



DIVERSITY: The Spice of Life And Turkeys, Too!

by Adam B. Butler, Wildlife Biologist and Wild Turkey Program Coordinator, Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks

If you spend time as a serious student of the wild turkey, you will meet certain turkeys who teach you something. For me, several stand out.

There was "The Professor," a cunning old tom with whom I sparred for the entirety of the 1998 season. The Professor pulled moves I did not know turkeys had. On the final day of Mississippi's season, he snuck close to me but left unscathed, just to thumb his beak at my ignorance. The Professor's lesson was that no two turkeys are alike; they all have individual peculiarities, so always expect the unexpected.

Another sage old instructor was a bird named The Creek Bend Gobbler. He roosted in a big spruce pine that leaned out over a sandy, spring-fed creek and had a fondness for a nearby pasture. No amount of calling could divert his morning march from the tree to the pasture. Moreover, once he reached the pasture's confines he refused to take up any business or affair outside it. His lesson? You cannot force a turkey to do something to which he is uninclined. You play the game on his terms, not your own.

Meet ol' Three Legs

But of all the feathered masters to whom I have paid tuition, none was more formative than ol' Three Legs.

Three Legs was not some disfigured anomaly. The name referred to his beard, which was so long that from a distance he appeared to be walking on a tripod. The year I met Three Legs, I was still just a boy. My parents trusted me enough to let me wander out the back door to the property of a neighbor, who graciously permitted my obsession with the turkeys on his place. His land became my paradise.

During spring, it was Three Legs' paradise too. If he wasn't in the pasture, he'd be in the big woods. If he wasn't in either, I had to check the powerline. If I still couldn't find him, it was a guarantee he'd be strutting and drumming beneath the cool shade

of the young loblolly. That was the great thing about Three Legs: He was such a homebody I never had to go far to strike up a conversation. Terms like habitat and home range were not yet a regular part of my vocabulary, but nevertheless, Three Legs taught me plenty about both.

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His lesson was this: Turkeys prefer to concentrate their lives in places that offer a variety of different habitats cobbled together in close proximity.

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Now, nearly three decades later, as someone who studies and manages wild turkeys for a living, the lesson Three Legs taught could not be clearer. Turkeys demand diversity, and once you've followed them around a bit it's easy to see why. In many ways, they almost behave as two separate species. Most familiar to hunters are the birds drawn to open forests with sparse understories and long, sweeping views. Here their keen eyesight can detect the slightest sign of trouble from far away. On the other hand, nesting hens and their young depend on places that they totally avoid outside of the reproductive season, when thick cover becomes essential for safety, concealment, and survival.

Get me somewhere different

These contradictory needs mean turkeys do best when they do not have to travel far to reach something different.

To illustrate this, recent research compared the average gobbler harvest on publicly hunted Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs) in Mississippi to the shape and makeup of the large landscapes surrounding them. WMAs with many different types of habitats interwoven together tended to produce the most turkeys. This was especially true when small blocks of interconnected hardwood timber stands constituted about one-third of the total landscape, filled out with various fields and roadways.

Areas like these, with many different types of landscape, all evenly distributed, meet all of the turkeys' needs within relatively localized ranges. Adult birds in such areas have less reason to roam, which allows for smaller, more concentrated core areas. Hens with young can have adjacent nesting and bugging zones, minimizing their exposure to predators and upping survival rates.

Throughout the southeastern United States, the landscape diversity described above is a hallmark of industrial timberlands. Streamside Management Zones (SMZs) provide arteries of well-distributed hardwood timber that turkeys use throughout the year for foraging and travel. Timber harvest operations create frequent disturbances, which constantly alter the vegetation at turkey level, down near the ground. A Google Earth

glance at industrial timber tracts often reveals a patchwork quilt of greens, browns, and beiges. These colors represent various stages in the timber lifecycle: fresh clear-cuts; young, reforested stands; thick saplings or poles; and mature forests waiting to be harvested. While not every stop along this journey is ideal for wild turkeys, when this form of timber management is practiced extensively across a landscape, the distances between turkey essentials are never very great.

Tempt more turkeys into your tract!

So, as a leaseholder of one of these tracts, what can you do to enhance it for turkeys?

FIRST, focus on things that contribute to diversity. In heavily forested areas, that means wildlife openings. Whether you choose to plant them with supplemental forages or simply maintain native vegetation via periodic mowing, don't waste opportunities to increase the availability of open ground.

