

A Family Affair

THE JONES FARM IN PAINT ROCK VALLEY

*By Lynn Washington, Registered Forester/Jackson Work Unit Manager
and Elishia Ballentine, Editor, Alabama Forestry Commission*

In north Alabama, property ownerships are smaller and more fragmented than in the central and southern parts of the state. So, it is somewhat unusual to have a contiguous parcel of land that is close to 5,000 acres. However, in the Paint Rock Valley of Jackson County, some 4,670 acres of the Jones Farm straddles the Paint Rock River. Roughly 2,670 acres of the property are in native upland hardwood stands, while approximately 2,000 acres are semi-open cropland, food plots, and fields.

Historically cut off from the rest of the world by the river, this farm located in Hales Cove was purchased by Ray Jones (Sr.) and his father in the 1950s. By the 1960s, the land had been cleared and converted from a cotton farm into a cattle operation. They constructed a ford to cross the river. Fences were built around the entire cove; fescue pastures were planted. Ray set a goal of producing beef cattle of the highest quality. At the same time, soil conservation and taking care of the environment were top priorities. Eventually, livestock was watered out of troughs rather than being allowed access to streams and rivers. Measures were taken to prevent erosion as well.

The Jones family proved to be excellent managers of their farm with a herd of more than 1,000 cattle. This is evidenced by

the honors bestowed on them over the years. In 1995, Jones was presented with the Southeastern Region “Environmental Stewardship Award” by the National Cattlemen’s Association, and was later named “Steward of the Year” by the Stewards Partnership. Then in 1996, they were designated as a “Farm of Distinction” by the Alabama Farm City Week Committee. That

same year, Jones was not only selected as the “Alabama Farmer of the Year” at the Lancaster/Sunbelt Ag Expo in Moultrie, Georgia – billed as North America’s premier farm show – he was also named the overall winner that year as the “Southeastern Farmer of the Year.”

However, cattle was not the only concern of the Jones family . . . they were very interested in wildlife management as well. In those days, there were no deer in North Alabama and very few turkeys; both species had been decimated during the Great Depression. In cooperation with the Alabama

Department of Conservation, Jones undertook to stock the farm in 1964, one of the first such releases on private property in North Alabama. Transported from the Fred Stimpson Wildlife Sanctuary (Clarke County in south Alabama), 30 white tail deer and 35 turkeys were released on the Jones Farm.



Adapting to the mountainous terrain and river bottom habitat, the deer thrived. The turkeys, on the other hand, simply left. Some of them were radio collared, and it seems they walked north into Tennessee. According to Mr. Jones, there wasn't enough suitable cover or nesting habitat. "What we really needed was warm season grasses," he acknowledged.

Never one to give up easily, a second release of wild turkeys was conducted in 1985. A couple years later, a dozen or so wild-life ponds were built at various spots on the side of the mountain, and a number of Canada geese and mallard ducks were released in cooperation with the Alabama Waterfowl Association.

Then in the early 1990s, Raymond Jones, Jr. took over management of the farm. At that time, he recalls, "The farm was just vast, vast open land. You could stand on the property and see for miles in either direction, with the mountains as a backdrop. It was all very neatly trimmed. Quite honestly, it was like a barren wasteland or desert for wildlife."

Realizing that these vast open pastures and hardwood timber on the mountainsides were not exactly the diverse habitat that turkeys needed, the Jones family decided to convert the award-winning 1,770-acre cattle operation into a row-crop farm and focus on wildlife habitat enhancement.

Becoming a Wildlife Paradise

With the aid of the Alabama Forestry Commission, a TREASURE Forest management plan was developed in 1997 that suggested establishing wildlife corridors, food plots, riparian buffers along the river, drainage streams, and pine plantations. The plan also recommended selective timber harvesting and clear-cuts on the hardwood mountainside, although Ray Jones (Sr.) did not very much like the idea of logging and was strongly against planting pines. He explains, "I didn't think much of pine trees at the time, mainly because the deer would eat them as soon as they were planted!"

