



Oaks and Prairies Wildlifer

A newsletter for landowners in the Post Oak Savannah
and Coastal Prairies Regions of Texas

TEXAS
PARKS &
WILDLIFE

Spring 2018

Page 2

Washington County
Wildlife Society

Page 3

Spring is a Time to Build:
The Process of Antler
Development

Page 5

The Virginia Opossum: A
Misunderstood Marsupial

Page 7

Black-eyed Susan

Page 8

The Value of Snags, Logs
and Downed Limbs

Page 10

Quail Memories and Hope

Page 12

Turkey Project Update:
Spring 2018

Page 14

Upcoming Events

Page 15

Our Wildlife Biologists

District Field Notes

BY DAVID FORRESTER

Another spring, and habitat conditions across the district are in good shape. Rainfall has continued to be ample and timely. Although we've had some dry periods, we've been fortunate in getting rains about the time things might start to get critical. Everything is green, soil moisture is good, and stock tanks are full.

The district is finally at full strength. We added Clint Faas to the team back in the fall. He is covering Fort Bend and Wharton counties. The newest member of district 7, Shannon Lawrence, began on February 19, 2018 and she's over Victoria, Calhoun, and Refugio counties, formerly covered by Trey Barron.

The ongoing turkey project in the district is...well, ongoing. We have two graduate students on board doing an outstanding job. Doug Jobes has a turkey update in this newsletter. This is our last year trapping and tracking birds, so we hope to have some reportable data to share shortly. We will definitely share results with you through this newsletter and also at co-op meetings, etc.

We had another good prescribed burning season this year. The troops participated in multiple burns that impacted several thousand acres across the district. This is a great management tool and the burns provide a great educational opportunity for the landowners and managers we work with.

Biologists are winding down from the latest harvest entry deadline into the new LMA system. April 1 was the deadline for landowners to enter their harvest data and management practices. The biologists attempted to offer assistance and reminders to folks about getting their data in by the deadline. Now, folks need to make sure they get themselves in good standing with their local wildlife management associations by the June 15 deadline. You want to be enrolled in the conservation option by that date. Harvest option participants have until September 1.

For those that suffer from allergies, these beautiful spring days may not be so enjoyable. However, things are new and colors are vivid. Please get out and enjoy the wildlife and habitat on your piece of Texas.

Washington County Wildlife Society

WRITTEN BY RICHARD THAMES, PAST PRESIDENT-WCWS

Back in the early 1990's declining deer numbers caused concern among Washington County landowners. This inspired a group from the Greenvine area to join together and discuss the future of the county's deer population. After several meetings at the Greenvine Store the Greenvine Wildlife Co-op was formed. At the same time in other parts of the county, concern was also growing and a petition to close the deer season was being circulated.

In response to this growing concern the Greenvine Co-op leadership and other local landowners arranged a meeting with Texas Parks and Wildlife Department District Biologist Bob Carroll, local Wildlife Tech Robert Lehmann and Game Warden Willis Blackwell. After lengthy discussions between the landowners and TPWD representatives it was decided that the people of the county would need to join together and work together to preserve, protect and improve wildlife habitat in the county.

Soon after a countywide landowner group called the Washington County Wildlife Management and Conservation Society (WCWS) was formed. The Society's first chairman was Bill Thane; vice chairman, Gene Eckert and secretary, Terry Shirley. The Society's first order of business was to agree on a mission statement and the group setup objectives to promote correct wildlife management practices.

The Society members were asked to go out and encourage their neighbors to join together in community wildlife groups called co-ops. A total of 7 Wildlife Management Association's were formed across the county. The WCWS would serve as the administrative parent to all county WMAs. It was agreed upon the TPWD Biologist would provide the assistance on wildlife habitat improvement, and the TPWD Game Warden would enforce game laws and the County Extension Office, now Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service, would coordinate educational seminars and related field days.

To date the WCWS membership is up to 466 and growing. This consists of 118 original and early members who joined during 1994-1999. Approximately 35,150 acres of the 397,696 total acres in Washington County are owned by WCWS members. Since 2009 we have awarded 25 scholarships totaling over \$18,000 to high school seniors from Washington County.

The good works and services that WCWS produces include:

- Semiannual educational and business meetings
- Wildlife Management Associations - community gatherings to network and learn
- Quarterly society newsletter produced and distributed to members and other readers
- College scholarships for highly deserving Washington County youth who pursue natural resource careers
- TWA Learning Across New Dimensions in Science (LANDS) program nurtured by WCWS
- Texas Brigade Cadets - financial and programmatic support for Washington and area county youth
- Washington County Youth sport shooting related activities – financial and volunteer support
- Physically challenged hunt at Lake Somerville – provide financial and volunteer help to Corp of Engineers and Burleson County Wildlife Coop
- Lone Star Water Forum – Annual educational program for water conservation and protection supported and promoted by WCWS
- Field days and educational events – society partners with state and federal natural resource agencies and other organizations
- Mill Creek Watershed Project Advisory Board – society members serve on Advisory Board

Enhancing and conserving wildlife in Washington County through education is more than a catch phrase for our organization.

