

Management Calendar



Obtain an updated aerial photograph of your property.

Updated aerial photographs are an invaluable tool in land/wildlife management. In fact, it is the first thing I want to see when someone asks me to help them improve their property for wildlife or create a management plan. In my opinion, aerial photographs are best if taken during the dormant season when deciduous trees have lost their leaves (i.e., late winter or early spring before

green up). This allows you to distinctly see differences in pine or evergreen habitats and hardwoods. Infrared images taken during the growing season can do this as well, but I prefer color photos taken during winter. They are simply what I have gotten use to and comfortable with. An aerial photo puts everything into perspective by allowing you to see the various habitats and how they lay across a property. While this may sound odd, it also allows you to see

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habitat diversity and layout of your neighbor's land which may play a role in how you manage your property. For example, if your goal was to manage for turkeys and you see on an aerial that your neighbor's property is primarily mature timber, increasing nesting habitat on your property will likely attract nesting hens (and gobblers) from the surrounding property in the spring (not that you want to "steal" turkeys from your neighbor! Ha). Also, aerial photographs often become my "drawing board" when devising plans to improve a property. That is, having a map of the entire property in front of me, I can see everything, where various habitats are on the property, where food plots are located, etc. Having this, I can visualize how deer or other wildlife use the property and/or how we can improve the property to not only ensure quality habitat is provided across the landscape, but where habitat management can be used to direct wildlife to areas for improved hunting. There are many companies that specialize in taking aerial photographs, adding geographic features (roads, property lines, habitats, etc), and providing a custom aerial map to the customer's specifications. While using these companies is obviously more expensive than pulling your property up on something like GoogleEarth, the resulting map/photo will be of high quality, up-to-date, customized to your liking, and can be uploaded into GIS type programs that allow you to pull useful information about your property (e.g, number of acres of each habitat type) and create detailed habitat man-

agement plans. While I prefer professionally flown custom maps to work with, I often use free online satellite imagery, such as GoogleEarth, Bing Maps, etc. if needed. The downside of these images is that they are often outdated and harder to work with in professional mapping programs which can handicap your map building/management planning process.

Spring is a good time to check soil pH and apply lime to food plots if needed.

To check the soil pH, simply collect soil samples and send them to a soil laboratory (see previous *Wildlife Trends* articles on how to properly collect soil samples). Your local farmers cooperative will often have soil collection bags (which normally have directions on how to collect soil samples) and will also know where you can send the soil to be tested. Although there are exceptions, most crops grow best in a relatively neutral soil pH of 6.5 – 7.0. Thus, lime is often needed to enhance the soil (this is particularly true in sandy soils).

Because it can take several months for lime to effectively change the soil pH, checking the soil in the spring will give you ample time to enhance the soil before the fall planting period. Remember, ensuring proper soil pH is often more important than what you plant or how much you fertilize. In fact, proper soil pH is essential for fertilizer to be available to the plants. Although lime can be spread any time of year, applying it at least 6 months before planting will allow time for it to enhance the soil. Lime can be broadcast directly on top of the soil where rain can work it into the growing zone of the soil, but disking it into the soil will speed the process and is recommended.

Learn your property.

Late winter/early spring is a great time to be outdoors and the perfect time to learn more about your property, find areas that could be improved, and fig-

ure out how deer or other wildlife use your property. Learning these things will help you maximize the value and use of your property. I often use squirrel hunting as an excuse to be in the woods learning a property and scouting for deer sign. Squirrel season runs through February in many states and can offer some great excitement. While it can still be pretty cold in many parts of the south, this is a great time to wander around and learn your property. As I have mentioned in past calendars, February and March are also great times to learn how deer use your property and strategize on new stand locations. Because deer have been exposed to a great deal of hunting pressure over the past few months, they are using areas that they are most comfortable in and feel safe. If you find out where they are “hiding” now, you will know where to find them next season once the hunting pressure builds and deer seem to disappear. During this time of year, buck sign such as trails, rubs and scrapes is still fresh.

Mow early or wait until early summer.

If you have areas that need to be mowed, mow them before turkey nesting season (which is generally March-May in most of the southeast) to prevent destroying nests. Unless necessary, I recommend leaving as much of



your roadsides, fields and other openings un-mowed to provide additional nesting habitat for turkeys and other birds. Much turkey nesting research shows that these areas are valuable and heavily used for nesting by hen turkeys. Even if turkeys do not use all of the unmowed areas, these areas will host an alternate food source (small mammals – rats, mice, and rabbits) for potential turkey nest predators. Having this “extra habitat” also increases the “search area” and reduces predator success in finding turkeys and their nests giving turkeys of a better chance of producing a clutch and surviving. This strategy is more valuable for landowners whose property has limited nesting habitat.

Make preparations for spring turkey season.

One of the best ways to ensure you have gobblers in the spring is to manage your property throughout the year to promote quality nesting cover (see turkey habitat management article in the January-February 2009 issue for more detail on creating nesting habitat). I have worked with many landowners who had gobblers on their property all year, but they disappeared during the spring. After closer inspection, their property didn’t have good nesting habitat and the hens had moved to adjacent properties, carrying the gobblers with them. Quality nesting habitat is created by maintaining a patch work of early successional habitat throughout your property. Burning, herbicide applications, strip disking, timber harvest, and roadside management strategies are all tools that can help you create quality nesting habitat for turkeys. Besides the key element of creating nesting habitat, creating strutting zones in strategic areas around your property will help put turkeys where you want them to be. A mower, disk, or fire or combination of these are the tools of choice for this task. Fire is my preferred tool if it can be used. Strutting areas are simply areas that have relatively little or open



ground cover that will be attractive to turkeys for breeding courtships. I often create these areas between roosting and nesting areas and preferably near a food source such as an old field, chufa patch, or food plot. Areas that often lend themselves well to creating strutting areas are powerlines, old fields, food plots and roadsides. Lastly, mowing hunter access trails will help you slip into areas to hunt without making a bunch of noise. If these trails go through thick habitat, don't be surprised if turkeys use the same trails.

