Your Side of the Fence

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Managing To Improve Dove Action

By Josh Richardson, Migratory Game Bird Biologist

The eastern sky begins to glow, and you've settled in against a fencerow with your equipment within easy reach. Pretty soon you hear the rhythmic whistle of wings and look up to see a trio of "gray rockets" come to rest in a dead tree farther down the fence, surveying the open field before you. After a minute of vigilance, they're off again, crossing a little in front of you.

Three shots, and one bird falls, but OK, it's still early. One hour and hundreds of passing doves later, you pick up your 15th bird. As you head to the truck, you wish you could do this on your own property instead of someone else's. While it does require some acreage, equipment and time, it is possible on many properties statewide.

In the last issue of this newsletter, we discussed management everyone can do for doves by manipulating native habitat. This time we'll focus more on management of fields and food plots for doves. In Oklahoma, dove fields have traditionally been planted to wheat, millet or milo. More recently crops such as black-oil sunflower and canola have become more common. All of these are suitable for attracting and holding doves, and each has characteristics to make them better suited for one location or another.

Due to the wide diversity of temperatures and rainfall across the state, it is highly advisable to contact your local Extension office or seed dealer for more details on planting (dates, soil temps, planting depth, etc.) and crop types. Make sure that whoever you consult understands ***WHEN*** and ***HOW*** you plan to use the field. Each plant, or variety of plant, has a defined maturity length, and "normal" planting dates for crops like sunflower or milo would result in plants maturing mid-September or later. Unlike a normal agriculture operation, having "weeds" in your dove field is not a bad thing; in fact it can add beneficial diversity (see Winter 2014 "Your Side of the Fence" edition for a list of some of the better native "weeds"). On the other hand, a high percentage of bare ground in a dove field is extremely important, so starting with and maintaining a fairly clean field is beneficial. Folks unfamiliar with farming might think that after the seed has been planted, the job is done until right before hunting season. But one must stay vigilant while the field is growing to stop or reduce seed losses caused by disease, insects or other animals. Again, the issues that can arise are too varied to be fully covered here, but your local Extension agent or farm consultant can be an invaluable resource.

After 3-9 months of growing under "passive management," it is time to get active again as the opening day

ODWC

Dove hunting can be productive in a field with bare ground.

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Managing Oklahoma's wildlife resources and habitat to provide scientific, educational, aesthetic, economic, and recreational benefits for present and future generations of hunters, anglers, and others who appreciate wildlife.

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Manipulate only portions of a field at any one time so that feeding areas remain.

draws near. Starting in mid-August, you should begin manipulating parts of your dove field(s), exposing grain and providing a food source birds will begin to concentrate on. It is advisable to only manipulate portions of a field at any one time. Manipulations spread out over a period of 4-6 weeks can provide a continuous high-quality feeding area well into the season. Recall that doves have weak legs and cannot easily feed where there is a lot of plant material on the ground. You should try to match the field manipulation with the type of crop growing there. Mowing plants with robust stems and many leaves will often leave a rough surface with a thick layer of plant material, so, most of the seed you worked so hard to produce becomes unavailable to the doves you were trying to attract. Alternately, disking a light, fine-stemmed crop will likely incorporate most of the seed into the ground, also making it unavailable to doves. In Oklahoma, burning or a combination of mowing and burning is the manipulation of choice for dove fields, but each field and each circumstance (including equipment and personnel needs) will require its own decision about the proper management technique.