Spring is a Time to Build: The Process of Antler Development

WRITTEN BY TODD PILCIK

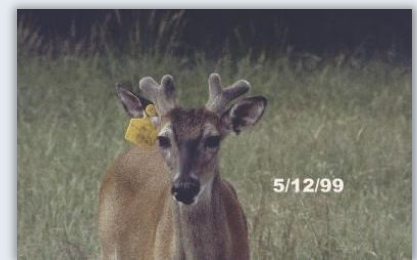
Opportunities to get out and explore the great outdoors abound in the spring and early summer.

The weather makes it perfect for outdoor activities. Wildlife watching is usually reserved for migrating and nesting birds, blooming flowers, emergence of colorful insects and young of the year being attended by their parents. But with all this activity, there is one process that is usually overlooked; the growth and annual regeneration of antlers on white-tailed deer.

Most people know that November in Texas marks the opening of general deer season and every year thousands of hunters head afield in pursuit of deer, but not just any deer, a buck. For centuries man has placed a stigma on the size and quality of the antlers but few understand the complex environmental and biological processes required to construct these unique appendages. Often mistakenly called horns, deer antlers are composed of bone which has been grown in the course of only a few months. It is the fastest growing bone in mammals and unlike horn, which is composed of a keratinized hair like material that grows over a bony core, antlers are actual bone formed by deposition of minerals through complex interactions. Antlers, so prized as trophies in the fall, have their beginnings every spring throughout the life of a male white-tailed deer.

Antler development in white-tailed deer begins early in life and the first external signs may be seen in male fawns at around 2 months of age. Antlers arise from pedicles which are bony protuberances developed from the frontal bones of the skull. The pedicle is formed when cells on the frontal bones are activated by rising androgen levels creating a specialized periosteum. The periosteum contains specific binding sites for testosterone and insulin like growth factors stimulate the proliferation of antlerogenic cells. Trabecular bone forms beneath this layer and the pedicle develops. Commonly called, buttons, this pedicle is the site for all future antler development and for the first year, in the vast majority of deer, where the process ends.

At approximately one year of age, increase in photoperiod (day length) influences a decrease in melatonin production. Decreases in melatonin trigger the hormone cycles responsible for antler production. Skin covering the pedicle develops a shiny appearance associated with fine hairs, often called velvet. At this point, the antler begins actively growing. The antler growth can be compared to building a structure. First the frame is built using cartilage and other tissues and is filled with blood vessels and nerves which serve as the transport pathways for protein and nutrients to the developing antler. Growth occurs at the distal end (tip) and from the center out and progresses until mid to late summer. During this phase of development, the antler consists of approximately 80 percent protein and only about 20 percent ash (mainly calcium and phosphorus). It is soft or spongy to the touch and can be easily damaged.



Photos©TPWD

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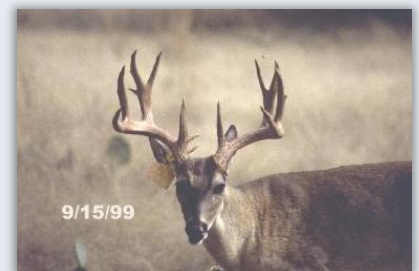
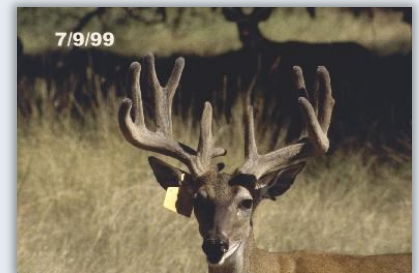
Spring is a Time to Build: The Process of Antler Development, continued

Damage during this delicate stage may contribute to unique antler characteristics such as kickers and deformed beams but it must be noted that genetics can also play a role in non-typical antler formation. Once the frame is completed, increases in testosterone levels trigger a marked increase in the deposition of minerals, which serve to harden and finish off the structure. Mineral deposition ultimately fills in the blood vessels and the supply of blood and nutrients ceases to nourish the velvet and it dries up. The velvet is then shed, often aided though rubbing on brush or other structures, leaving exposed bone composed of 60 percent ash and only about 40 percent protein.

