

FOR THE BIRD HUNTING ENTHUSIAST

The Upland Almanac

WINTER 2010

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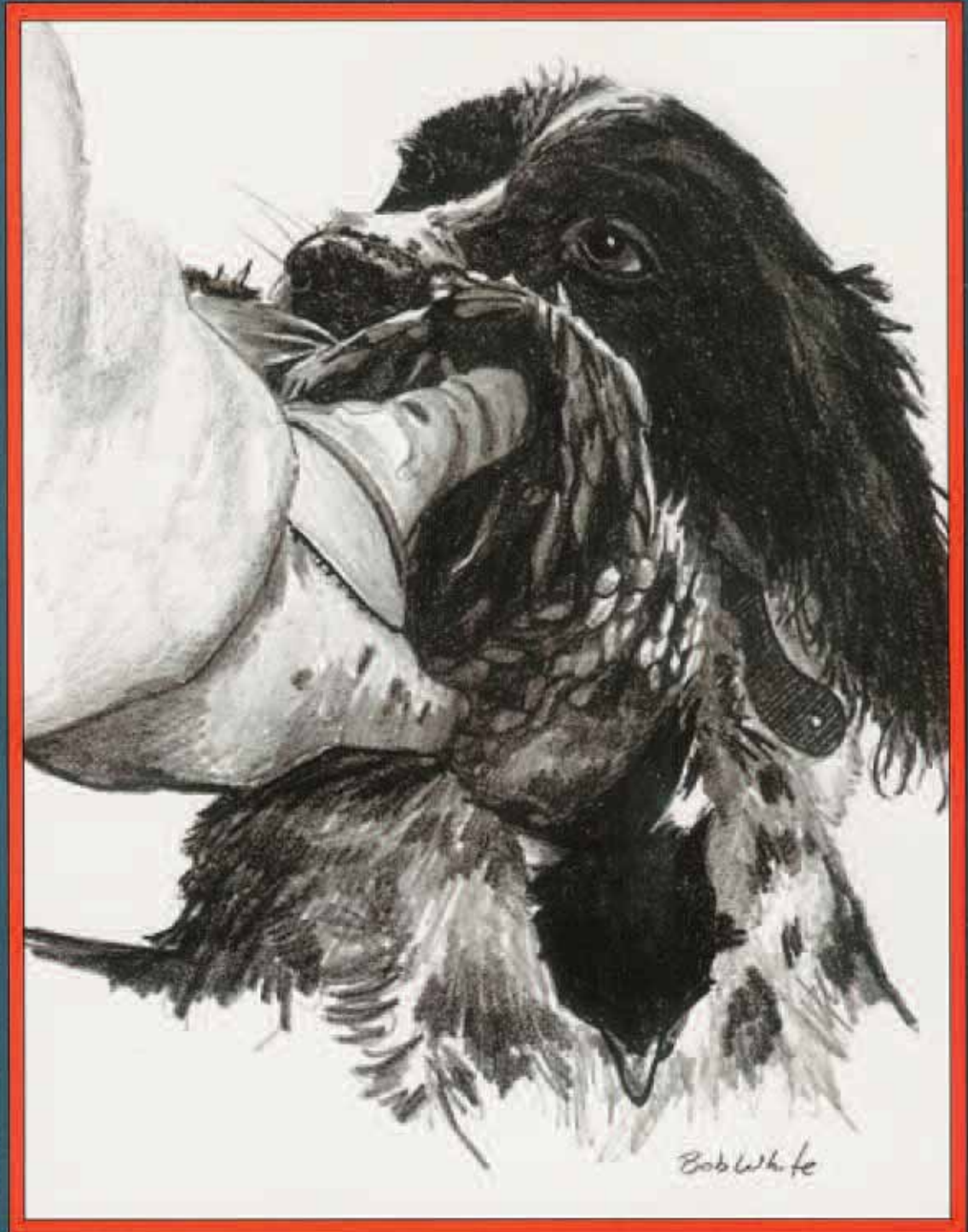
**WAITING FOR
WOODCOCK - OHIO**

**LOST IN
THE FOG - OREGON**

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HUNTING "MANCATION"**

**SWITCHING HANDS
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CONSERVATION VIEWPOINT:

HABITAT: THE FORGOTTEN KEY TO SUCCESS

by RUFFED GROUSE SOCIETY PRESIDENT & CEO DR. MICHAEL ZAGATA

How do we go about increasing the numbers of the wildlife species of interest to us? One way is to increase the habitat essential to those species. According to Eugene Odum in his 1971 textbook *Fundamentals of Ecology*, "Habitat is the place where something lives or the place where one would go to find it."