One of the questions I most often receive from hunters is what is and is not legal to do in a field managed for doves, or what is considered baiting. That is a good question, and it gets kind of confusing if one also hunts waterfowl or cranes. Hunting dove in or over fields of standing or manipulated grain is legal. Manipulation includes mowing, burning, disking or spraying. ***PLEASE NOTE, HOWEVER, THAT TEAL AND SEPTEMBER GOOSE SEASONS,COINCIDE WITH DOVE SEASON AND HUNTING TEAL OR GEESE ON A MANIPULATED FIELD IS CONSIDERED BAITING.***

After putting time and effort into creating this dove field, you will likely hunt it more than once and want to invite others over to hunt as well. Hunting morning and evening, in every part of the field, will result in a great looking field with very little dove use in very short order. Instead, leave a portion (around 10-20%) unhunted, or hunt the field only once a day. This provides an area or time of protection that allows birds to remain comfortable coming to the field to feed, instead of "burning" out a field hunting too hard or often. As cool fronts pass through, many of the resident birds that used your field will begin to head south, but new arrivals will quickly take to your field as they follow the feeding cues of remaining resident birds.

Hopefully this series of dove management articles has shown you new or different ways to improve your property for doves, whether through native plant management, or through more resource-intensive ag-type management. Come September and October, there is no reason for you to have only a handful of birds, a half-empty box of shells and be staring at an empty sky.

Brandon Brown/ODWC

Turtles Play Important Roles in Farm Ponds

By Matt Fullerton, Wildlife Diversity/Private Lands Biologist

As an advocate for reptiles and amphibians, I am often asked about the purpose of turtles in farm ponds and whether or not they negatively affect the pond's fish population. The short answer to this is "no," and in fact, the presence of turtles may be a benefit.

The most common species of turtle in farm ponds is the red-eared slider (*Trachemys scripta elegans*), known for the bright red stripe seen on each side of its head. The name "slider" comes from this turtle's habit of sliding off of logs and rocks into water when it perceives a threat. Highly adaptable, this turtle can be found statewide in temporary pools, farm ponds and large permanent reservoirs. As long as ample basking spots are available, this turtle will typically flourish.

What many landowners do not know about this turtle is that while it may be carnivorous when young, feeding on insects, tadpoles and crayfish, the adults eat primarily plant material. Common aquatic plants fed upon by turtles include duckweed, pondweed and smartweed. Red-eared sliders may eat the occasional fish, but this only constitutes a small part of their diet; a healthy bluegill or largemouth bass can likely evade the average red-eared slider with ease.

Jessica Bolser/USFWS

Red-eared sliders are often spotted sun-bathing on a branch or on a farm pond bank. As soon as they perceive a threat, they "slide" into the water.

When red-eared sliders hatch, they are roughly the size of a 50-cent piece. Adult red-eared sliders can grow as large as 10 inches, though 5-8 inches is more common. It is fairly easy to differentiate between adult male and female sliders when in the hand, as the males are usually smaller than females and have noticeably longer claws. Red-eared sliders will frequently travel across dry land, especially during rain events; this is how turtles will seem to "appear" in a newly constructed pond.

A second common turtle species found in sluggish creeks and the occasional farm pond is the eastern snapping turtle (*Chelydra serpentina*), a turtle that often receives a bad rap due to its defensive behavior. The truth is, snapping turtles are shy and typically stay submerged in the water unless basking or searching for a place to lay eggs on the bank. While they do eat primarily fish, snapping turtles will usually eat fish that are sick or have died. The scavenging habits of the snapping turtle can help keep farm ponds clean and benefit the fish population by culling diseased or dying fish.

Gary Peeples/USFWS

Eastern snapping turtles are known for their defensive behavior. Photo by Gary Peeples/ USFWS

Turtles are important in farm ponds because they perform an important ecosystem function. Additionally, they are a reminder that managing your pond for game fish also benefits many types of nongame wildlife – so sit back and enjoy them!

Surface Damage in Oklahoma — The Little Extras

By Rich Fuller, Wildlife Biologist — Energy Emphasis

Recently I attended an educational seminar for surface landowners and mineral rights owners in western Oklahoma. The seminar had several interesting topics related to oil and gas production and what people should know while entering into a lease for energy-related production.

The speaker giving the presentation was Luke Adams, an attorney with Tisdal and O'Hara lawfirm based in Clinton, Oklahoma. Throughout his presentation, Adams kept mentioning "Little Extras" that surface landowners can receive through negotiating surface damage issues. Since Oklahoma has what is called a "split estate" the subsurface minerals owner(s) may or may not also own the surface. Whenever a well is drilled however, there are requirements placed upon the operator to compensate the surface owner(s) for the damages incurred to the property as the result of the well.

