



Courtesy of Mark Banker

# Fresh Beginnings Benefit Wildlife

*Cutting trees is good for many animals.*

by David Hart

When Dean Stauffer holds up a photo of a fresh clearcut before his third-year wildlife students, he asks them to give their reactions. Predictably, at least a few of them are shocked or saddened by the sight. Once Stauffer has their attention, the wildlife professor at Virginia Tech leads his students in a lively discussion about wildlife habitat and habitat diversity.

"I really upset some of my students when I tell them that clearcutting is actually good for many species," says Stauffer, "especially those students who come from an

urban environment and aren't that familiar with various types of wildlife and their preferred habitats."

There's no question timber harvesting, especially on public lands, is a contentious and highly emotional issue. It has been vilified by many in the environmental movement for the past 30 years. As a result, the general public has an overwhelmingly negative perception of clearcutting, and any attempt to cut a tree on public land is met with swift and fierce opposition from activists. Timber harvesting on Virginia's 1.8 million acres of national forest is just a fraction of what it used to be.

"We are missing a whole component of high-quality habitat," says Stauffer.

That's why a variety of conservation organizations like the Ruffed Grouse Society, Quality Deer Management Association, and the National Wild Turkey Federation are calling for more cutting on our public lands. So are many of the Department's own wildlife biologists. Currently, less than two percent of the 1.8 million-acre national forest land in Virginia has been cut in the last 20 years, according to Ruffed Grouse Society Regional Wildlife Biologist Mark Banker.

"Last year, less than 1,200 acres were cut and the trend has been similar for many years before that," he says.

Stauffer and Banker both agree that maintaining just 5 percent of the



©Bill Lea

*Signs of life are readily apparent shortly after a selective cut (left). Above, vibrant growth quickly transforms the gray scar on the landscape with a mix of young trees, vines, and thickets.*

birds and mammals that feed on them.

A few years later, the former gray smudge on an otherwise verdant hillside is itself a vibrant green, a mix of young trees, vines, and dense thickets. A study conducted by a U.S. Forest Service research ecologist found the production of fruits and berries from such plants as dogwood, pokeweed, blackberry, and greenbrier was up to 20 times higher in regenerated forests than in undisturbed, mature forests. As a result, a rich mix of birds and mammals thrive in that lush new growth. In short, it's incredible habitat teeming with life.

In ten years, the new trees provide overhead cover for such species as grouse and woodcock, while the dense cover under those trees still offers excellent food and cover for a variety of other critters. Turkeys and songbirds nest and feed in it. Deer thrive in it; so do small mammals and reptiles.

No one is proposing the wholesale mowing of our forests, and no one is suggesting we harvest areas that have been set aside as wilderness or even the few areas that qualify as

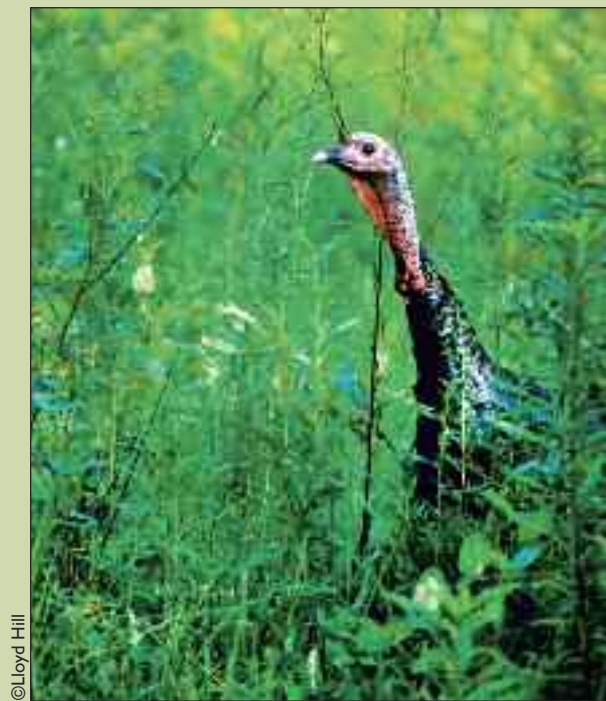
national forest as 0 to 10-year-old forest would create an incredible diversity of habitat that would benefit a wide variety of wild animals.

"That would mean the forest would be on a 200-year rotation," explains Stauffer. "In other words, once an area is timbered, it wouldn't be timbered again for at least another 200 years. It also means that half of our national forest would be over 100 years old."

*In The Name Of Diversity*  
Stauffer says forestry practices have changed dramatically in the past few decades, thanks in part to those environmental watchdog groups. Now, responsible logging companies follow what are known in the industry

as Best Management Practices (BMPs), which reduce the overall impact of a cut. BMPs reduce erosion and provide buffer zones adjacent to watersheds, among other things. The short-term impact is minimal.

There's no question a fresh clearcut is an unattractive gaping hole in the middle of a lush, green forest. What logging opponents don't show, however, is that same clearcut 20, 10, even 2 years later. Within just a year, even less, young growth springs from the tree stumps and grasses rise from the disturbed soil. Soon after, a wide variety of vines, shrubs, and other plants thrive in the new sunlight that reaches the ground. The cycle of life starts over, from the plants and insects to the



©Lloyd Hill

*Turkeys are among many species that benefit from the dense cover and food sources created by good timber management.*



©David Hart

### What About Water?

There's no question that logging can have negative impacts on watersheds when timber companies don't follow best management practices. However, when done thoughtfully and carefully, the impacts can be lessened. One study conducted in the Chatahoochee National Forest in Georgia found virtually no long-term impact from logging to a nearby stream. Other studies that monitor water quality in relation to timber management activities have also shown negligible effects.