SECOND, remember that turkeys tend to stay on the move, making connectivity between diverse habitat features important. Give thought

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to the layout of your hunting property and consider how turkeys are likely to traverse it. If there are prime turkey areas that are somehow isolated, encourage a safe flow of turkey traffic by creating new access or travel corridors. This may be as simple as mowing a lane between the rows of trees through a pine stand connecting two hardwood SMZs. (Don't harm any planted seedlings or trees.) The lanes could be enhanced with additional management such as establishing them in turkey favorites like perennial clovers. The same idea applies to road shoulders and utility rights-of-way—ensure that these important sources of landscape diversity are managed with turkeys in mind, and the lessons you learn from turkeys hereafter can be about how to bag them, not how to find one that simply isn't there.

ACCIDENTS ARE PREVENTABLE

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Know the risks, take precautions, and use tools to prevent them

Believe it or not, simple devices and common-sense precautions can prevent serious accidents when you're hunting or performing other tasks on your lease property. As humans, we tend to get complacent and rush, not using available protective gear—but check out these incidents that occurred on Weyerhaeuser property over the past few years and that might have been prevented with a few seconds and a few tools.



Put the brakes on suffering

How many times do you open and close a gate on your lease? Not just an accident but a fatality resulted when a club member who was unlocking a gate was struck by his own vehicle. It is always good practice to use your emergency parking brake while leaving your vehicle with the engine running, no matter what gear it is in. Apply the brake; avoid the risk.

Hands-on (and harness-on) safety

More than a dozen hunting accidents in the last few years were linked to tree stand usage. Fact: Using a safety harness will help prevent falls, but a surprisingly small number of hunters use them. Always maintain three points of contact while climbing up and down ladders. That means both hands and one foot or both feet and one hand are touching surfaces at any one time. (No, your forehead, elbow, or one ear do not count as points of contact, and your backside only counts if you're sitting still.) Keep your body near the middle of the step and always face the ladder while climbing.

PREVENTABLE *continued*



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Unload your gun when it's not in use

Some incidents and fatalities resulted from the accidental discharge of a firearm, which can injure yourself or others. One such incident occurred when a gun was laid on the tailgate of the pickup truck, and another hunter picked up the gun while pulling the trigger, shooting a companion. Guns should have their safeties on and be unloaded when you are not hunting. Always practice the 10 Commandments of Gun Safety.

All-terrain caution

Sadly, the highest number of injuries and fatalities on Weyerhaeuser lands have been related to all-terrain vehicles (ATVs). To help avoid serious injury or death, drive smart—wear helmets and eye protection and always adjust your speed to the conditions.

THAT MEANS LOWER SPEEDS:

- at night
- in unfamiliar areas
- in curves
- on hills
- on wet/muddy ground
- on loose gravel



Joshua Elks, Craven County, NC
First deer for the 6-year-old son of Weyerhaeuser
Administrative Assistant Nicole Elks

MINORS SHOULD NOT OPERATE ATVS.

We strongly encourage you to take necessary precautions to ensure the safety of yourself and others around you—and possibly save a life.

At Weyerhaeuser, We “Gopher” Conservation!

And you play an important role, too

By Richard Stich, Environmental Affairs Manager, Weyerhaeuser Southern Timberlands



A COUPLE OF YEARS AGO, I was doing some field work, trying to verify the location of some gopher tortoise burrows on Weyerhaeuser property in southern Mississippi. On my map was a fair-sized food plot the hunt club had cleared, and I wanted to check it for additional burrows.

Gopher Tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*)

Sure enough, about 15 feet off the west side of the wheat patch, I found what I was looking for. As I put up flagging to mark the burrow, I heard a loud commotion: parting the grasses was what appeared to be an infantry helmet barreling straight towards me. The burrow-owner moved with surprising speed for a turtle, running right over the toe of my boot as she sprinted back to her burrow.

Gophers: The watermelon-sized turtle

A lot of species of aquatic turtles live in the southeastern United States—snappers, sliders, cooters, and softshells, to name a few. But there are only three species of terrestrial or land turtles: the ornate box turtle (*Terrapene ornata*), the eastern box turtle (*Terrapene carolina*), and the gopher tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*). As you may have guessed, the two box turtle species are closely related and similar in appearance. On Weyerhaeuser property, the ornate turtle’s range is limited to far western Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Texas, while the eastern box turtle occurs across the South. Both are small to medium in size—about the size of a grapefruit. The gopher tortoise is comparatively huge, up to 15 inches long.

