gray squirrels, fox squirrels, flying squirrels, raccoons, frogs, snakes, honeybees, wasps, and spiders utilize the cavities. Absence of suitable snags can be a major limiting factor for some snag-dependent wildlife populations.

Jerry's snag creation could not have been much more successful. During the spring, the tree attracted a pair of Pileated woodpeckers, the likely creators of the multiple cavities in this old pine. In addition, a pair of red-bellied woodpeckers took up residence in the upper cavity, a pair of red-headed woodpeckers took over the lower cavity, and yellow-shafted flickers set up house-keeping in a cavity on the backside of the tree.

While there is something very natural about planting trees and watching them grow, killing them doesn't come so naturally. Hopefully from childhood we have been taught that trees are good. However, having worked with thousands of children over the years, I have learned that we need to teach a more complete message. While trees are great and vital to our existence, using those trees is also essential for us to enjoy the lifestyle to which we have grown accustomed. The products we utilize each day would not be available if we did not harvest trees. Not all landowners or the public in general understands that. If people do not understand the need for us to harvest trees, it can be a difficult chore to make them understand the benefit of a dead tree.

While I have spent a lot of my career talking with landowners about planting trees, after seeing the success of Jerry's snag, I may have to start recommending snag creation more often to those who are managing for cavity nesters!

When creating a snag, remember that the larger the tree, the more use it will normally receive. Always keep safety in mind, and avoid deadening a tree that might fall into an area regularly frequented by people or livestock. Snags should be large and well distributed, and both hard and soft woods should be utilized.

Although this once stately pine was now bare and full of holes, there had probably never been more life in that old dead tree! Unfortunately, shortly after nesting season, the old pine hit the ground in a wind storm. But all was not lost . . . downed woody material is home to a whole suite of species. Trees just keep on giving. And by the way, I noticed some hatchet marks on another tree nearby! ♣

Photo by Fletcher Scott

