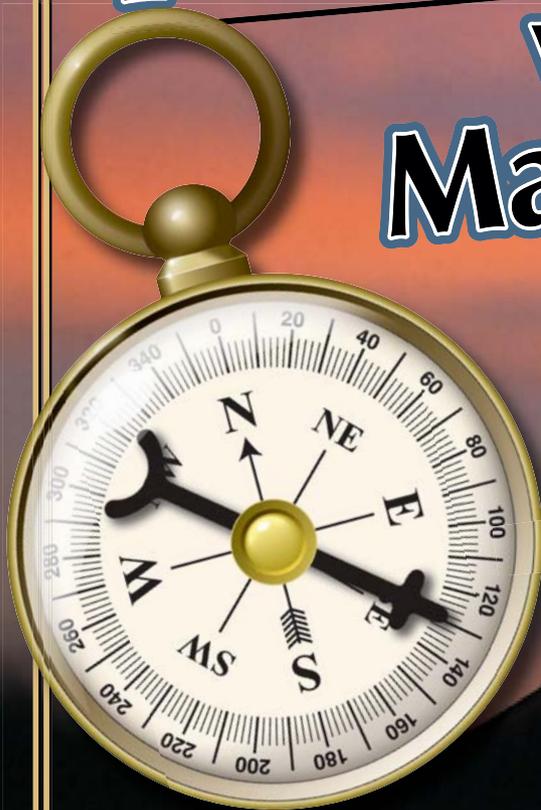


# PUSHMATAHA

## Wildlife Management Area

BY STEVE BURGE



“The wooded hills prevailed on either hand without any prospect of termination, and strongly resemble the mountains of the Blue Ridge, at Harper’s Ferry, in Virginia,” wrote Thomas Nuttall the first and most famous naturalist to document his findings about Oklahoma in his journal dated May 19, 1819. On this particular day, Nuttall and a small company of soldiers and one Indian interpreter were four days into their march from Fort Smith, Arkansas to the confluence of the Kiamichi and Red Rivers. It is believed they were camped about two and half miles from the present day town of Tuskahoma, Oklahoma.

The purpose of their trip was to execute the orders of the government by removing all the early settlers (about 200, and most of them were of the outlaw sort) out of the territory of the Osages, to prepare the way for relocating the Choctaw Indians out of Mississippi.

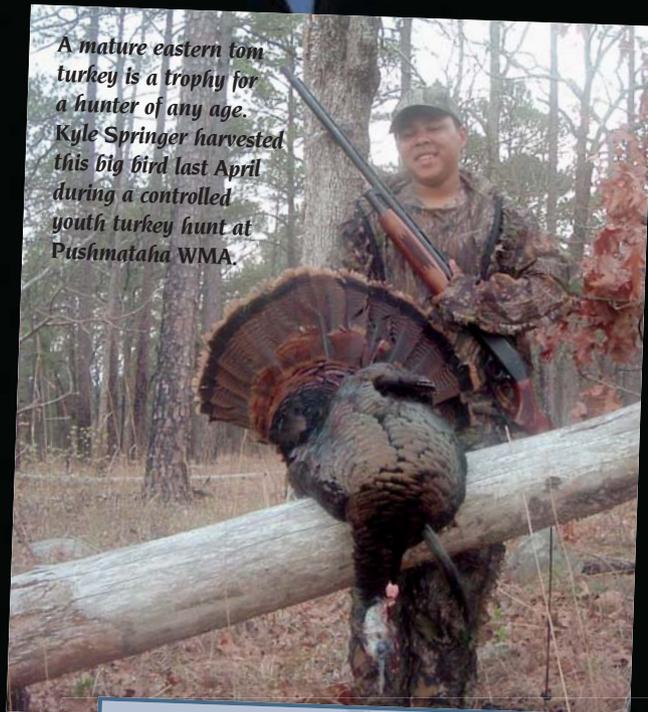
Roughly southwest of where Nuttall was encamped is the location of one of the state’s first deer refuges, Pushmataha Wildlife Management Area (WMA). In 1947 the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation purchased Pushmataha WMA along with two other WMA’s (Cookson and Spavinaw). The WMA’s were to be used as deer refuges in the early efforts of the Department’s deer restoration program. At its lowest point, the state’s deer herd dipped below 500 animals. One

of the last strongholds in the state was in the rugged hills of southeast Oklahoma.