The gopher tortoise is a true deep-South species whose range extends from the toe of Louisiana east to the Georgia/South Carolina border and south throughout much of Florida. The tortoise generally occurs on deep, well-drained sandy soils where it can excavate burrows over 6 feet deep that may extend more than 20 feet. The species feeds mostly on grasses, weeds, fruits, and, when available, prickly-pear cactus. The tortoise is

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Ornate Box Turtle (*Terrapene ornata*)

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NAKRN5M



Eastern Box Turtle (*Terrapene carolina*)

© MATT REINBOLD
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FURRYSALYMAN

GOPHER TORTOISE *continued*

considered by some to be a keystone species because its burrows have been shown to provide shelter for more than 300 other species, including gopher frogs, eastern indigo snakes, and many insects. The tortoise is also a long-lived species, with individuals surviving up to 80 years.

Turtles “gopher” clearings among the pines

Gopher tortoises occur in pine-dominated forests and do best in stands with an open-canopy, little to no midstory (bushes and small trees), and a grassy or weedy understory. When the upper canopy or midstory gets too thick, it shades out the low-growing plants the tortoise prefers to eat. In response, tortoises will often move toward natural and man-made openings such as glades, road edges, utility rights-of-way, and food plots.



Spotting a burrow

The easiest way to know if your lease land may host gopher tortoises is to locate their distinctive burrows. Generally, the burrows have a characteristic half-moon shape about 10 inches wide and 6 to 8 inches tall. In addition, the burrow will have a wide “apron” made up of loose sand and soil in front of the burrow entrance. On this apron, the tortoise will often bask in the sun, and females generally lay their eggs there. By contrast, the burrows of other animals are usually round and may not include an apron.

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Make sure burrows are well marked and don't disturb the area for 15 feet around it.

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Helping them out

This is where recreational lease members can pitch in to help this interesting species. Gopher tortoises seem drawn to food plots, roadsides, and other clearings, which tend to include a nutritious food source. That's why lease management activities that can help tortoises include maintaining food plots, mowing, and bushhogging.

Before starting these activities, however, lease members should look around for any burrows, make sure any burrows are well marked with flagging (or other methods), and ensure

that heavy equipment does not disturb the apron (the area at the burrow entrance), the burrow itself, or behind the burrow. Food plot disking or plowing should never occur over the burrow or apron. Generally, a radius of about 15 feet around the burrow is plenty of precaution.

Other gopher aid

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is currently evaluating whether the gopher tortoise needs less or more federal protection. The tortoise is listed as threatened in Louisiana, Mississippi, and eastern Alabama, a designation that gives the species protection through the Endangered Species Act. The species is a candidate for this listing in the eastern portion of its range.

By looking at the range map, you can likely determine if your lease is in the tortoise's range. If so, damaging a burrow or harming or killing a gopher tortoise can lead to federal



prosecution in the areas where the tortoise is listed, and several state laws protect the species where it is a candidate for listing.

Fortunately, many current forestry practices are beneficial to the gopher tortoise. For example, thinning pine stands is done to better space the

remaining trees, which can eventually grow to become high-value sawtimber. This opens the canopy, which improves conditions for the gopher tortoise. Another beneficial practice is herbicide application which controls midstory woody brush, allowing understory plants to flourish. Both thinning and weed control are good for tortoises, as well as for deer, turkey, and other game species. Prescribed burning is also used to create habitat beneficial to gopher tortoises and other species. Weyerhaeuser is working with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and several state agencies to better understand how the gopher tortoise uses managed forests and how conservation practices for the species can be further incorporated into compatible forestry practices.

So the next time you visit your lease property and prepare your food plots, remember that you're also playing a part in species conservation. Hunters spend more time, money, and effort on wildlife conservation than any other group in society. Remaining alert to gopher tortoise burrows and taking small steps that require little effort will go a long way toward helping the species' dwindling populations recover.

From Maine to North Carolina:

A bird's journey from one great Weyerhaeuser place to another

By Henning Stabins, Weyerhaeuser Wildlife Biologist

This is the story of a bird called Snoopy. Snoopy is a *Scolopax minor*, better known as the American Woodcock. He was first tagged on Weyerhaeuser land near Jackman, Maine, in an alder bog in October, when the weather was getting cold.