Wallace Grange in his 1949 book *The Way to Game Abundance* wrote: "An animal can survive only if its habitat survives. Since an animal and its habitat or environment are inseparable they are biologically one, and in game (and nongame) management we find that the main approach (to increasing abundance of the animal in question) is almost invariably to modify the habitat, thereby securing the desired response." This approach is not new, as evidenced by the publication dates of my references, but has it been forgotten?

The principles cited above apply to the management of all wildlife — deer, rabbits, squirrels, songbirds, grouse and woodcock. Habitat is the key to the success of a management strategy, but today the focus seems to be on using various schemes to manipulate population numbers or control predators. Without considering the crucial role habitat plays, it is doubtful that such plans can be successful.

Some of you are old enough to remember the heydays of the '60s when it was common to see 30 or more deer a day while hunting and to have 25 grouse flushes. What has changed? In the late 1940s, thousands of family dairy farms failed in the Northeast. When they did, the lands they farmed went fallow — millions of acres in a very short time. That set the stage for the wildlife abundance we experienced in the '60s. Let's consider how the two events are related.

A hayfield is a plant community that provides habitat to species like the meadowlark and bobolink. However, if that hayfield isn't regularly mowed, it will begin to change as other plant species get a foothold and begin to replace the grass. This process of plant community change is called plant succession and is driven largely by sunlight. The plants that live in the early stages of plant succession don't do well in the shade. Thus they are called shade-intolerant. As taller plants invade an existing plant community (e.g., a hayfield), the taller plants will shade out the shorter plants and eventually replace them. In the northern belt of states from Minnesota eastward to Maine and southward to the mountain tops of Georgia, the stages of plant succession might look like this: grass or hayfield to an abandoned pasture with an abundance of weeds, then brush, next aspen or apple trees and viburnums and eventually species like beech, maple, hemlock or oak take root.

Thus in those geographic regions, if left alone, a hayfield or cornfield will eventually become a mature hardwood forest. Pheasant hunters wouldn't want to see the hayfield and cornfield

become woods because we've learned pheasants prefer habitat consisting mainly of hay and cornfields. If we were interested in observing indigo buntings or hunting ruffed grouse and woodcock, however, we might welcome the change. What about the deer hunter? Consider the '60s when deer numbers were at their peak. They peaked because there was a mix of successional stages from fields to brush — millions of acres of which proved ideal for deer.

The preferred rifle at the time, the Winchester Model 94 in a .30/30 caliber with open sights, could be evidence to support our theory. It's a brush gun used at relatively short range, and the open sights allowed the hunter to quickly find a moving target in heavy cover. The deer rifle choices today, though there is a wide selection available, have two characteristics in common: They have a flat trajectory over a long distance and are equipped with a scope. They are designed for long shots in the open understory created by the closed canopy of leaves, a canopy that blocks sunlight and thus the source of energy for green plants. No sunlight means fewer green plants and that means little food or cover for the wildlife species that live on the forest floor.

The change in weaponry tells us that the habitat has changed as a result of the light-driven process of plant succession. For those interested in the hermit or wood thrush, this is a positive change as the mature woods with a more open understory provide those thrushes with habitat (we have recently learned that even forest interior species use clear cuts between the time their young leave the nests and when they migrate). However, for the deer, grouse or woodcock hunter, that change may not be welcomed because it means a loss of preferred deer, grouse and woodcock habitat. That loss of habitat will lead to a decrease in the abundance of those species and render them less able to increase in the face of natural predation.

HABITAT IS ALWAYS CHANGING

Plant communities or habitats found in the early stages of plant succession don't stagnate. They change and evolve toward the later stages that are more shade tolerant and thus persistent. We've all seen this when, all of a sudden, our favorite grouse covert no longer produces grouse. It really wasn't all of a sudden, and the signs of change were there. We just didn't take the time to notice. Go back and look at the vegetation that now occupies your once favorite deer stand or grouse covert. It won't look the same as it did when you first started hunting there.

