

THE CONSERVATION QUARTERLY

Early Spring 2017 edition

Nature notes & news from the Lavaca County Wildlife Management Association

Big changes coming to MLDP program

As some of you are already aware, massive changes are coming for those who participate in Texas Parks and Wildlife's Managed Lands Deer Permit (MLDP) program. The most notable change is the antlerless season length for cooperators that were on what was previously referred to as MLDP Level 1. LCWMA members will now be enrolled in what is known as the "conservation option," and will enjoy the extended antlerless season that was previously reserved for Level 2.

During the archery season, LCWMA members in the conservation option may harvest legal bucks, as defined by the antler restrictions, with archery equipment only. Archery hunters enrolled in the LCWMA must follow MLDP guidelines for the harvest of antlerless deer. This means a permit is **required** to harvest antlerless deer during the archery season if the property is enrolled in the LCWMA. At the same time, hunters using firearms may harvest antlerless deer only. Once the general (firearms) season begins then bucks could be harvested with firearms or archery equipment until the end of the general season. The antlerless season would continue through the general season and extend until the end of February. The new season would be as follows:

September 30, 2017-February 28, 2018

Antlerless deer may be taken by any lawful means, including modern firearms.

September 30, 2017-November 3, 2017 (if approved by TPWD)

Legal bucks, as defined by the antler restrictions, may be taken with archery equipment only.

November 4, 2017-January 7, 2018 (if approved by TPWD)

Legal bucks, as defined by the antler restrictions, may be taken with archery equipment or firearms.

January 8, 2018-January 21, 2018 (if approved by TPWD)

Legal bucks, as defined by the antler restrictions, may be taken with a muzzleloader.

Another notable change is that permits will no longer be mailed to cooperators, but printed off by cooperators themselves. Brent Pierce, Texas Parks and Wildlife biologist for Lavaca County, will not be able to print off permits for those without internet access. The LCWMA continues to work hard to find a solution to this problem. Look for more information on this issue in the next newsletter.

If you have received the program guidelines you know that there are a couple more notable changes to the system. Brent Pierce, Texas Parks and Wildlife biologist for Lavaca County, has asked that cooperators not set up their account in the new system until they receive further instruction via this newsletter. As of printing time, it is not known if MLDP cooperators will be rolled into the new system automatically, or whether each individual cooperator will have to set up their new account, as instructed in the documents emailed by Texas Parks and Wildlife. The next newsletter is scheduled for late April or early May, and will contain detailed instructions on what steps to take to enroll in the new MLDP program.

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Harvest data reminder

If you have not already done so, do not forget to submit your 2016-2017 hunting season harvest data to Texas Parks and Wildlife by April 1, 2017. Data may be entered into TWIMS or submitted on paper to Brent Pierce, Texas Parks and Wildlife biologist for Lavaca County. With the coming changes in the MLDP program, failure to submit harvest data **WILL** endanger your future participation in the MLDP program. All LCWMA members are strongly encouraged to enter their data via the TWIMS system, as upcoming changes will necessitate its use. Once again, it is imperative that your harvest data be turned in by the April 1 deadline to ensure that you are able to participate in the new MLDP program.

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Save the date.

This year's annual meeting of the LCWMA will be on Sunday, September 17, 2017 at the Knights of Columbus Hall in Hallettsville. More details of the meeting will be released in the summer edition of *The Conservation Quarterly*.

Help spread the word. Tell your neighbors to sign up now.

If you know someone interested in joining the LCWMA please get them signed up as soon as possible. Those with internet access can download an enrollment form off the LCWMA website (www.lcwma.org) under the JOIN tab. If you do not have internet access, please contact LCWMA chairman, Joel Wagner, at 361-798-6506, for an enrollment form. Due to the changes in the MLDP process the enrollment deadline will likely be rolled forward a couple of months. It is vitally important that we get new members enrolled as soon as possible, to guarantee their participation in the new MLDP program.

It's time. Send in your 2017 membership dues today.

If you haven't already done so, please mail in your 2017 membership dues as soon as possible. LCWMA dues are still \$20 and may be sent to the LCWMA at the following address:

LCWMA
P.O. Box 524
Hallettsville, TX 77964

You should receive a receipt once your payment has been processed. Please be patient, though, as we have only one Treasurer, and he like all LCWMA officers are volunteers; meaning they handle LCWMA business in their spare time. If you don't receive a receipt within one month of mailing your membership dues, please contact LCWMA Treasurer, Sam Bordovsky by phone at 361-798-1813 or by email at sbordovsky@gmail.com. To avoid confusion, and to expedite payment processing, please mail your dues directly to the LCWMA. Please do not mail payments to, or drop them off at, the Texas Parks and Wildlife office in Hallettsville.

