



OKLAHOMA

DEPARTMENT OF WILDLIFE CONSERVATION

YOUR SIDE OF THE FENCE



Aubrey Bradford/RPS 2018

Tulsa Area Businessman Named ODWC Landowner of the Year

By Carlos Gomez, Oklahoma State Game Warden



This year's recipient of the coveted ODWC Landowner of the Year award is Mr. Gerald Choate of Catoosa. A small business owner in Tulsa, who owns a

modest-sized property south of Henryetta, Mr. Choate demonstrates how and why small businesses (and land-parcel owners) can succeed in Oklahoma – by utilizing fiscal prudence and creativity. In a season of football, Choate's story is analogous with a budding college program working hard and succeeding with NFL efficiency, but achieving those goals using only a high school budget.

In spite of its inconvenient location 90 minutes from his home in Catoosa, Choate has been able to transform his 325 acres into a wildlife oasis in just



Gerald Choate of Catoosa (center) was recognized as the Wildlife Department's 2019 Landowner of the Year at the November Commission meeting.

12 years. Carved from the rough hills above the North Canadian River near Dustin, this diamond-in-the-rough quickly emerged from Choate's investment of knowledge, tight budgets and sweat-equity. Mr. Choate has employed all the conventional equipment, including a brushhog, disc, tree-pincher, ATVs, broadcasters and chainsaws. But maximizing relationship-resources has been perhaps

his most unusual and creative asset. Studying and strategizing existing openings, maximizing the periodic benefits of fire, ongoing mineral-exploratory operations on or near his property, and leveraging neighboring landowner alliances, have all contributed to accomplishing his management goals.

One beneficial nugget has been his use of a 60:40 mix of wheat to

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Landowner Assistance Contacts:

C Region - Kyle Johnson.....(405) 590-2584
NW Region - Brett Cooper.....(405) 740-9830
E Region - RosaLee Walker....(918) 607-1518
SW Region (405) 397-1599

Deer Management Assistance Program

Dallas Barber.....(405) 385-1791

Okla. Wildscape Certification Program:

Melynda Hickman.....(405) 990-4977

Streams Management

Jim Burroughs.....(918) 683-1031

Farm Pond Technical Assistance; Farm Pond Fish Stocking Program:

NW Region - Chas Patterson.(580) 474-2668
SW Region - Ryan Ryswyk.....(580) 529-2795
NE Region - Josh Johnston....(918) 346-3220
EC Region - Jim Burroughs....(918) 683-1031
SE Region - Don Groom.....(918) 297-0153
C Region - Keith Thomas...(405) 325-7288

Other ODWC Contacts:

Operation Game Thief.....(800) 522-8039
License Section.....(405) 521-3852
Website.....wildlifedepartment.com

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Kyle Johnson.....(405) 590-2584
kyle.johnson@odwc.ok.gov

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rye grains (not grass) mixed with prescribed seeding densities of turnips, cabbages and clovers, planted all together in the early fall. The wheat provides the early-season food; turnips produce a late-season food; and the rye serves as both a natural, inexpensive fixator of nitrogen (fertilizer) and "weed-reducer". Maintaining 10 percent of his total acreage in food plots, he strives to keep them connected where possible using mowed, disked, and seeded openings following the naturally occurring travel-lanes. When coupled with strategically timed and rotating controlled burns, and protected brush-piles, the property has transformed from good land into great land.

With only the help of a son and daughter-in law, he works the plots and trails on a three-year rotational basis. To many, this could be daunting and easily overwhelming. But to landowners like Gerald Choate who possess a sportsman's passion, helping wildlife flourish and making it 'want to be on his land' has also been therapeutic!

Beyond the satisfaction of improving the wildlife populations, Choate sees his most gratifying reward when 'sharing his fruit with others.' Gerald generously realizes there's more fun in having fruit when you can share with others. He fully understands wildlife is a renewable resource that can provide plenty for many and that has been the real cherry-on-top for Tulsa area sportsmen. Through Gerald's participation and support to his local National Wild Turkey Federation chapter in Tulsa, a

great many sportsmen have become familiar with him and witness to his productivity. By donating hunts for fundraising, he's been directly responsible for many thousands of dollars dedicated to NWTF-supported programs in Oklahoma that benefit untold numbers of sportsmen. But locally, many have also come to anticipate, and rival to win, one of his great guided-hunts at the annual NWTF banquet. This has created opportunities for friendships to flourish among many sectors of our conservation community including benefits to local game wardens and their professional relationships. Beyond giving all a chance to share and witness kids and adults harvest their first buck or tom turkey, it's also provided Tulsa sportsmen and women a social setting to go beyond just being fellow sportsmen to becoming very good friends - all working together in conservation.



It's difficult to measure the cost of such a commitment to your land but helping a young boy harvest his first buck just may measure up.