Plant succession has moved forward and today there are about 10,000,000 more acres of timber in New York alone than existed in the '50s. That means we've lost about 10,000,000 acres of the early successional stages. The result is fewer meadowlarks,

bobolinks, deer, grouse, woodcock and rabbits. Indeed, the New England cottontail rabbit was recently listed as threatened in Massachusetts and the grouse is a "species of greatest conservation need" in all the New England states except Maine.

The solution is that we need to cut more trees — not all trees — but more trees. It's not that we no longer log. Rather, because of well-intentioned public pressure, we have changed the way we log. The preferred, and more acceptable, harvest regime today

involves removing a single tree or small group of trees rather than creating a clear cut and regenerating early successional forest types like aspen and paper birch. That technique might look more attractive to us, but it doesn't to the wildlife that needs the habitat — the food and cover — provided by the plants that prosper when light is allowed to once again reach the forest floor. Gaining public understanding and support for that concept is the key to renewed wildlife abundance.

FOR THE BIRDS

PHEASANTS FOREVER/QUAIL FOREVER PF'S PRESIDENT APPOINTED TO WILDLIFE AND HUNTING HERITAGE CONSERVATION COUNCIL



Howard K. Vincent, Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever National President and CEO, has been appointed to the new 18-member Wildlife and Hunting Heritage Conservation Council. Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar and Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack announced the council will advise the two federal departments on recreational hunting and shooting sports activities and associated wildlife and habitat conservation.



The Wildlife and Hunting Heritage Conservation Council is an official advisory group under the Federal Advisory Committee Act that will help to promote and preserve America's hunting heritage for future generations. It will also provide a forum for sportsmen and women to advise the federal government on policies related to wildlife and habitat conservation endeavors that benefit recreational hunting; benefit wildlife resources; and encourage partnership among the public, the sporting conservation community, the shooting and

hunting sports industry, wildlife conservation organizations, the states, Native American tribes and the federal government.

"It's an honor to be able to represent Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever and sportsmen and women nationwide on this Council," Vincent said. "I look forward to providing input to the Obama administration on items ranging from 2012 Farm Bill conservation programs, youth hunter recruitment and hunter retention and continuing America's strong hunting heritage." Individuals on the Council will serve two-year terms.

CABELA'S HEADLINING PHEASANTS FOREVER'S NATIONAL PHEASANT FEST 2011

Pheasants Forever is proud to announce that Cabela's will be the presenting sponsor of the organization's signature event, National Pheasant Fest 2011, coming to the Qwest Center in Omaha, Neb., on Jan. 28-30, 2011.

National Pheasant Fest 2011 presented by Cabela's will be Pheasants Forever's seventh such event and the second in Nebraska. The event combines a national consumer show, habitat seminar series and family events complete with puppies, tractors, shotguns and art. This annual gathering has grown into the nation's largest event for upland hunters, farmers, sport dog owners and wildlife habitat conservationists. The 24,205 attendees at National Pheasant Fest 2005 had a \$2.5 million impact on the city of Omaha.

For more information on the event, visit www.pheasantfest.org.

HABITAT, HUNTER ACCESS HIGHLIGHT NEW "OPEN FIELDS" PROGRAM

Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever are praising a decision by the U.S. Department of Agriculture to release \$50 million in funding for the "Open Fields" Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program, a new effort to encourage owners and operators of privately held farm, ranch and forest lands to provide public access to their lands for wildlife-dependent activities such as hunting and fishing.

Open Fields was authorized by Congress for the first time in the 2008 Farm Bill following support from a Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership-sponsored coalition that included Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever. Open Fields provides states \$50 million in federal monies to create or enhance voluntary hunter-access programs on private lands and encourages landowners who enroll their properties to employ best-management practices for wildlife. Landowners can receive a financial incentive in exchange for opening lands to the public for hunting, fishing and other outdoor recreation. The Open Fields funding can now be used to enhance the 26 existing state public access programs and establish programs in states where such programs are currently absent. There will be an application process for states to apply for funding.

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