

Georgia WILD Newsletter: November 2008

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Georgia's Bobwhite Initiative benefits nongame, too

The Bobwhite Quail Initiative is a private-land incentives program developed by the Georgia Department of Natural Resources' Board of Natural Resources and the state General Assembly to address the severe decline in bobwhite quail and other grassland-forb wildlife species.

Eight years into the initiative often called BQI, it is clear this competition-based program is helping wildlife beyond the states beloved gamebird.

First, some details on BQI. Objectives include:

- * Helping achieve habitat and population restoration goals set forth in the Northern Bobwhite Conservation Initiative.

- * Improving early successional and grassland/forb habitat around working farms and pine stands.

- * Improving quail hunting and wildlife viewing opportunities.

The program provides landowners and managers, or cooperators, with technical assistance and through a competitive process financial incentives for carrying out bobwhite habitat management on working farms and pine stands. Financial incentives are only available to cooperators with property in a 15-county region within three focus areas of Georgia's upper Coastal Plain. Those areas and counties: Southwest -- Colquitt, Crisp, Dougherty, Lee, Mitchell, Terrell and Sumter counties; Central -- Bleckley, Dodge, Emanuel and Laurens; and, East -- Bulloch, Burke, Jenkins and Screven.

The program is funded primarily by sales of BQI vehicle license plates. Cooperator contracts run three years, because BQI is geared toward a three-year, early successional habitat window.

Landowners can re-enroll fields, which maintains habitat and preserves wildlife gains made during the initial contract.

Currently, 115 cooperators are under contract. The contracts include 216 crop fields, 53 pine stands and roughly 13,145 acres. BQI habitat incentive practices include establishing and managing weedy field borders, hedgerows, filterstrips, field corners and fallow openings; conservation tillage; and, heavy thinning and frequent prescribed burning of pine stands. Weedy areas are usually established using light harrowing in the winter months and maintained by restricting disturbance throughout the growing and nesting season. The main exception is for control of invasive exotics, specifically pasture grasses like Bermudagrass and bahiagrass, which are highly competitive but of limited habitat value for quail. (In these cases, cost-share funds are sometimes available for chemical treatment of problem areas.)

Between June and September, BQI biologists perform compliance checks to make sure the enrolled habitat meets contract specifications and is maintained. This helps ensure the program gets the most bang out of the conservation buck.

During compliance checks, biologists record occurrences of quail, sparrows, songbirds and rabbits flushed or heard. Biologists also monitor control fields that are representative of customary intensive farming techniques. Comparison of these data shows BQI practices result in positive impacts for quail and a host of nongame species that inhabit early successional habitats.

From 2005 to 2008, the average number of quail per BQI field vs. control field was 1.8 and 0.5, respectively. Cumulative wildlife use by nongame species was measured by totaling the average number of sparrow and songbird species recorded for each field. The cumulative wildlife value per BQI and control field was 9.3 and 2.4, respectively, for 2005-2008.

Biologists have recorded an array of nongame species using BQI habitats. Birds seen or heard during summer monitoring include indigo bunting, blue grosbeak, painted bunting, red-winged blackbird, grackle, brown-headed cowbird, northern cardinal, eastern kingbird, ground dove, ruby-throated hummingbird, eastern meadowlark, Bachman's sparrow, grasshopper sparrow and field sparrow. Cool-season encounters include purple finches, goldfinches, bluebirds, white-throated sparrows, chipping sparrows, white-crowned sparrows, dark-eyed juncos and rufous-sided towhees. Also, these weedy habitats provide good hunting grounds for timber and eastern diamond rattlesnakes, king snakes, coachwhips, black rat snakes, eastern fence lizards, and northern harriers and Cooper's, sharp-shinned, and red-tailed hawks.

In southwest focus area, gopher tortoises and their burrows have even been spotted in the early successional habitats BQI affords.

Another bonus: Heavily thinned pine stands respond with a diverse flush of vegetation from the increased sunlight and two- to three-year prescribed burning regimen. For example, a pine stand enrolled in 2007 had an understory comprised of dogfennel, common ragweed and panicledleaf ticktrefoil. The following summer, after a heavy thin during the winter opened up the overstory for sunlight to reach the forest floor, the understory contained common ragweed, panicledleaf ticktrefoil, partridge pea, spurred butterfly pea, goats rue, false indigo, other forbs and a mixture of native warm-season grasses. The occurrence of that species of false indigo marked the farthest west in Georgia it has been documented. Ultimately, the goal of the heavy thinning and frequent fire regimen is the restoration of the pine savanna habitat, which is listed as a priority in Georgia's State Wildlife Action Plan.

Insects and pollinators are also found in BQI habitats, providing the foundation for the prey populations on which quail and many nongame wildlife species depend. Pollinators also are a boon for crops and produce.

BQI has generated many other benefits for wildlife conservation including leveraged funding for management and research; youth quota quail hunts; and, increased educational outreach regarding the decline and effective restoration techniques for this guild of species. Additionally, BQI biologists have provided technical assistance from site visits to developing management plans for more than 800 landowners across more than 600,000 acres since the programs inception. The continued focus is increasing and maintaining early successional and grassland/forb habitat.

A 2004 cooperator survey indicated high customer satisfaction and a strong perception that BQI practices have improved bobwhite and songbird populations, as well as the environmental condition on cooperator farms. A frequent comment from landowners is they have started hearing quail in parts of their farm where quail had not been heard in years or even decades. After eight years, BQI has proven two things: This guild of species can be increased on working farms and pine stands, and adequate levels of economic incentives and qualified technical staff are essential for success.

BQI is marketed to landowners as a program for quail restoration, but there is no doubt it will continue to provide significant benefits for nongame species.

(This article compiled by BQI biologists.)

Arrowhead: better than outdoors TV

"Better than Animal Planet Live!" is how one second-grader described her visit to Arrowhead Environmental Education Center.

Located on 337-acre Arrowhead Wildlife Management Area near Armuchee, the center offers fun and learning in northwest Georgia. Originally developed from farmland into a private hatchery, the property, which includes 14 hatchery ponds and three lakes, was bought by the state in 1968 and is used to help in managing waterfowl and other wildlife.

Now in its 15th year, the center is open to schools in the Floyd County school system and private Darlington School. Arrowhead has a 2.2-mile interpretive nature trail, a beaver dam, wetlands and a new aquatic center where students can view lake sturgeon, crayfish and other native aquatic species. An average of 9,000 children visit the center each year.

Visitors will see a detailed mural that depicts northwest Georgia hardwood and longleaf pine forest habitats, a variety of live reptiles and amphibians, and a collection of birds of prey. Mounts of birds and mammals are also on display.

"I love that we can open (students) eyes to the environment," center director Kim Kilgore said. "So many kids are indoors so much and then they come here and we are able to give them something they can take back home with them, something that will help them appreciate their natural environment."

Kilgore recalled one group of second-graders that visited the center. "We were teaching them how to use binoculars, and afterwards we went for a bird walk and the group saw a mother pileated woodpecker feeding its babies.

"One little girl was ecstatic, saying, 'This is better than Animal Planet Live!' I am so glad that we can provide that kind of hands-on conservation education."

Teachers in Floyd County and Darlington can arrange field trips to Arrowhead by contacting Kilgore at (706) 295-6073 or kim.kilgore@dnr.ga.gov.