Snoopy was not looking forward to a cold winter, so he packed up and started his 730-mile journey south. His journey included stops in Yonkers, NY, and Salisbury, MD, (where he probably grabbed a bite of steak and gravy) before he ultimately ended his month-long adventure near Elizabeth City, NC, at his prime wintering areas on a forested tract of about 3,000 acres called Perquimans 5.



Snoopy's habitat in Maine

Perquimans 5 is not known for its alder swamps or its rare, incredibly diverse landscape. It's just a regular "biological desert" no animal uses, right? Wrong! The territory Snoopy sought is a managed 16-year-old loblolly pine stand in a sea of agriculture fields. This

stand was certainly well managed, though: planted in 2004, thinned in 2016, and fertilized in 2019. It also borders a row of wind turbines. But the GPS record shows that Snoopy enjoyed his winter days in Weyerhaeuser's pine stand and spent his evenings in the adjacent fields to the north. By mid-March 2021, Snoopy was still on Perquimans 5 enjoying all the amenities the pine forest could offer.

Why we snoop on Snoopy

Who cares, besides Snoopy? We do! Snoopy is a subject of the [Eastern Woodcock Migration Research Cooperative](#) (EWMRC), an international partnership interested in better understanding the species' movements from its northern breeding areas to its southern wintering areas. The research, which may identify potential reasons for the bird's declining numbers, is being coordinated by the University of Maine and involves multiple states and partners, including Weyerhaeuser.



The special tags attached to birds like Snoopy are GPS-enabled satellite transmitters fitted to their backs via a rump-mounted harness. The transmitters are programmed to record the bird's location every day during migration and transmit the information every few days to the researchers. The location accuracy is precise—within 30 feet.

The University of Maine had asked Weyerhaeuser for access to company lands that surround Maine's 40-mile-long Moosehead Lake. Thanks to previous collaboration on woodcock research, our wildlife experts knew just the spot to find woodcocks—an old homestead site called Fogg Farm. Near a stream, this site had thin soils and short growing seasons that had proven too tough for efficient timber management, so it had been returned to natural forest and shrubland. But those same moist soils, young forests, and scattered openings were all the ingredients for great woodcock habitat.

Happy habitat in managed forests

Why did Snoopy leave one Weyerhaeuser tract near Moosehead Lake in Maine and travel over 700 miles—sometimes flying more than 70 miles a day—to rest on different company land in the swamps of eastern North Carolina? It turns out that intensively managed forestland provides great habitat for a wide variety of species, including the woodcock. All the work company foresters do when implementing our Environmental Management Plan, following the Sustainable Forestry Initiative guidelines to create a shifting mosaic of tree stand ages, protect water quality in streams and wetlands, retain landscape structure

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SNOOPY *continued*

during harvests, and conserve soil during wet weather—it all comes together in a story like Snoopy's. Add in collaborative partnerships and continually improving our practices based on research, and everyone in the extended Weyerhaeuser family, including our lease holders, can take pride in what we do.

Snoopy is just one of hundreds of birds monitored through the Eastern Woodcock Migration Research Cooperative, which has identified migration paths from Prince Edward Island, Canada, to West Palm Beach, Florida, and from Cook, Minnesota, to Hattiesburg, Mississippi. Of course, the best part of any trip can be coming home. Around the middle of March, Snoopy started his long return journey. While that path took him slightly more inland, he ended up fewer than 4 miles from where he'd been tagged.

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Everyone in the extended Weyerhaeuser family, including our lease holders, can take pride in what we do.

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“Loblolly forests are nice to visit,” thought Snoopy perhaps, “but there’s no place like the (white) Pine Tree State—home.”

Next time you see a woodcock, think of where it may have come from or where it is flying off to. There’s no doubt it’s racked up frequent flier miles, but managed forests may provide havens on either end of the trip.



GAME ON!



Antwan Jones & Benji McIntosh, Craven County NC
With a good day's harvest of rabbits atop their hunting dog kennel

GAME ON!



MacKinzie Massey, 15, Clark County, AR



Food Plots for Wildlife: Conserving pollinators

By Daniel Greene, Weyerhaeuser Wildlife Scientist, and Laura Six, Weyerhaeuser Forest Ecologist

Wildlife food plots are a common sight on Weyerhaeuser Company lands. In fact, wildlife plantings are one of the most-applied management activities throughout the southeastern United States.