Hardened antlers are carried throughout the breeding season and are used for fighting with other males, displays of dominance and defense against predators. In mid to late winter, reactions to continuing decreases in photoperiod and the reduction of testosterone production cause cells to de-mineralize the bone at junction of the antler and pedicle. This weakens or erodes the bond at the seam and the antler falls off. Most antlers are shed within a day of each other but complete loss of both antlers may take weeks to complete. The scar or exposed bone left by the shed antler on the pedicle is immediately filled with blood and scabs over and the process begins again.

Bucks generally reach peak antler development between 4 ½ and 6 ½ years of age. Demands on body development contribute to this fact. From birth to around 4 years of age, minerals and nutrients are being allocated toward the development of skeletal structure thus utilizing only the excess nutrients to produce antlers. Once a buck has completed skeletal development, around 4 years of age, those nutrients are available for antler production, hence a marked increase in antler size at this stage. It should also be noted that the body will actually utilize minerals stored in bones to supplement development. Minerals can be sequestered from bones in the body such as the ribs to be utilized in antler development and then replaced after the antlers have developed.

Spring and early summer is the time to observe the antler growth process in action. Most of the environmental and physiological factors, such as photoperiod and hormonal changes, are out of our control. We rely on nature for that. The one key factor we can influence is to create and maintain good habitat so that it may provide all the protein and nutrients necessary to not only aid in antler production but also promote good physiological condition.



Photos©TPWD



Todd Pilcik is the Private Lands Biologist for Matagorda and Brazoria counties. He received his Bachelor of Science degree in 1994 and pursued his Masters degree at Southwest Texas State University in San Marcos. Todd was hired in August of 1994. He worked with the migratory program until 1999 when he accepted a biologist position in the Texas hill country covering Lampasas, Coryell and Bell counties. In 2002, he transferred to the Texas coast and is currently stationed in Bay City.

The Virginia Opossum: A Misunderstood Marsupial

WRITTEN BY CLINT FAAS

When you hear someone mention a “possum” what is the first thing that comes to mind: dirty, mean, rabies? You are not alone. When most people think about these night-dwellers a negative connotation usually comes first. However, these intelligent animals play an important role in the ecosystem and generally none of the above are true.



Photo@TPWD

The Virginia Opossum (*Didelphis virginiana*) is about the size of a terrier dog with a long, scaly, prehensile tail. The tail is primarily whitish in color with the basal quarter or so a darker black. Although it does have the ability to support their weight, it cannot do this for long periods of time and instead they use it for climbing and maneuvering. Their pelage ranges from a light grayish color to a dark, almost black, color. Both front and back feet have 5 hairless toes with the back having a larger clawless opposable “thumb”. Front feet are more symmetrical with all 5 toes radiating out evenly like rays of a sun. The females have a pouch on their abdomen for raising young making them the only marsupial in the United States. In fact, the genus name *Didelphis* is an Ancient Greek word for “double womb.” The name opossum, however, comes from the Algonquin Indian word “apasum” translated to “white animal.” Early European settlers changed the pronunciation to the current word opossum with the long O sound and many times people shorten this even more and drop the O all together. Regardless of the close pronunciation, they are not “possums.” Possums are an entirely different group of animals (genus *Phalangeridae*) that can be found in Australia and surrounding islands. The similarity in the two sets of animals only extends as far as them both being marsupials.

Opossums have existed an extremely long time. Fossil records have dated them back to the Pliocene Epoch some 2-5 million years ago. Though the reason for their success is unknown, some presume that it is largely due to their ability to adapt. Their primary habitat consists of deciduous woodlands, but they can be found in prairies, marshes, farmlands, and urban environments. This broad range of habitats is a testament to their ability to adapt and find food under many different circumstances. In Texas, opossums can be found almost statewide with the exception of the extremely dry portions of the Trans-Pecos. They prefer to den in hollow trees and logs, but they can be found in woodpiles, rock piles, crevices in cliffs, under buildings, in attics, and in underground burrows excavated by other animals. Within their core area, opossums may use roads or trails as travel corridors, but they have a relatively small home range with an average of around 11 acres. As previously mentioned, their adaptability leads to a wide range of food preferences including rats, mice, young rabbits, birds, insects, crustaceans, fogs, fruits, vegetables, and carrion. With such a broad range of potential food sources their diets may differ significantly from one location to the next. As one would expect urban opossums tend to be more opportunistic and may be considered a nuisance if they find their way into household trash. However, other people embrace their presence in home gardens for their ability to clean up fallen crops and potential pests.

The benefits and intrigue of these animals goes far beyond their ability to adapt. For one, they play an important part of the environmental cycle through their willingness to consume dead plants and animals. This breakdown of matter helps reset the nutrient cycle.