The Wildlife Department’s goal at the time was to establish a thriving deer herd and then capture and relocate deer into other areas of the state that had very low, or even non-existent, deer populations. As any deer hunter will testify, these early efforts proved to be an outstanding success. Deer were trapped at Pushmataha and were transplanted to other parts of the state. Today there are healthy deer populations in every county in the state.

In those early years, wildlife management was a growing, but still new, science. Pioneering managers often learned by trial and error. Managers closed hunting on the refuge for several years and planted about 450 acres of food plots around the 19,000-acre property (that’s more than 29 square miles). Considerable effort went into planting food plots as natural obstacles were plentiful. The natural terrain was heavily forested and the shallow soils were full of rocks. However, if there was an opening, they disked it and planted it. If there was not an opening they cleared the land.

Managers were hoping the small herd would grow – and grow it did. Unfortunately, a noticeable browse line on the WMA’s vegetation indicated the food plots did not keep up with the appetites of the growing deer population. The deer herd had exceeded the area’s carrying capacity.



DAMON SPRINGER

*A mature eastern tom turkey is a trophy for a hunter of any age. Kyle Springer harvested this big bird last April during a controlled youth turkey hunt at Pushmataha WMA.*

***At Pushmataha's Walk-in Turkey Hunting Area, over 6,000 acres of prime turkey habitat offers challenges for hunters of all skill levels.***

A new era began at Pushmataha WMA in the 1960's when deer gun hunts were offered. The Department collected license fees at the entrance and only allowed a predetermined amount of hunters in each day. Hunters became an important management tool in maintaining a healthy deer herd and hunters maintain their critical role today. As the years clicked by, area managers continued to strive for increased hunter opportunities and carefully monitored the deer herd's physical characteristics such as buck to doe ratios, fawn survival, weights and antler growth.

Just like the mountains of this area that rise and fall, so did the deer population. A blow to the deer population occurred in 1993 when the Pushmataha WMA experienced a loss of about 70 percent of its deer herd due to an outbreak of a disease commonly known as blue tongue. The outbreak was a natural occurrence and it only took about five years for the deer numbers to rebound.

According to deer harvest records, Pushmataha WMA has one of the most mature deer herds in the state. With a buck to doe ratio of 1:2.5, the area offers hunters a chance to harvest large bucks and quality does. Over the years, at least 10 bucks harvested off of this area have made the Cy Curtis record book with plenty more still out there to test one's deer hunting skills on.

It is interesting to note that Nuttall's observations penned in his journal reveal how the habitat of the area has changed in the nearly 200 years after his journey.

## Pushmataha History

### Past Managers:

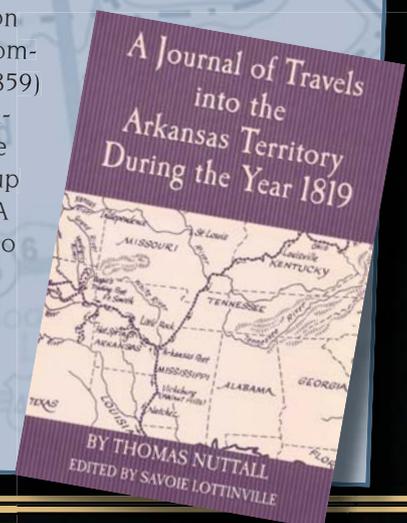
The Pushmataha Wildlife Management Area has had only four different managers since its beginning: Hoyt Smith 1950's-mid 1960's, Frank Carl mid 1960's-late 60's, Ray Robinson late 1960's-mid 1990's and the current biologist, Jack Waymire 1995-present.