Camp scholarships offered by LCWMA

The LCWMA will sponsor 6 scholarships for children and grandchildren of LCWMA members to attend 1 of 2 different conservation-oriented camps this summer. The camps include the Wildlife Conservation Camp presented by the Texas Chapter of The Wildlife Society {(<http://www.wildlifecamp.tx.org/>) \$350} and the Texas Youth Range Workshop presented by the Texas Section Society for Range Management {(<http://rangelands.org/texas/texas-youth-range-workshop/>) \$350}. Children and grandchildren of LCWMA members, who paid their 2016 and 2017 membership dues, are eligible to apply for 1 of 6 scholarships to cover the camp tuition shown above.

Applications should be emailed to the LCWMA (lavacacountywma@gmail.com) by April 15, 2017. The topic of the email should be CAMP SCHOLARSHIP APPLICATION and contain the applicant's name, name of the paid LCWMA member and their relation to the applicant, a contact phone number, and which camp you are applying to. Applicants also must provide a $\leq 2,500$ word essay, on the topic, "What are the biggest obstacles for the future of wildlife habitat management in Lavaca County?" Winners will be notified via email or telephone by April 22, 2017 and funds will be distributed directly to their camp of choice, if the applicant is accepted.

Scholarships were made possible by donations made to the LCWMA in memory of Ed McCrumb, Sr., in addition to LCWMA funds. Ed was a long-time officer, advocate, and founding member, of the Vienna Wildlife Management Association, before it was incorporated into the framework of the LCWMA as a management unit. One of Ed's passions was to always involve the youth in LCWMA events. The Board of Directors thought it a fitting tribute to honor Ed's memory by educating our youth on the importance of natural resources conservation, and by creating ambassadors to ensure their continued use by future generations.

Resolve to improve the health of your natural resources

by Joel Wagner, wildlife ecologist and LCWMA chairman

In the last newsletter I challenged all LCWMA members to resolve to improve the health of their natural resources in 2017. I offered a list of 6 management practices that are not extremely difficult to implement, but can produce profound effects in a relatively short period of time. While not an exhaustive list by any means, these practices can be beneficial whether you own 50 acres or 50,000 acres are a new landowner or a seasoned veteran. The following practices are time-tested to enhance the natural resources they target:

1. plant a food plot
2. conduct a prescribed burn
3. create a sanctuary area
4. aggressively manage feral hogs
5. implement a rotational grazing system
6. exclude livestock from riparian areas, and establish alternative watering sites

What follows are brief descriptions of the management practices, reasons for instituting each, and the species (i.e., plant or animal) that will benefit from them. I could write a whole newsletter on each of these topics, and one day I may, but for now, an overview of each will hopefully pique your interest.

1. Plant a food plot

If holding more wildlife on your property for more of the year is your objective there are few practices that can match the attraction and holding power of a food plot. Food plots not only attract more wildlife to your property, but they improve the nutritional quality of their diet. While food plots are traditionally associated with white-tailed deer, they can be tailored to benefit many more wildlife species. Mourning and white-winged doves, northern bobwhites, Rio Grande wild turkeys, and waterfowl are species that are attracted to and benefit from food plots.

A mix of annuals and perennials will ensure that animals are attracted to the area year-round. An even ratio of annual to perennial plots is a good starting point. However, over time, many food-plotters will lean towards a greater amount of perennial food plots due to the lower annual inputs of time and money. Lower inputs by no means translate to less work. Perennial plots still require fertilization, weed control, and periodic mowing to maintain succulent growth. If you plant a lot of food plots, no-till planting may be the way to go to save time and money. No-till planting is also great for building soil organic matter. Organic matter increases water holding capacity of sandy soils, mitigating the effects of prolonged periods without rain. In heavy clay soils, organic matter increases soil porosity, making it easier for the soils to drain excess water.

There are hundreds of food plot products on the market and *very few* were developed to withstand the long, hot Texas summer. If you choose to do a spring and summer plot, choose plants that are bred for drought tolerance and prolonged heat.

Being a successful food-plotter is more than just plowing up some ground and putting seed in the soil. Being successful at food plotting takes a commitment to learning your soil and your crop inside and out, and manipulating the environment to facilitate a return on your investment. Good food plots can easily cost \$100/acre, so, make sure you take all the necessary steps to ensure success.