However, experience taught that installing tree shelters would not only protect the young trees from excessive deer browse, but also greatly increase their growth rate. Ray (Sr.) noted that another big influence about this time was their neighbor upriver and fellow TREASURE Forest landowner, Jack McQuinn, who encouraged them to plant trees. After receiving advice from several wildlife biologists, foresters, and other natural resource professionals, Jones Sr. was persuaded, and the decision was made to "go all out" in the effort to transform the farm into a wildlife oasis.

This transformation included converting the clean, immaculate fence lines into hedge rows comprised of Chickasaw plum, honeysuckle, and natural vegetation. To create more diversity and provide the "fawning, bedding, bugging, and nesting habitat" so desperately needed by wildlife, 40 acres of big blue stem, little blue stem, Indian grass, and other native warm season grasses were planted under the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) program. According to Raymond (Jr.), they had to rethink what was "pretty." "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder . . . what might be ugly to us, as humans, is paradise to wildlife," said Jones. "A field overgrown with weird looking plants is actually beautiful to them."

Raymond (Jr.) and farm manager, Mike Miller, worked diligently on implementing the forest management plan. In addition to seeking professional advice and consultations, cost-share funding was utilized; partnerships were developed with resource

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Landowners Ray Jones, Sr. and Raymond Jones, Jr. with Farm Manager, Mike Miller (kneeling)



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agencies such as the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, the AFC, and the Nature Conservancy.

The hardwood canopy at the back of Hales Cove was selectively logged for the first time in many, many years. On some of the areas that were clear-cut, the Alabama Forestry Commission conducted prescribed burns at different times to create differing successional stages. Food plots were planted in a mixture of oats, wheat, rye, and clover, as well as chufa. Duck boxes were installed on the ponds. Several miles of permanent fire lanes were installed. The use of “easements” was also part of the plan to reach the landowners’ objective of enhancing the habitat for wildlife. In trying to create diversity, Jones noted that all the hardwood logging, as well as various planting, was done in patches throughout the farm, much like a patchwork pattern.

Certified as a TREASURE Forest in 1998, the primary emphasis for the Jones property was of course wildlife management. Their secondary objective was timber production. A little over ten years later in 2009, this third generation farm in Jackson County won the prestigious Helene Mosley Memorial TREASURE Forest Award for the North Region. Other honors include being nominated for the Alabama Wildlife Federation’s Governor’s Conservation Achievement Award in 2006.

About 10 percent of the 2,000 acres of open land has now been converted to timbered acres by planting rows of loblolly pine to create wildlife corridors. In the riparian buffer zones along the Paint Rock River, various species of mast-producing hardwood seedlings were planted – including Shumard oak, Nuttall oak, cherrybark oak, and yellow poplar – through the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). Extending out into the fields, this natural buffer stretches up to 300 feet wide in places.

Sawtooth oak seedlings were planted along the edge of the hardwood plantations, as well as Chickasaw plums and other fruit trees. A beautiful cherrybark oak plantation on an oxbow island was planted under cost-share funding. This stand was one of the tour stops during the Alabama Natural Resources Council (ANRC)/Tree Farm Regional Forestry Event/Field Day held on the Jones Farm in 2010 at which 120 people attended.

The educational aspect of the TREASURE Forest philosophy has not been ignored at the Paint Rock Valley farm. In 2011, the



Management Chiefs division of the Southern Group of State Foresters toured the property, observing the various management practices that had been implemented. Throughout the years the Joneses have hosted several tours, such as the Northeast Alabama TREASURE Forest Landowners Association in 2000. Back in 1996, former State Forester Bill Moody escorted a tour of the farm for 150 or so teachers. Numerous school groups (including “Adopt-a-Class” programs sponsored by the Jackson County Forestry Planning Committee), church groups, and Boy Scouts have also enjoyed hay rides and educational tours on the Jones property.