### Where Did the Name Pushmataha Come From?

Pushmataha is a Choctaw word meaning "sprout completed," but was also the name of one of the most outstanding chiefs of the Choctaw Indians. Chief Pushmataha lived from 1764 to 1824 (original spelling Apushmatahahubi). Pushmataha was known for his wise counsel, eloquent speaking and legendary skills as a warrior.

### Thomas Nuttall

For more information about naturalist Thomas Nuttall's (1786-1859) travels through Oklahoma and across the United States, pick up a copy of the book "A Journal of Travels into the Arkansas Territory During the Year 1819." The book is available at many libraries, as well as Amazon.com.



## Pushmataha at a Glance

### Area Description:

Pushmataha WMA covers 19,236 acres of northern Pushmataha County in southeastern Oklahoma. Located south of the town of Clayton, Pushmataha WMA is on the western fringe of the Ouachita mountain range and is comprised of a mixture of oak and pine forests with steep slopes and rocky terrain.

### Camping and facilities:

Two designated primitive camping areas are offered on the area. However, both lodging and restaurants are available in Clayton.

### Shooting ranges:

Rifle, pistol and trap ranges are available to anyone who possesses a current hunting license. The rifle range offers 50-, 100- and 200-yard target frames with two shooting benches under a covered canopy. A shotgun range is designated for trap shooting (bring your own trap thrower and clay targets).

### Fishing opportunities:

Sardis Lake is practically a "stone's throw" north of Clayton and offers some of the best crappie and bass fishing one could ask for. Go south of the WMA and you'll find another hidden treasure of southeast Oklahoma - Clayton Lake. Not only is it a great lake for catching a few fresh fish for the skillet, it also has a camping area with full hookups for RV camping. Several rivers are nearby, including the Kiamichi (French for "horned screamer"), Little and Blackfork rivers. These rivers offer plenty of feisty smallmouth and panfish for the adventure-minded angler.

"We proceeded a little west of south along the hills and prairies which divide the three principal branches of the Kiamesha, skirting the south side of the bare serrated hills already noticed scattered with pine and post-oak," noted Nuttall, May 19, 1819.

Much of the terrain in and around southeast Oklahoma today would be characterized as heavily forested, rather than "scattered" with pine and post oak.

Biologists continued to search for new techniques to allow the Pushmataha WMA to reach its full potential and restore the area to reflect what Nuttall observed. In the early 70's, managers began using prescribed fire and mechanical forest thinning as management tools.

While a few thought that fire would surely do more harm than good to wildlife habitat, it was not long before they changed their mind. Sportsmen who hunted the Pushmataha WMA started to reap the harvest of the good management, and their voices were heard in the valleys and from the ridge tops as they hollered with excitement when they killed a big buck.

Prescribed burning combined with thinning the forest to open up the forest floor increases the germination and growth of native grasses and forbs (weeds). This under story vegetation provides food and cover for a wide range of wildlife species. Not only did prescribed fire help wildlife and hunters - it re-introduced a natural ecological process that had been absent in recent decades.

Wildlife in the area responded to the vegetation changes almost immediately. The Pushmataha WMA's reputation soon grew as one of the states top hunting hot spots in southeast Oklahoma.

Nuttall noted in his journal on his visit that the mighty elk inhabited southeast Oklahoma. Recognizing these historical accounts, the Wildlife Department began re-introducing elk on Pushmataha WMA during the late 1960's and 70's. A total of 72 head of elk were captured at the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge and relocated to Pushmataha WMA during these early years. Unfortunately, many of the elk died and the herd dropped down



PAUL MOORE

*The Pushmataha elk herd received a genetic boost in the year 2000 when the Oklahoma Station of Safari Club International assisted with purchase of six elk that were released on the area. At the same time, the Timberline Ranch, a private commercial elk ranch in Cushing, donated an additional pair of elk.*

to around 30 animals. Over time the herd rebounded and began to grow and in 1994, the Wildlife Department offered the first controlled elk hunt on the area, allowing one bull to be harvested.