One drawback to food-plotting is that feral hogs are drawn to many of the same food sources that attract other wildlife species. Food plots are an investment, thus, it is wise to invest in a fence to keep feral hogs from destroying them. An electric fence of 2-3 wires 6-8 inches apart and beginning 6 inches above the ground is effective, and cost-efficient, at deterring feral hog damage. Net wire, or field fence, is also quite effective, but is a more permanent solution and more costly than electric fence. No matter what materials you choose, be sure to protect your food plot investment from feral hog destruction.

2. Conduct a prescribed burn

Prescribed burning is the cheapest, most effective habitat management tool that land managers possess. No other tool can set back succession cheaper and more effectively than prescribed burning. It is the perfect tool to remove senescent vegetation and promote new growth; far superior to the tractor and shredder. Another benefit of prescribed burning is that it restores bare ground in native habitats. Bare ground is extremely important to gallinaceous, or ground-walking, birds like turkeys and quail, especially when they are newly-hatched.

Prescribed burning is also the perfect tool to promote plant species diversity. Timing and intensity of prescribed fires can manipulate the native plant community to facilitate populations of desired wildlife species. For livestock producers, late winter prescribed burns have been shown to reduce insect pests detrimental to livestock productivity, particularly horn flies and ticks. Numerous research studies demonstrate that regrowth following a prescribed burn has greater digestibility and contains elevated nutrient levels for 30-90 days post-burn. Huge swaths of native prairie in the Flint Hills of Kansas are burned annually for this very reason, to obtain rapid weight gain on stocker cattle.

Conducting a prescribed burn is more than just putting in a fireline and striking a match. There are rules that dictate outdoor burning in Texas. The Texas Outdoor Burning Rule, as its name implies, contains the state's guidelines for outdoor burning. Take the time to read over the rule so you are familiar with the requirements to lawfully conduct a prescribed burn on your property. If you want to do a prescribed burn on your property, but you feel like you don't know enough to do it right then think about joining one of the area prescribed burn associations. Lavaca County is served by 2 nearby prescribed burn associations, the South Central Texas Prescribed Burn Association and the Coastal Bend Prescribed Burn Association. Check them out on the web, and see if joining a prescribed burn association is the right choice for you.

3. Create a sanctuary area

Sanctuaries are highly effective in holding wildlife, particularly white-tailed deer, on a property. That said, they are probably the most underutilized management technique in the book. The theory behind sanctuaries is that they minimize human disturbance, in hopes of reducing the chances that animals will feel pressured, and move on to the neighboring property. A sanctuary doesn't have to be huge to be effective, but it does need to be largely undisturbed. At the very least, sanctuaries should never be hunted. If possible, it's best to stay out of the area altogether, but that may not be entirely possible. If necessity dictates that you enter a sanctuary area, it is best to do so during the heat of the day, when wildlife movement is least. Placing feeders or mineral sites in sanctuary areas is okay, but use all means necessary to ensure feral hogs can't access them. Otherwise, the area will become a magnet for hogs with good food and little human disturbance.

4. Aggressively manage feral hogs

There is no natural pest that has caused near the native habitat destruction of feral hogs. Innumerable research projects have demonstrated the detrimental impacts of feral hogs on other wildlife species and their habitats. Ground-nesting birds, like turkeys, quail, and meadowlarks have seen marked population declines since the explosion of feral hog populations in the 1990's.

While most landowners could do without feral hogs, and the destruction they cause, few landowners are taking steps sufficient to dramatically reduce feral hog numbers. Most landowners know that trapping is the most effective means of reducing feral hog numbers, but the tool of choice does not always fit the task at hand. Box traps using a tripwire or some other type of trigger to entrap the hogs, are ineffective at removing entire sounders, and can quickly create trap-shy hogs. On the other hand, remotely-triggered traps using a cellular-enabled camera to monitor feral hog entry and exit are highly-effective at removing entire sounders at once. The biggest drawback is that remotely-triggered traps are often cost-prohibitive for smaller landowners. It may be more amenable for neighboring landowners to purchase a remotely-triggered trap and rotate its use amongst the owners experiencing a feral hog problem. Even then, you have to catch and sell several hundred feral hogs among those properties to pay for the trap, and not every purchaser will catch enough hogs to pay for their part. Another, possibly more cost-effective, option for removing entire sounders of feral hogs is to purchase just a remotely-triggered gate and to use livestock panels to construct the sides of the trap. Even with the effectiveness of remotely-triggered traps, there will be hogs that don't get caught. The only way to effectively remove such hogs is to pattern them and kill them with a firearm.

All in all, if you are looking to eliminate large numbers of feral hogs from your property you need to use a trapping setup that enables catching the entire sounder at one time. If continued monitoring turns up hogs that were missed follow up with hunting of individual hogs, to prevent population increase.