LANDOWNER NEWS

Prescribed Burn Associations: Landowners Helping Landowners

By Brett Cooper, Private Lands Biologist



Prescribed burning is one of the most cost-effective management practices to improve wildlife habitat. In fact, noticeable habitat improvements

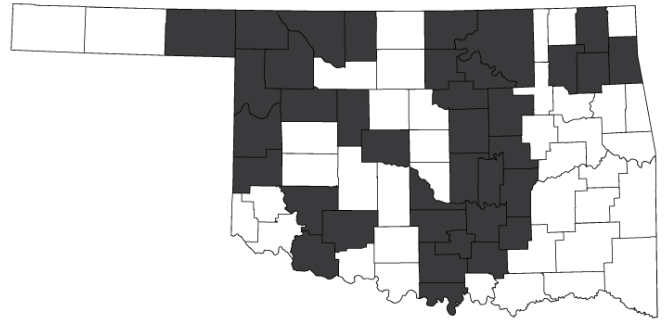
can be observed after just a single burn. However, land managers seeing the improvements first-hand rarely decide to stop at just one burn. They see what prescribed burning can do for their land, wildlife, and livestock, and want more. Thankfully, burn associations occur nearly statewide to assist.

The Oklahoma Prescribed Burn Association (OPBA) was created in 2010 to support local burn associations and develop more across Oklahoma. There are currently 22 burn associations in 36 counties with the newest being established in Alfalfa County. In short, burn associations are landowners helping other landowners plan for and complete prescribed burns on private land. Associations not only have tools and equipment to assist, but also have invaluable experience to help landowners prepare and

complete each burn project.

John Weir, OSU associate extension specialist, reported 126 prescribed burns in 18 counties, resulting in 29,699 acres burned in 2019. While the majority of prescribed burns typically occur from winter to early spring, an increasing number of summer and early fall burns are occurring each year. These growing season burns behave differently than dormant season burns and result in a wildlife-friendly mosaic on the landscape which benefits species like bobwhite quail. Growing season burns are often safer and easier to complete when compared with dormant season burns and offer a larger window of opportunity to enhance wildlife habitat through burning.

The OPBA website has detailed information for landowners wishing to start a new burn association in their county or find information on existing associations to join. The website also has numerous resources that provide education and training on weather and smoke, local PBA's, laws and regulations, fire planning, and equipment vendors.



Oklahoma counties with prescribed burn associations. More information at ok-pba.org.

In addition, the OPBA has regional coordinators that are available to assist with getting started burning and preparing burn plans:

- Seth Coffey 580-504-9709 (South Central)
- Harry Fritzler 405-308-6339 (Central)
- Ken Gee 580-319-8440 (South)
- John Mustain 405-762-6627 (North)
- Derril Putnam 405-740-8327 (West).

To help the OPBA stay up-to-date on all burns that are conducted, including those not completed through a PBA, an online Burn Entry Form is available by visiting ok-pba.org.

Whether the goal is to enhance land for livestock or habitat for wildlife, prescribed burning is a great tool to consider for properties of all sizes. Assistance is also readily available for all who wish to learn more or get started.



Water Matters

Flood Waters Affect Oklahoma Waterways - For Better or Worse

By Keith Thomas, Fisheries Biologist



Oklahoma residents survived another 100 year flood this past summer. Heavy property damage and loss occurred in most of northeast Oklahoma.

The last rain event of this size took place in 1996 which devastated the eastern side of our state. At the height of the event, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineer was releasing 275,000 cubic feet per second at Keystone Dam. That's enough water to fill the University of Oklahoma's Memorial Football Stadium once every 75 seconds. Impoundments situated along the Arkansas River could only do so much to hold back the torrential amounts of water. However, without them, there would have been much more devastation.

The Bad Things: Reservoirs and Rivers

Enormous changes to the terrain occurred including the removal of entire sections of river banks along with creek channels being moved or totally filled in. Major amounts of shoreline sloughing and undercutting also took



Keystone Dam near Sand Springs - May 23, 2019 (KFOR)

place. Many tons of sand and sediment were moved with ease by the strong currents. Jetties and levees were compromised with ease resulting in flooded neighborhoods and farm land. The McClellan - Kerr Navigation System near Muskogee was closed to barge traffic. Major dredging operations will need to take place in order to return things to normal.

There is no way to know the exact number of fish that were washed downstream as a result of emergency releases from all the dams along the Arkansas River. Pelagic species such as shad, herring, white bass, striped bass and crappie were the most

susceptible to high releases washing them over and through the taintor gates. Previous studies investigating fish movement in Oklahoma has shown striped bass specimens ending up in New Orleans after similar floods. Luckily most of the larger fish can avoid the currents and stay in the reservoir. Small or juvenile fishes are not so lucky.

Another issue that could potentially occur is the spread of non-native organisms from one water body to another. Plants, insects, fish, mollusks, etc. could all be redistributed after high flows. The white perch is one example of a fish that never existed in Oklahoma until Cheney

and Wilson Reservoirs flooded around 2000. Today we find them in several waters connected to the Arkansas River. The zebra mussel is another organism that may have expanded its range due to this year's flood. Future ODWC sampling outings will determine to what extent this took place.