Continued on page 6

The Virginia Opossum: A Misunderstood Marsupial, continued

They also may, in certain areas, help to curtail the spread of tick-borne illnesses such as Lyme disease. Opossums are very clean animals, grooming themselves often. They are also abundantly parasitized by ticks. In their cleaning, opossums are able to find and kill almost 90% of the ticks that attach to them. In some cases, this translates to the consumption/killing of thousands of larval ticks per week. For each larva consumed, the risk of that individual becoming a vector for, and passing on, Lyme disease is eliminated. Studies have also shown that the removal of opossums from an area translates to an increase in tick abundance on other susceptible species. Ultimately, an increase in diversity across the landscapes translates to fewer ticks surviving to potentially infect another animal.

Opossums are rarely aggressive animals. They are, for the most part more interested in getting away from people than having a confrontation. If threatened, they will hiss and bare their teeth in an attempt to scare away predators. If this doesn't work, they have an involuntary response that makes them faint or "play opossum" to discourage another animal from eating them. This response can last anywhere from minutes to hours and may be accompanied with drool, eyes-wide-open blank stares, and even a foul odor expressed from anal glands. When they "wake up" they simply regain their senses and move on. If they do come in contact with a predator or become exposed to rabies in another way, they are almost completely immune to the disease. Due to their lower body temp (94-97° F) the virus cannot survive. In addition to being mostly immune to rabies, they are immune to most snake venom. Scientists are studying this trait to see if it is possible to create an effective, low cost treatment for snake bites.

This extraordinary animal gets very little, if any positive attention. With intelligence that rivals most dogs, the ability to adapt to most any environment, the ability to serve as a biological trap for ticks, and immunity to rabies and snake venom, the Virginia opossum has earned its place in the spotlight. So the next time you see one give it a wide berth with a piece of mind that it isn't harming anything, but playing its part in an extremely diverse ecosystem.



Clint Faas is the District 7 biologist for Wharton and Fort Bend Counties. A Wharton County native, he graduated from Texas A&M University in 2005 with a B.S. in Wildlife Ecology and Management and a minor in Rangeland Ecology and Management. He went on to obtain a M.S. in Wildlife Ecology from Texas State University in 2008. Post-graduation, and prior to his hire in 2017, Faas worked as a private sector biologist and Director of Conservation Programs for a statewide non-profit.

Black-eyed Susan

WRITTEN BY ZNOBIA WOOTAN

It is hard to find someone that has never heard the name black-eyed Susan. It just might be the most recognizable wildflower name out there. *Rudbeckia hirta* commonly known as black-eyed Susan can be found widely naturalized just about everywhere there is a prairie or woodland opening.



Black-eyed Susan's are named for their dark centers.
Photo©Andy and Sally Wasowski

Other common names for *Rudbeckia hirta* are: brown-eyed Susan, brown Betty, gloriosa daisy, poorland daisy, and yellow ox-eye daisy. Black-eyed Susan has slightly drooping yellow petals and gets its name from the brown to purplish black center that can be flat or slightly raised. The contrast of the vibrant yellow petals to the dark center makes it an eye catching display when it blooms in the hottest parts of the summer. The black-eyed Susan is actually the designated state flower of Maryland. As a matter of fact a wreath of black-eyed Susan's is placed on the winning horse of the Preakness. An interesting bit of trivia is that before the days of the commercial floral industry and greenhouses the wreath of black-eyed Susan's was actually yellow chrysanthemums with their centers painted black, since the Preakness is run before the real black-eyed Susan's are blooming. These vibrant yellow flowers will bloom from mid-summer until frost. Such a long lasting bloomer makes it a great nectar source for butterflies and other pollinators and it is a larval food source for the gorgone checkerspot butterfly and the bordered patch butterfly. It will grow in almost any soil and will survive in dry soils but will produce prolific blooms with a little moisture. It can grow in full sun to shade. The hairy stems make it deer resistant also. With its wide range of tolerance for soil, light and moisture as well as its high deer tolerance black-eyed Susan is a must for any Texas Landscape or habitat restoration.

The Value of Snags, Logs and Downed Limbs

WRITTEN BY BOBBY EICHLER

Most everyone understands the benefits that living trees provide for wildlife, however, not many people understand the value of dead trees.

Dead trees, often referred to as snags, are created by a variety of natural processes such as wind, fire, flooding, drought, lightning, disease and old age. Snags may also be created by actions of man, such as root compaction from equipment, flooding, or herbicide exposure to name a few. Regardless of cause of death, snags should be retained for the benefit of many species of wildlife. According to the National Wildlife Federation, over 1,000 species of wildlife utilize snags in some way in the United States.