After his talk, I asked Adams to explain more about what he was calling the "Little Extras", but before that, it's important to know more about surface damages as it relates to the company that brings about the damage (known as the "operator") and the surface landowner. The following is a summary of our visit:

Q. "Luke, you mentioned that surface owners who get an oil or gas well drilled on their property are compensated from the damages associated with that action through the Oklahoma Surface Damage Act. How does the Act help landowners?"

A. "Rich, the Oklahoma Surface Damage Act went into effect on July 1, 1982. Prior to that time an operator was not required to pay the surface owner any amount of money for the drilling of a well on his or her property, except for damages to growing crops, unless the operator's use of the property was deemed unreasonable. The most important part of the Act is that operators are now required to pay you for the damages caused by the drilling of an oil and gas well on your property, reasonable or not. The Act also directs an operator to negotiate in good faith with surface owners prior to entering the property. The Act provides that the intent of these negotiations is to reach an agreement with regard to how much money the surface owner should receive for the damages caused to his or her property as a result of the drilling of an oil and gas well."

Q. "You also mentioned that there are some cases where the Act does not apply. Can you explain?"

A. "That's correct, the Surface Damage Act does not apply in every instance where an operator desires to drill a well on your property. For example, if the operator wants to drill a well in Section 1 to extract oil and/or gas from Section 2, the Surface Damage Act does not apply and the operator cannot force themselves onto Section 1. In other words, assuming you own surface in Section 1, you can tell them no and there is nothing they can do about it. However, if the operator wants to drill a well in Section 1 to extract oil and/or gas from Section 1, the Surface Damage Act applies and the operator can force themselves onto your property."

Surface landowners are compensated for damages from oil or gas well drilling.

Q. "Is there some sort of standard scale or formula for calculating the measure of damages?"

A. "Rich, the Act only contemplates the measure of damages caused by the drilling of an oil and gas well on your property. The measure of

damage is the difference in the fair market value of the entire tract of land before the drilling of a well and after the drilling of a well. It's important to note that the measure of damages encompasses the entire tract, not just the actual land taken which is typically 3 to 4 acres. One of the best examples to illustrate this point is when the property wherein the operator intends to drill a well is irrigated by a pivot system. You own 160 acres in Section 1 irrigated by a pivot system. The operator intends to drill a well in the middle of your pivot and plans to utilize 4 acres for the well pad. During the drilling and completion of the well you will not be able to use your pivot system as intended, thereby affecting the entire 160-acre tract. The measure of damages in this instance should include the loss of use of the entire tract, loss of crop production and the inconvenience in the actual use of the land as it relates to the value of the land, among others things."

Q. "What about some other factors that may happen in the future such as pollution?"

A. "The measure of damage within the agreement should only include the normal damages caused by the drilling of the well and installation of a well pad and access road. That is to say, no future and extraordinary damages such as loss of livestock, fire damage, pipeline damages and damages resulting from spillage or any contamination or pollution of the soil or water supply are included and should be specifically excluded in the agreement. You should also request that, after completion of drilling, the well site be reduced in size significantly to lessen the future impact to your property. The operator should not be allowed to use your water unless they pay. They should be required to install tinhorns at any waterways or low water crossings and must rebuild terraces that are destroyed so as to prevent erosion. The operator should be required to build the lease road to your specifications and maintain the same for the life of the well. Fences and gates should also be built, installed and maintained according to your specifications. Remember, this is your property and they are mere tenants for all intent and purpose. The top soil they turn over should be stockpiled to use when the property is restored after the well is plugged and abandoned. During restoration the operator should be required to put the property back to its original condition so that you would never know they had been there. They should also accommodate you with regard to the location of the production equipment, tank batteries, etc. And as we all know, hunting and fishing is a big recreational activity in western Oklahoma and even though a property is leased by the operator to extract minerals, it does not include any hunting or fishing privileges. It is the landowners discretion to allow or prohibit anyone including the operator to hunt or fish on the property, or, to establish a separate hunting lease. In special circumstances landowners may also be able to restrict the operator's access for drilling, reworking, etc., to non-hunting season."