The Bad Things: Lakes and Ponds

Damage on a smaller scale occurred in towns and parks away from the mainstem river. Dams and spillways were overwhelmed with the enormous quantities of water and simply gave way. For example, once the waters receded at Cushing Lake, approximately 1/2 million fish were found stranded in Big Creek below the dam. Additional events took place at Lake Carl Blackwell and Wister Reservoir. Low dissolved oxygen plus high water temperatures caused many fish kills once they were washed down stream.

On the Good Side of Things

Ponds and lakes were filled to their brims. In many cases, this was a needed occurrence in order to flush out old debris and accumulated sediment.



Fish kill after Cushing Lake dam breach due to flood. (Ashley Nealis/ODWC)

Entire systems were re-charged. Nutrients were mixed into the water column which rejuvenated the food chain. As a result, excellent reproduction and recruitment should take place. River bottoms were scoured out creating new habitat for bottom dwelling organisms such as fish, crustacea and invertebrates. New habitat was added to pond and lakes such as submerged vegetation for fish nursery areas, trees, gravel and creek channels.

Overall floods cause changes

for the betterment of the environment. Aquatic communities do recover by becoming more balanced, abundant and productive. Flood events have happened for millennia shaping the topography and regions we live in today. These will continue to go on and man can only learn to control / cope with them the best he can. Mother Nature, global warming or just bad luck we are all just part of a bigger picture and human habitation is at the mercy of it all.



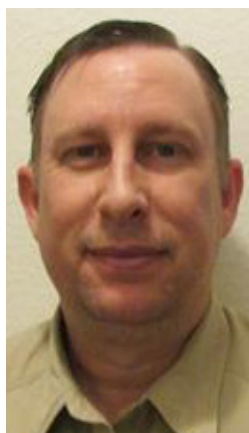
Arkansas River at Sand Springs May 2019 (Tom Gilbert, Tulsa World)



TECH NOTE

Trees, Trees, and More Trees – How Much is too Much?

By Kyle Johnson, Private Lands Biologist



It can be easy for hunters and land managers to believe the idea that “more trees equal more deer,” but in reality, an overabundance of trees can do just the opposite.

Certainly, there is no debate over the importance of acorns for deer and turkey, but this valuable food is rarely available for more than two months in a given year. Forests offering acorns and little else simply fail to meet the year-round food demands that deer and turkey truly require.

Years ago, Oklahoma’s woodland and savanna habitats were extremely diverse, providing important habitat elements for many grassland and woodland wildlife species simultaneously. Individual trees and tree mottes were scattered across the landscape and did little to block sunlight from reaching the ground. Few trees, if any, were stunted, and the ground layer was covered in a diverse mix of native grasses, wildflowers, and shrubs.

Today, many of Oklahoma’s once-abundant open woodlands



Thinned woodlands restore plant diversity and provide habitat for deer, turkey, and many other birds and mammals. (ODWC)

and savannas have progressed into closed canopy forests where leaf canopies are dense and very little sunlight hits the ground. Forests thick with impenetrable vines, or which have a ground layer dominated by leaf litter and little else, simply don’t meet the year-round food requirements of species such as deer and turkey. Dense forest habitats do have value to some forest-dependent wildlife, but opening the canopy to restore plant diversity has far greater value to deer, turkey, and many other birds and mammals.

Thankfully, there is great news as dense canopied forests offer land managers a great opportunity to attract and produce more

wildlife through timber stand improvements (TSI). Although a TSI project can sound daunting, it simply involves removing undesirable trees, thinning to relieve overcrowding, and using prescribed fire to rejuvenate the habitat and maintain the open canopy. Desirable deer and turkey foods are already hidden within the soil in the form of roots and seeds. All that is required is sunlight to stimulate their emergence.

Many agencies and entities within the state have staff eager and willing to provide free technical assistance to land managers interested in enhancing habitat for wildlife, including timber

stand improvements. Consulting a private lands biologist can be an excellent way to begin the process, especially when deer, turkey, quail, or other species may be the primary goal. Additionally, consulting with a professional forester, such as local foresters with Oklahoma Forestry Services, is highly recommended for forest projects. Often, combining the

expertise of both can be the best first approach.

The old saying, "A bad day hunting is better than a good day at work" has likely been murmured by more than one hunter pursuing game in deer woods that are a little too dense with tree cover. Replacing that bad day of hunting with more that are good can be

as simple as improving a forest through some strategic tree removal. Cost-share programs are often available and there is no better time than now to take action.

Contact information for ODWC Private Lands staff can be found on Page 2 of this newsletter.



Forests too dense with tree cover fail to offer the year-round food resources that white-tailed deer, wild turkey, and many other wildlife species require. (Kyle Johnson/ODWC)



Food diversity for white-tailed deer and wild turkey can be greatly enhanced through timber stand improvements which open the tree canopy and allow abundant sunlight to reach the forest floor. (Kyle Johnson/ODWC)



Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation
 Private Lands Section
 P.O. Box 53465
 Oklahoma City, Oklahoma 73105

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