Snags are an important component of the overall forest ecosystem and can actually be seen as micro-ecosystems of their own. Shortly after tree death, various fungi and insects will occupy the snag and start their part in the decomposition process. In addition to the insect activity, over time the bark and underlying wood will start to decompose and slowly become softer. As these processes occur, an assortment of woodpeckers will utilize the snag by foraging on the insects as well as excavating cavities for both foraging and shelter. As time allows, many of the cavities will be 'blown out' and made larger to allow for other cavity nesting birds or mammals to utilize them. Some of the more common cavity using birds include chickadees, nuthatches, wrens, and bluebirds; mammals include squirrels, bats, raccoons, and opossums.

In addition to foraging and cavity use, snags are used by many other bird species for various reasons. Snags may be used for 'hunting' perches by all forms of birds of prey such as hawks, eagles, and ospreys, 'hawking' perches for flycatchers trying to forage on flying insects, and 'songposts' for songbirds when trying to find a mate.

When living trees or snags fall to the forest floor, they are often referred to as logs. Logs also serve a vital function to the ecosystem as the decomposition process continues. Many species of fungi, insects, frogs, toads, lizards, snakes, salamanders, and mammals will utilize the logs for various reasons. The decomposition of the log will release nutrients and minerals that are bound up within the structure back into the soil. This process is recycling at its best and insures forest health through perpetuity.

In addition to snags and logs, downed limbs also play a part in the forest ecosystem. Often times these limbs provide the needed protection for tree seedlings and herbaceous plants to be able to germinate and grow and avoid the pressure of browsing and grazing animals such as deer and livestock. Without the protection from browsing and grazing, areas with high populations of deer and livestock may be void of tree regeneration and recruitment. The structure of the downed limbs in conjunction with grasses and vines provides shelter for various wildlife species such as small mammals and ideal areas for ground nesting birds such as wild turkey.

Habitat management guidelines recommend that in instances where woodlands do not have many snags that you create them. Chances are, due to the historic droughts and floods to our part of Texas over the last 10 years, the landscape likely already has many snags.



This snag has been highly utilized as a foraging area by a variety of birds. Photo@Laura Sherrod, TPWD.



Several species of mammals and birds can likely utilize the large cavities produced on this snag. Photo@Laura Sherrod

Continued on page 9

The Value of Snags, Logs and Downed Limbs, continued

If this is the case, you may not need to create snags, but you should conserve and retain several per acre. It seems the past weather issues effected many oak and cedar trees throughout our district. Both of these tree species have rather dense (hard) wood and may take a while before cavities are excavated. Give these snags time and they will develop into prime habitat.

Lastly, there are times when snags should be removed. When snags are near homes, barns, powerlines, and areas of high human activity and pose a threat to property or safety, they should be removed. If a tree is 40 feet tall, it can obviously fall and damage anything within a 40 foot radius. With the help of an experienced sawhand, a person may wish to either remove the entire tree or remove branches or to 'top' the tree and retain lower branches and the trunk. If this is near your home and within your yard, you can count on many observations of woodpeckers and cavity nesters if you are a bird watcher.

So the next time you walk through your property, take some time to see how many snags or downed timber you may have. Rather than seeing it as an eyesore, study them for a while and see what wildlife species have been or are currently utilizing them. Chances are you will see a whole new world that you never really noticed.



Snags offer excellent perches for large birds of prey but may also be used as 'hawking' sites for flycatchers. Photo@Laura Sherrod.



Downed limbs and tree tops provide protection to small seedlings from browsing animals as well as provide shelter for many species of wildlife. Photo@Bobby Eichler.



Fungi on a downed log are an important part of the nutrient recycling process. Photo@Laura Sherrod.



Bobby Eichler is the Technical Guidance Biologist for the Oak Prairie District. He has Bachelor and Master of Science degrees in Forestry both with emphasis in Game Management, from Stephen F. Austin State University. A native of Giddings, Bobby started his TPWD career in East Texas before moving to La Grange in 2007.

Quail Memories and Hope

WRITTEN BY KELLY NORRID

One of my greatest childhood memories was visiting my aunt's dairy in north Texas and listening to the distinctive call of the Bobwhite. A small creek lined with trees separated two of the fields where she grazed the cattle on a rotating basis.

No need for improved grasses here; she "fed 'em what God gave 'em." This practice created the ideal mixed-brush habitat where the quail thrived.

Fast forward 30 years...

Sitting with my aunt I said "I used to enjoy sitting here listening to the quail." She replied with a sigh, "So did I!" Rarely do we hear or see quail now.