Q. "Luke, you mentioned several times in your talk that the negotiation process of determining the measure of damages and how they are to be corrected or compensated can include some "Little Extras." For the benefit of our landowners who subscribe to "Your Side of The Fence," can you explain what you mean?"

A. "After the amount of damages is calculated and agreed upon by all parties, landowners can then negotiate the "Little Extras." These extras will not appear on your Surface Use and Damage Agreement; and the CEO of the operator of the well will most likely never know they exist. The only place you will find these "Little Extras" will be in the operator's field hand's written notes and the inbox of your email.

It's important for folks to understand that when the field hand approached you initially to drill a well on your property he was likely in a hurry. The well next door will be ready to move in 30 days and his higher ups are demanding that he get the next spot secured yesterday, but they won't allow him to pay you more damages than what your neighbor agreed to take. So, in order to get the deal done under budget they will agree to make some improvements to your property with the crew that will be on site in a few days to start pushing dirt. Here are some examples of the "Little Extra" improvements that can be done. If you have a dam that busted, ask them to fix it. If you want them to rip-rap your existing dam with some of the larger rock they unearth, just ask. If you want them to bull doze the old farm home on your property, just point. Let's say you're an avid deer hunter and you want a food plot planted, just tell them where you want it located and what seeds to plant. Often, the operator can do these tasks with very little expense and can go a long way to appeasing you, the land owner.

In short, when dealing with an operator who wants to drill a well on your property and you need some improvements done, just ask. What's the worst that could happen? They say no?"

What with new innovations in extraction techniques, Oklahoma's oil and gas industry is developing areas within the state that have never been developed previously. Similarly, these new techniques such as horizontal drilling are bringing new life into geologic formations that were thought to have been fully exploited. If you are one of the landowners who gets a knock on your door by an operator wanting to drill, here are two bits of advice:

1. Do some research and speak with people who know what your rights are for surface damages, and

2. Don't be afraid to ask for some "Little Extras."

Who knows, you might end up with some improvements that will greatly benefit the wildlife inhabiting your property for you and future generations to enjoy.

Editor's Note: The ODWC expresses its appreciation to Luke Adams, J.D. (Tisdal & O'Hara PLLC – Clinton, OK) for assisting with this article.


ODWC

Landowner Spotlight

Staying Young: The McMahons Enlist Agencies to Improve Land

By Doug Schoeling, Private Lands Biologist

Landowners don't have to have thousands of acres to get great enjoyment out of their property or the animals that inhabit it on a daily basis. Mr. and Mrs. Gordon McMahon purchased 44 acres in Garvin County that borders the Washita River to build their retirement home in 2005. They have always enjoyed hunting and fishing on the property but more importantly viewing the wildlife that uses it. When the property was first purchased, the property's oxbow lake was flooded and used by waterfowl, but the upland sites were thick with eastern redcedars, green brier, and other thick vegetation. Gordon knew there was wildlife on the property, but he wanted to see more. He contacted conservation agencies like the NRCS, USFWS and ODWC to see what programs were available.

In 2007, with the help of the USFWS Partners program, the McMahons began building the first of two wetlands. This didn't come easily because the area remained wet during construction and the dike had to be moved so the contract could be completed in time. Shortly after the project was completed, the region was afflicted with a major drought. The only standing water on the property began to get smaller and smaller, and the fishing opportunities diminished. Even so, the McMahons turned the drought into an opportunity to install a dike and water control structures in the wetland. But the wetlands never filled. Since they wanted to be able to fish the wetlands, they decided to drill a water well. This well now supplies enough water to have a small area in the channel of the wetland that holds permanent water and provides fishing opportunities.