George Washington and Jefferson National Forest Planning and Forest Ecology Staff Officer Ken Landgraf says loggers are required to follow strict guidelines set by the forest service before they cut a single tree. Those guidelines include buffer strips of at least 100 feet adjacent to permanent streams.

"We survey an area and mark all boundaries and even the trees that can and can't be cut," he says. "All logging activity is heavily monitored and controlled to ensure minimum impact to nearby watersheds."

old-growth. Large areas of the George Washington and Jefferson National Forest aren't suitable for logging—the slope is too steep or rocky and the soil, too thin to rebound quickly. There are thousands upon thousands of acres, however, that are perfectly suitable for timber harvest.

However, drive down just about any gravel road that snakes through Virginia's mountains and you'll see nothing but homogenous, 70- to 100-year-old forests that offer little in the name of diversity. A number of species rely on those mature forests, of course. Scarlet tanagers and orioles live almost exclusively in the tops of mature trees. Woodpeckers rely on large, dead trees, as well. Countless other birds and mammals, however, need young forests. Even if they don't "need" it to survive, those species benefit tremendously from the habitat created by timber management. Ruffed grouse are a perfect example.

"Grouse utilize early-successional habitat because it not only provides more food in the form of soft mast, green vegetation and hard mast, but because it provides necessary overhead cover from predators like hawks and owls," says Banker. "Food is limited and there is virtually no protection from predators in a mature forest."

That's why grouse have fallen on hard times. And with them, so have grouse hunters.

### Hunters Matter

More than 34,000 hunters pursued grouse in 1994, according to a survey conducted by the Department. They spent 176,000 man-days in the grouse woods and harvested 68,418 birds. Since then, those numbers have plummeted. Just 13,300 grouse hunters took to the field in 2008, spending an average of only five days in the woods out of the lengthy season. The reason? Timber activity was considerably higher in the 1970s and '80s, but those clearcuts have matured and no longer provide suitable habitat for the popular game bird.

Things are just as bleak for deer hunters who frequent the slopes and hollows in the western mountains. While private land deer harvest figures west of the Blue Ridge have generally kept pace with those east of the Blue Ridge, harvest figures have plummeted on public lands west of that range. Bath County hunters, for

example, tagged about 2,800 deer on public land in 1986. Twenty years later, that number fell to around 1,200. The trend is similar in virtually every county with national forest land. Just as grouse need young forests, deer also benefit from the dense growth that springs up in managed forests. Older oaks may produce acorns, but they shade out much of the growth deer need when acorns aren't available. In short, there is nothing for them to eat in a large stand of old trees.

"There's no question removing mature trees to allow sunlight to reach the forest floor would be greatly beneficial to deer," says DGIF Deer Project Coordinator Nelson Lafon. "I don't think we will ever get back to the population levels of the 1980s, but increas-



©David Hart

Grouse numbers have fallen; they need high-quality habitat that comes with active timber management.

ing management activity on the national forest would certainly help."

A bigger threat to our forests is looming, adds Lafon. As oaks mature and die, shade-tolerant trees like maples and white pines take over. That not only spells trouble for deer, it can also have a detrimental effect on turkeys and bears, which rely on acorns in the fall.



©Lloyd Hill

Bobwhite quail rely upon the early successional habitat created by clearcuts.



©Bill Lea

Two years after a selective cut the forest floor has been transformed, creating cover and food for a range of wildlife, including the blue-winged warbler (right). ©Rob & Ann Simpson

Also, the open forest floor may be leading to lower survival rates of fawns. A study in Pennsylvania found that predation of whitetail fawns is significantly higher in big woods than it is in farm country, where fawns have far more hiding places.

The ripple effect is obvious. Based on mandatory national forest permit sales, hunters are abandoning the na-

tional forest. There were nearly 30,000 fewer permits sold in 2007 than in 1994. Lafon doesn't know if the deer kill has dropped due to a decline in hunters or because the more open forest has made whitetails more vulnerable to harvest, therefore reducing their numbers overall. Possibly, hunter numbers have fallen as a result of the decline in deer and other game. Either

way, the slide in hunter numbers hurts conservation efforts for all wildlife supporters. It also has a detrimental effect on rural economies that depend on hunter dollars in the fall and winter seasons.

Opponents suggest logging should instead take place on private property. Banker agrees, but he says that's not happening much these days, either. Besides, hunters should have quality habitat on public lands, as well.

"Hunters are one of the largest user groups of Virginia's national forest. Why shouldn't forest management include their needs?" he asks.

### Not Just About Game

Managing our public forests doesn't just benefit deer, turkeys and grouse, and the hunters who pursue them. Cutting trees creates ideal habitat for a variety of non-game wildlife, as well, says Stauffer. A study conducted in South Carolina found considerably higher densities and a broader variety of songbirds in regenerated clearcuts than in mature forests. In some cases, lack of early successional habitat is in part responsible for the drastic decline in a number of songbirds which rely on it for nesting and brood rearing.

"Golden-winged and blue-winged warblers and prairie warblers are in serious decline largely due to habitat loss," says Stauffer. "One way to help them is to provide more early-successional habitat through timber management."

The very notion of cutting trees to help wildlife may be shocking to Stauffer's students at first, but once they understand the dynamics of habitat diversity they change their minds. Thankfully, so are many other people who were once wholly opposed to timber harvesting. □

David Hart is a full-time freelance writer and photographer from Rice. He is a regular contributor to numerous national hunting and fishing magazines.



©David Hart