According to the Texas Quail Council, the numbers of bobwhite quail have dropped 5.6% per year since 1980, which equates to a 75% loss in bobwhite population. What could be causing such a significant loss in such a short period of time? Although just one factor is rarely the reason for population decline, habitat loss, habitat fragmentation and management techniques are widely believed to be the overwhelming culprits. As landowners, what can we do to help turn the tide? First step: Create a suitable, diverse habitat. There are a variety of factors that need to be considered when improving land management practices for quail and other wildlife. All wildlife require a certain structure to their habitat.

When managing for quail, think cover. Cover is very important for the quail to feel comfortable nesting and foraging. In order to raise chicks, quail need large native bunchgrasses such as switch, gamma and little bluestem. Native tall grasses grow large enough to shade areas underneath to create open space for the chicks to forage, plus provide overhead coverage to shield them from the sharp eyes of predatory birds. These grasses also provide much needed nesting material. As with most large plants, tall bunchgrasses must also be kept in balance. Too many bunchgrasses may take up too much useable space whereas too little will not give sufficient coverage from above.

Think of it like this. Take a softball out to your field and toss it in front of you. Can you see it? Try it at 50 yards, then 20. If you can see the ball, then it is likely that a predator will see the quail.

This idea holds true for many other types of wildlife. Species such as the short-eared owl, meadowlark and Texas horned lizard share the same habitat as the quail.

Diversity of plant life is also important. Not only are tall grasses important for quail and other wildlife, woody cover is also important. Typically, quail nest along the edges of habitat transition areas. The woody areas also need to be managed for the proper mix of open space and cover.

Continued on page 11

Quail Memories and Hope, continued

Suitable brush cover should consist of woody species 3'-10' in height and occupy at least 100 sq. ft. of area. These loafing areas give the birds an area of protection from predators, provide shelter from inclement weather, and provide a place to roost.

Forbs, or non-grass plant species, are also vital to quail. Forbs are important because adults are primarily leaf and seed eaters. Plants like croton and partridge pea are preferred foods. Even the maligned ragweed is a great food source for wildlife. Forbs are important to the chicks as well.

Chicks are dependent on the nutrient-rich insects that feed on the broad-leaf plants. With a proper mix of grasses, forbs, woody species, and insects, quail and other wildlife will thrive. A side benefit is that a diverse forb mixture will attract pollinators, which incidentally have also experienced serious global declines over the past decades.

Unfortunately, creating prime habitat alone may not be enough to bring populations back to where they once were. Habitat is important, but the connection between habitats is just as important. Isolated habitats are not conducive to sustaining wildlife populations. This is where wildlife corridors come in handy.

Wildlife corridors provide a highway for wildlife from other areas to repopulate areas that have been abandoned in the past. These corridors can include creeks, rivers, or drainages that connect isolated habitats. Even better, cooperation between landowners to create contiguous habitats is key to the survival of this beloved bird and other wildlife. Several Wildlife Management Associations exist in our area to facilitate such cooperation. With proper management of the land and corridors connecting them, fragmented landscapes can be made whole again.

Entrepreneur and conservationist, my aunt successfully ran a business and helped preserve wildlife all at the same time. With a little help, maybe we will hear the bobwhite call again just as they did all those years ago.



Growing up in southeast Texas, Kelly spent countless hours exploring his backyard-which just happened to be the creeks and game trails of the Sam Houston National Forest. Using field guides, he taught himself about the plants and animals he was discovering. Kelly decided to channel his love of the outdoors into a career. His diverse background includes participation with wildlife reintroduction programs, plant surveys of Buffalo and White Oak Bayous and rare plant surveys throughout southeast Texas. This background led Kelly to participate in habitat restoration projects throughout the area. This work led Kelly to become proficient in the identification of native plants and the ecology of southeast Texas. In early 2010, Kelly was hired by Texas Parks and Wildlife to be the Natural Resource Specialist for Sheldon Lake State Park and later, Davis Hill State Natural Area. This position saw Kelly overseeing the day to day management of the natural resources of Sheldon Lake and to help lead and manage the habitat restoration efforts for both Sheldon Lake and Davis Hill. In January, 2015, Kelly became part of the Texas Parks and Wildlife, Wildlife Diversity Program by becoming an Urban Wildlife Biologist serving the Greater Houston/Galveston Area.

Turkey Project Update: Spring 2018

WRITTEN BY DOUG JOBES

The trapping season this year marks the conclusion and final spring that turkeys will be trapped in the district. The summer of 2018 will also be the final year that turkey hens will be tracked through the nesting and brood rearing periods.

Despite the cold temperatures and even a couple of freezing events, trapping was slightly more successful than the two previous years. Our efforts began early in January and continued through the month with some success. However, trapping really slowed down in late January, and didn't pick up until the second week of February. Our final successful trapping occurred on the first day of March. In all, there were 43 birds captured and tagged with GPS transmitters across all 6 of the study counties (Fayette, Caldwell, Gonzales, Dewitt, Lavaca, and Jackson). Now the waiting begins.