Recently, a warfarin-based poison called Kaput was approved for use by the Environmental Protection Agency and then by the Texas Department of Agriculture. As of press time, though, that option is somewhat in limbo after a temporary injunction on the use of the poison was granted by a State District Judge in Austin. However, Texas Ag Commissioner, Sid Miller, insists that the ruling only applies to the emergency rule change made to make use of the poison safer. According to a press release by Sid Miller after the filing, the lawsuit only halts the extra protections he put in place with the emergency rule change. In essence, if Miller is correct, the judge's ruling took away the extra precautionary measures that were put in place by the Texas Department of Agriculture, and made use of the poison less restrictive. Bills have been filed in the Texas House and Senate to halt the sale and use of warfarin for feral hog eradication until more studies determine the effects of warfarin use on various industries and ecological systems in Texas.

5. Institute a rotational grazing system

Livestock grazing can be both a blessing and a curse when managing natural resources. Successful utilization of livestock as a management tool requires cognizance of the indicators that determine when it is time to rest a pasture. The post oak savannah, blackland prairies, and coastal prairies ecosystems in Lavaca County evolved with grazing. Before their demise due to overhunting, nomadic herds of bison manipulated the native plant community. The herds slowly moved across the landscape, grazing and trampling the plant community, before moving on. The combination of these 2 practices kept the plant community in a constant state of flux, maximized plant species diversity, and prevented stagnation of the forage base.

When grazing is removed completely it doesn't take long for the plant community to become less hospitable and less productive for the species that inhabit it. On the other hand, when grazing is incessant, plants have little time to recover from the last grazing bout. Many of the most palatable native grasses are known as decreasers, plants that decrease in abundance as grazing intensifies. Little bluestem, big bluestem, switchgrass, and yellow indiagrass, also known as the "big 4" native grasses, are all decreaser species.

Lack of rest for native plant communities also provides the perfect opportunity for exotic invaders to infiltrate the system and quickly overtake the natives. Over 75% of Lavaca County rangeland has experienced degradation of the native plant community as a result of overgrazing. Fixing the problem is neither quick nor cheap, but if wildlife diversity is your goal then a healthier native plant community should be one of your goals. The old adage of "take half and leave half" is no longer considered sound advice for native grassland management. Research has shown that a paradigm shift to "take 25% and leave the rest" accounts for the 25% of native plant material that is trampled during grazing or eaten by insects or other native herbivores. In essence, the old school teaching resulted in the loss of too much leaf area from the plant since insect herbivory and the grazing of other wildlife was not taken into account. Remember, one of the greatest attributes of native plants is their ability to withstand drought, due to their expansive root systems. The roots of some native grasses can run as deep as 8 feet below the surface. When too much leaf area is removed repeatedly the plant is unable to support its extensive roots because it cannot produce enough food to support them. Loss of root surface area reduces the plant's ability to gather water and nutrients in times of stress, effectively reducing the plant's chances of surviving.

Finally, rotational grazing enables the accumulation of fine fuel needed to carry a prescribed burn. Prescribed fire can quickly remove senescent vegetation, revive the native plant community, increase species diversity, and return the habitat to an earlier successional state. An increase in early successional native grassland, in Lavaca County, is imperative if we are ever to restore northern bobwhite populations of days past.

6. Exclude livestock from riparian areas, and establish alternative watering sites

Riparian areas are those areas immediately adjacent to, or influenced by their proximity to, a naturally-occurring watercourse. By their locus they are nature's water filters and flood control. Their job is to trap and hold pollutants, whether natural or manmade, and prevent them from entering the waterway. Riparian areas and their associated wetlands also serve as giant storage tanks for floodwaters; holding and then slowly releasing the water to reduce the severity of flooding events.

When livestock are allowed to utilize riparian areas they render the process of filtration null and void. Instead, pollutants are delivered right to the watercourse at full strength. These pollutants include, but are not limited to: manure, fertilizer, herbicides, and insecticides. Greater than normal amounts of sediment also end up in the watercourse from the repeated tracking of livestock along the banks, which increases shoreline erosion.

If you are serious about improving the water quality on your property, as well as that of your downstream neighbors, excluding livestock from riparian areas is a wise choice. Fencing out riparian areas can be costly, and complicated when there are multiple watercourses on a property. The good news is that cost-sharing is available through federal conservation programs, including the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). If the cost of fencing doesn't pencil out, research has shown that placing a water trough away from the watercourse can reduce the amount of time that livestock spend in and around the waterway. Reducing the time livestock spend in a riparian area is better than doing nothing at all.

**LCWMA
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Call the Chairman at

361-798-6506 or

Email

lavacacountywma@gmail.com