Results ~ Seeing is Believing

The transition from an open fescue cattle operation to a wildlife oasis has taken a huge commitment, but this transformation of habitat shows what a landowner can accomplish with hard work and a management plan, whether on a small or large scale.

Case in point . . . in years past, the east side of the farm was the primary area of deer use with all of the hunting conducted east of the Paint Rock River. However, Raymond (Jr.) said recently that family and friends harvested more deer on the west side of the river this past season than on the east side or up on the mountainside. The advice had been followed of Stan Stewart, wildlife biologist with the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, which emphasized developing the property on both sides of the river to create the diversity needed to transform the farm.

Jones noted, “While there were fewer turkey, quail, and other types of wildlife we desired, there were probably too many deer. The habitat simply could not support them. Although improving the turkey population remained our main focus, we wanted to be good stewards of the wildlife with which the Good Lord had blessed us. We wanted to manage the deer better . . . provide more for them, so we reduced the herd through selective harvest.” Raymond continued, “Now the deer herd is healthier, and our land supports it better. We not only reduced the deer population, but also increased and improved the habitat component to support it.”

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Father and son agree that the main goal for management of the farm was and is to increase the turkey population. Both are avid turkey hunters. In fact, Raymond (Jr.) achieved a “Royal Slam” in 2009, which means he harvested a bird from five subspecies of wild turkeys – the Eastern, Rio Grande, Osceola, Merriam’s, and Gould’s – from all over the country.

Illustrating his own love of turkey hunting and dedication to family values, Ray (Sr.) published a delightful book entitled *Southern Turkey Hunting – A Family Affair*. In the preface of his book, Mr. Jones states, “Turkey hunting is more than just another sport or pursuit of another wildlife species, it’s a way of life.”

The farm is still highly populated by deer, and Raymond (Jr.) says with a smile, “There’s something very satisfying about shooting a deer under a tree you’ve planted.” But now the sight of turkeys “bugging” through the areas of warm season grasses or nesting on the edge of the bottomland pine plantations is also a normal sight. Hunting turkey on the property, as well as deer, has now become a Jones family tradition. Just a few years ago, the first long-bearded gobbler was taken on the farm.

Today, the Jones farm continues to be managed in an environmental-friendly manner. Ongoing maintenance requires bush hogging and dozer work on forest roads and trails, many of which are utilized as linear food plots. Fallow areas are also bush hogged to keep them in early successional stages for wildlife. Ponds are maintained as needed. A variety of wildlife plantings are sown annually throughout the property, as well as reserving a portion of the row crops grown (corn and soybean) specifically for wildlife.

With the mountains and river presenting a unique “access” challenge, over 47 miles of road have been constructed over the years. In another consideration of environmental issues, the family recently received assistance under Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) to protect endangered species in the Paint Rock River. Through this partnership, a bridge was built over the river, replacing the old ford that had been in place since the 1960s. Removal of this ford allows better access for fish and other aquatic animals using this stretch of the river.

Passing the Blessings on to the Next Generation

While environmental protection and conservation practices have been of major significance to these landowners throughout the 50 or so years of evolution from cattle farm pastureland to croplands and forests, Ray Sr. feels the greatest improvements have come about in the last 15-20 years with the focused emphasis on wildlife. Looking back, he says he would not change their path as to how they have cared for and preserved the land for the future . . . looking forward, he hopes the wildlife will continue to thrive for the next 50 years.

Will the next generation of the Jones family have the same enthusiasm for this TREASURE Forest as prior and current generations? Raymond believes the answer to that question is yes, the sustainability will go forward. “We were entrusted to improve this land – God’s creation – for future generations. This family has always been passionate about wildlife – from my grandfather to my father, on down to me and my sisters – and now the fourth generation is already exhibiting interest in and love for the land and wildlife. The girls as well as the boys enjoy being outdoors, riding four-wheelers, and hunting. We’ve got great natural resources here in Alabama . . . it’s a wonderful place to be.” ♣



Landowner Raymond Jones, Jr.
with AFC Forester Lynn Washington