They're often maintained specifically for white-tailed deer, wild turkey, and mourning doves. It is likely, however, that you frequently see insect pollinators such as bees in your food plots, especially on clover. This means you are playing an important role in pollinator conservation!

Beyond the direct benefits food plots offer game species, there are also important indirect benefits for other wildlife too, including insects, and in particular, pollinators. Think butterflies, moths, bees (there are more 4,000 bee species in the United States!), wasps, flies, and some of the nation's more than 30,000 species of beetles. You can help these pollinators by sowing seeds for plants that support them during hunting season and beyond.

Mix it up

While there is no perfect mixture of seeds to meet every objective, your choices can benefit multiple species. Common seed mixtures for food plots contain a blend of cool-season grains (such as rye, wheat, and oats), warm-season grains (such as milo and corn), legumes (clovers, beans, and peas), and brassicas (such as turnips and radishes). Plots that contain seed mixtures like these, with a variety of both warm and cool season plants, can provide year-round food resources for wildlife.

Similarly, seed mixtures for pollinators can include a wide variety of native annual and perennial flowering plants, warm season grasses, and legumes. Consider non-grain seeds such as ragweed, black-eyed Susan, milkweed, native lespedeza, asters, coneflowers, and bluestem grasses. Diverse seed mixes

have been shown to be important for many pollinator species, and they can be combined with your chosen seed mixtures for game species or planted alone, if they are fit for the specific site conditions (such as soil conditions) and are planted within the recommended planting dates for the site's Food Plot Seed Planting Zone.

Refer to these online plant selection resources:

- [Selecting plants for pollinators: A Regional Guide for Farmers, Land Managers, and Gardeners in the Southeastern Mixed Forest Province](#)
- [Native plant information, including plants for pollinators](#)
- [Pollinator habitat planting fact sheet](#)

Increasing pollinators benefits other wildlife

Within our working forests, diverse flowering plants are readily available in younger stands but decline as stands grow older and start to close their canopies. Food plots are a great way to extend habitat conditions for pollinators—and some game species in turn—as those stands age. Specifically, plantings that promote insect abundance can improve nesting and brooding conditions for many birds, including turkey poults and quail chicks. Similarly, pollinator mixtures that contain broadleaf flowering plants provide important cover for young birds to move freely on the ground and seek shelter from the sun and predators.



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Conserving pollinators continued

Ensuring quality forage

Most wildlife food plots contain plant species that provide supplemental high-quality forage to the area. Compared to the plants that naturally occur on the landscape, wildlife food plot mixtures deliver nutritional values similar to traditional, grain-dominated food plot mixtures, and some have more crude protein and overall better digestibility for species like white-tailed deer. At the same time, locally sourced seeds are derived from plants native to the area, which may be better adapted to the temperatures and periodic droughts common in the southeastern U.S. and help to ensure forage survival and availability during most of the year.



Pollinators need your help

It's worthwhile to support pollinators with your food plot planting choices. Unfortunately, many species—including the monarch butterfly, many native bees, and the non-native European honeybee—face a global decline. A shortage of pollinators can have devastating effects, as 75 to 95% of flowering plants rely on pollinators and they provide an estimated value of more than \$200 billion. They enable the agriculture industry by pollinating the foods we eat as well as supporting healthy forest ecosystems that stabilize soils, filter water, and clean air. In all, promoting pollinator habitat and a diverse pollinator community not only directly shapes wildlife habitat but can have broad global impacts.

Pollinators provide an estimated value of more than \$200 billion, but populations are declining. Promoting insects can improve nesting and brooding conditions and shelter for birds.

GAME ON!

Send Us Your Hunting Photos!



Sim Liddon, Sumter County, AL
An 8-pointer at age 11



Mattie Patton, Sabine Parish, LA
11-year-old granddaughter of David West, retired Weyerhaeuser Zwolle Mill Manager



Charles Berryhill, Marion County, AL



Riley Smith, McCurtain County, OK
Son of Carol Smith, Weyerhaeuser Lease Marketing Specialist



Turkey Neck Hunting Club, Craven, NC

Did you harvest the deer of a lifetime?
Or did your child recently take their first wild turkey?
We would like to share your success in an upcoming *Weyerhaeuser Outdoors*. Please email photos to amy.james@weyerhaeuser.com, along with details surrounding the hunt. Your photo may appear in a future issue!



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