In 2013, the McMahons turned their focus to the upland sites and began removing eastern redcedars and planting native grasses in an effort to convert an introduced field into ground-nesting bird habitat. This gave Gordon the idea to provide more wildlife food. He started to plant a few areas to food plots but didn't want to plant just one crop. He wanted different foods to be available at different times of the year. He began to experiment with different crops to see which would work best in his area. He now has eight food plots planted to wheat, oats, rye, cow peas, corn, clover and alfalfa, with one plot planted in a mixture of these crops. He has also planted over 300 oak trees to help provide additional hard mast fruit for the wildlife, but only 10 have survived. To see which crops and plants were getting the most use, he installed trail cameras at various plots. This gives the McMahon's an opportunity to get on their golf cart to check cameras and see which of their food plots is getting the best responses.

All of the extra food provided did come with the cost – nuisance feral hogs. Every year the McMahons spend many days trapping in an effort to keep the hog population in check.

The McMahons have enjoyed the habitat work so much that they decided to construct a second wetland in 2014 with the help of the NRCS and ODWC. The location of this second wetland allows it to be filled by drainage water of the original wetland. Now the McMahons are just waiting on Mother Nature to do her part and provide them with a little water to manage their wetlands, relax, and enjoy the fruits of their labor.


Doug Schoeling/ODWC

The McMahons have worked for 10 years to develop wetland and upland habitat improvements on their property.

Tech Note

Hack-and-Squirt is Great Way to Enhance Forest Areas

By RosaLee Walker, Private Lands Biologist

Trying to figure out how to manage and improve forestland can be a daunting task for landowners. There are various practices, techniques and designs for landowners to decipher and then determine which one will accomplish the goals and objectives on their property. Depending on the site, forestland improvement may involve culling low-value or undesirable trees. Culling these trees will reduce competition for nutrients, minerals, water and space for the remaining trees as well as allow sunlight to reach forest floor, increasing growth of herbaceous vegetation and plant species diversity.

One timber management method that can improve forestland quality is called "hack-and-squirt." Simply put, an incision – or "hack" – is made in the bark of the tree with a sharp tool (hatchet, ax, tree injector, etc.) and then herbicide is sprayed – or "squirted" – into the incision. The cut bark will hold the herbicide long enough for proper absorption into tree.

Not only is the hack-and-squirt method simple, it is also a highly effective and selective method for timber thinning. Landowners are able to choose which trees are treated with herbicide and which trees will remain. Other chemical methods such as aerial spraying are also highly effective. However, aerial spraying is not selective and does not give the landowner the flexibility to choose which trees to treat and which ones they would like to remain on the property.

Hack-and-squirt can be done any time of year. Even so, best results are typically found during periods of active tree growth, but not during the heavy sap flow of early spring. Similarly, rainfall can lessen the effectiveness of the treatment by washing the herbicide out of the incision. Because of this, it is not recommended to start treatment if rainfall is forecasted.

The age and size of the tree will also play a role in the effectiveness of the treatment and how much herbicide should be used. Hack-and-squirt is not recommended for use on trees less than 2 inches in diameter. Trees greater than 2 inches in diameter are acceptable, and the number of incisions made will depend on the diameter of the tree as well as the herbicide used. Always check the herbicide label for proper dosages, mixing instructions, cut spacing and recommended personal protective equipment.

For a list of recommended herbicides and application tips, check out the below table from the University of Florida IFAS Extension. More herbicide application techniques for woody plant control can be found at: http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdffiles/AG/AG24500.pdf

The hack-and-squirt method allows culling of trees by creating incisions and applying herbicides.

Herbicide Name	Active Ingredient	Application Rate	Application Tips
Arsenal AC	Imazapyr 4 lb/gal	6 oz/gal	One hack per 3" DBH
Garlon 3A	Triclopyr amine	50%	One hack per 3-4" DBH. Apply 1 ml of herbicide solution.
Velpar	Hexazinone	100%	One hack per 4" DBH.

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What's Inside

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