Assess management strategies, review or develop a plan, & pre-

pare for upcoming projects.

Good planning and preparation ensures you will have everything needed and be ready to initiate projects this summer. I heard a saying that has stuck with me over the years that always reminds me to plan – “People don't plan to fail, but often fail to plan”. Planning also allows you to prioritize projects, create a budget for the upcoming year, and develop timelines for completion to help you stay on track. Many landowners simply tackle projects as they come up or as they think of them. This strategy can work, but without planning they may overlook or run out of money before addressing a more needed proj-

ect. Spring is a busy time for us at Westervelt helping landowners determine their property's needs. We conduct what we call “property management assessments/reviews”. During this consultation, we review projects that had been completed the previous year, review harvest data or other information that provides insight to how the wildlife we are trying to manage is responding to management, re-assess progress towards goals, assess the habitat and property in general to determine its limiting factors, and develop a prioritized list of activities that need to happen to help the landowner achieve their goals. While this is a professional service we provide, it is a process that I feel all landowners should go through each year, whether they hire a professional biologist or not, to keep them on track.

Prune fruit trees.

Pruning is a management strategy that will improve the health of fruit trees as well as enhance fruit production. Moderate pruning is usually best. Heavy pruning dwarfs trees and may delay fruit bearing, and is especially undesirable for young trees. Proper pruning shapes the tree's structure for life. Prune young trees to establish a strong scaffold system with wide-angled, well-spaced branches that will not split from high



winds or heavy crops. A well-trained young tree bears heavy crops early and continues to bear efficiently. The dormant season is the best time to prune fruit trees, although dead or diseased branches may be removed any time. Prune bearing fruit trees regularly, preferably every year; it is a mistake to neglect trees for years and then prune them severely. Old trees, however, can sometimes be rejuvenated with heavier pruning than younger trees require.

Fertilize perennial clover plots

Although I am a fan of planting annual summer crops to provide maximum nutrition through the summer months, I also like to include perennial clover plots in my food plot strategies for diversity and as a year-round crop that will be available when other crops fade out or are being planted. Perennial clover plots will start growing rapidly once spring green up begins and daily temperatures exceed 65 degrees. Fertilizing clover can add a significant growth/nutritional boost to clover and other perennials. Because clover produces its own nitrogen, apply a fertilizer that does not contain nitrogen, such as 0-20-20, during early-mid spring to provide adequate nutrients for clover growth. If you add nitrogen, you are simply feeding competing grasses. Although I strongly recommend pulling soil samples and applying fertilizer accordingly, a “normal” fertilizer application rate for clover in the spring is 200 lbs./acre. Once the growing season

begins, monitor the plot for undesirable weeds and grass. Pre-emergent herbicides are a fantastic tool that will kill weeds before they have a chance to become a problem. If you are unable to apply pre-emergent herbicide, mowing will help reduce undesirable weeds (do not mow too low...your mower should be set to cut just over the clover). However, if weeds and grasses persist, apply selective post-emergent herbicides for control. Although herbicides are more expensive than mowing, they are often the most effective. Mowing is used to give the clover a better chance to out-compete the weeds while herbicide kills the weeds.

Manage water in duck ponds.

Although duck season may be over, leaving your duck ponds flooded will benefit migrating waterfowl by providing energy rich foods for their flight back north. Pond drawdown rate and timing is important and will vary depending on your management strategy (natural moist soil management or agricultural plantings). If you are planting agricultural crops for waterfowl, leaving the pond flooded through early summer will help control weeds. Just be sure to drain the pond early enough to allow adequate drying time before planting time. However, if you are managing for natural moist soil plants, such as in a beaver pond, you will need to start pond drawdown in the spring to allow desirable native moist soil plants to germinate and grow. Slow

draw downs (over a 2-3 week period) are often desired because they will result in diverse emergent wetland species composition. Quick draw downs result in decreased plant species diversity and are often composed of undesirable species. If you are managing a GTR (Green Tree Reservoir or flooded hardwood area), use a slow draw down process but ensure water is off the area before spring green up to protect/enhance the growth of oaks in the GTR. Some oaks, particularly the more desirable ones for generating duck food, do not do well if left flooded after they begin growing leaves in the spring.

Collect shed antlers.

By mid-March, whitetail bucks across the country have shed their antlers. Collecting antler sheds can be a fun spring activity for the whole family. Shed collecting not only provides a great opportunity to spend time with your family, but also provides some insight to the quality of your deer herd. After a few seasons, compare the quality of sheds found from different years. If your program is moving in a positive direction, you will notice that the antlers are getting larger each year. Key areas to concentrate your searches include food plots, fields, around feeders, and along trails where deer must jump (over fences, ditches, etc). Training Labrador retrievers to find sheds has become relatively common and may offer additional outdoor adventures for you and your best friend.