Preliminary data shows that peak nesting in this region of Texas occurs during the month of April and May with the remainder of the summer months having very few nesting attempts (Figure 1). What may surprise a

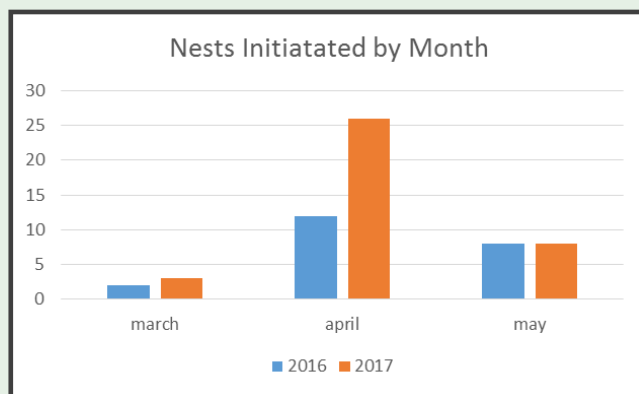


Figure 1. Nest initiation begins when the hen visits the nest site and deposits an egg for the first time. Most nesting attempts to date have occurred during April.

lot of people is that about 15% of turkey nests are abandoned for some unknown reason. As you can imagine it is very difficult to know what causes a turkey hen to leave a nest without some sort of video or camera recording the actual nest site. Although, disturbances caused by nest predators, and common land management practices such as mowing seem to be likely causes we cannot say that is the case all of the time. In fact, we were able to capture on a trail camera a feral hog passing within just a few feet of a turkey nest. We know that the nest was not destroyed by the hog or abandoned by the hen because we have later pictures of her returning to incubate. As of the writing of this article we have had four hens initiate incubation, and one nest has already been abandoned. Hopefully, weather conditions will continue to be favorable and provide the landowners and turkey enthusiasts a successful year of production. For the two previous years of the project, nest success on our study sites was very low.

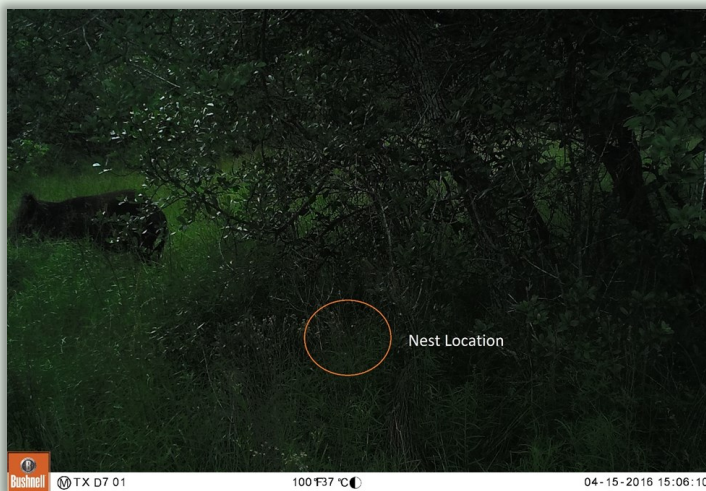
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Turkey Project Update: Spring 2018, continued

Out of all of the hens tracked and nests initiated since 2016, only five successful broods have been documented. These periods of low success have also been documented by other research and what appears to be the boost to local populations are years in which nest success is very high. In other words, there are periods of low nest success that basically maintain the population's numbers followed by a dramatic increase in nest success and poults that add numbers to a population. Maybe we will experience one of the great years this summer, but only time will tell. If you happen to see or capture a photo of a turkey with a leg band or a small black antenna on its back please report it to your local Texas Parks and Wildlife Department biologist.



Above: A successful nest. Notice the way each shell has opened. Below: A hen and her five poults. Notice the diverse vegetation and its height. This is pretty good brood rearing habitat. Photos©TPWD



This was a nest location that we were monitoring in Jackson County. Our GPS data showed that the hen remained on her nest even after this close encounter with a feral hog. Photo©TPWD



Doug Jobes is the Wildlife Biologist for Dewitt and Goliad counties. After a three-year enlistment with the US Army as an Airborne Ranger with the 75th Ranger Regiment he graduated from the Daniel B. Warnell School of Forest Resources, University of Georgia. He then received his Masters of Science in Wildlife Ecology and Management from Oklahoma State University. His professional interests include working with small acreage landowners and wildlife management associations.

Upcoming Events

MAY

19 Eco-Tourism Field Day

Q5 Ranch, 8:00 a.m.

Contact Doug Jobses at 361-576-0022

or Brian Yanta at 361-645-8204

19 Texas Big Game Awards Banquet for Regions 5, 6, and 7

Pitser Garrison Convention Center, Lufkin

Doors open at 2 p.m., Activities and Raffle at

3 p.m., Dinner at 5 p.m., Awards at 6 p.m.

RSVP required, \$20/per person

Contact TBGA at 210-236-9761

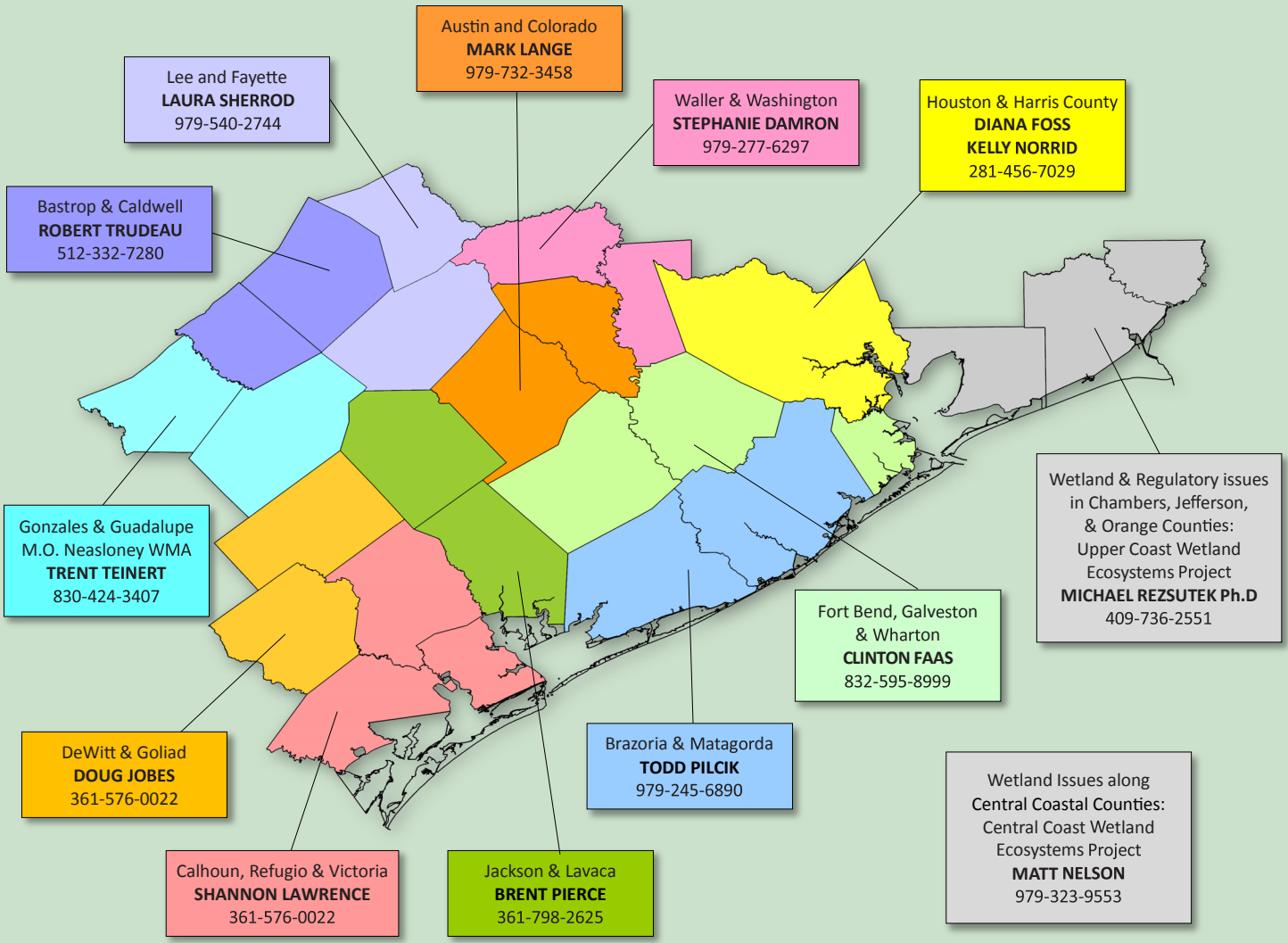
or purchase tickets at

<https://www.texas-wildlife.org/resources/events/2018-tbga-sportsmans-celebration-region-5-6-7>



Shrimp boat at sunset, Powderhorn Ranch. Photo©Chase Fountain, TPWD

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