As the herd expanded and time passed, the population had lost some of the genetic diversity that is so important to the health of the herd. The elk herd is isolated and, unlike the large herds in western states, does not have the capability to mix with other elk and ensure genetic variability. Genetic diversity promotes greater immunity to certain illnesses and also results in better reproduction.

In an effort to address this concern, the Department released eight elk in 2000 with assistance from the Oklahoma Station of Safari Club International and the Timberline Ranch. The relocation was an effort to improve the herd's genetic variability.

In addition to providing new bloodlines to the existing herd, biologists also used the opportunity to learn more about elk movement and habitat use on the area. Six of the eight animals were been affixed with radio telemetry collars so biologists could determine their location and whether they were mixing with the existing herd. Biologists found that the new elk did mix with the existing herd. To their surprise, researchers found that the young bulls traveled over 80 miles in just one week, eventually returning to the area.

While deer and elk may get many of the headlines at Pushmataha, they have no rival in popularity to wild turkeys in the spring when the big toms are gobbling. The area is rated among the best in the state with turkey hunters, particularly those who are pursuing the Eastern wild turkey. One of Pushmataha WMA's highlights is its walk-in turkey hunting area. Over 6,000 acres of prime, mature long beard habitat offers hunters of all skills and all ages the opportunity to chase these wily birds. The National Wild Turkey Federation provided key grants that assisted with the development of this unique walk-in turkey hunting area.

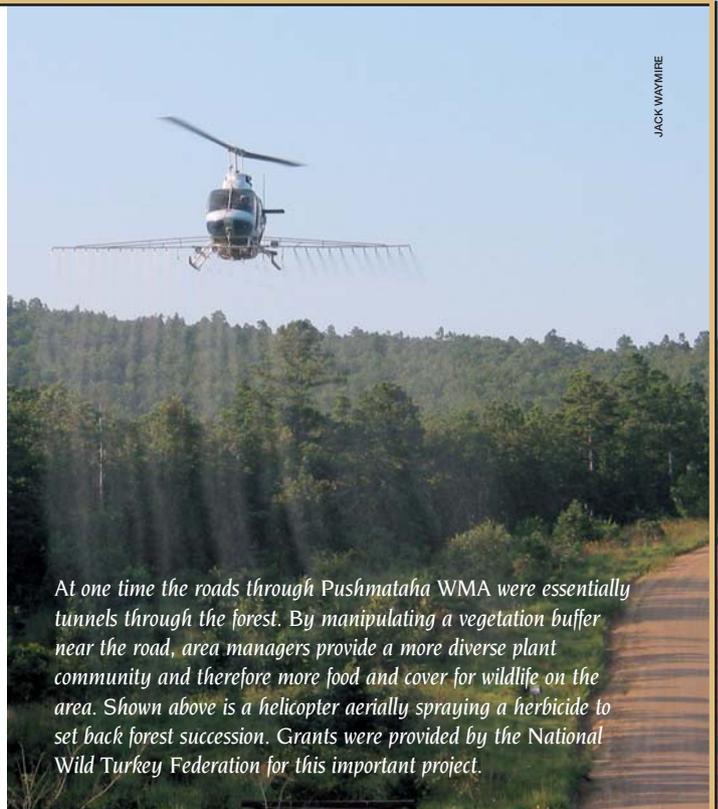
Today's hunters and outdoor enthusiast alike have, without a doubt, gained from the arduous work and adventurous spirit of the early day explorers and current day managers on this special area. Come to Pushmataha WMA if you are looking for some rugged and scenic beauty that'll not only challenge you physically, but also take you back to the days when southeastern Oklahoma was first explored.

### Present Day Management Strategies

Pushmataha WMA is recognized nationwide for its progressive habitat management. One of the longest running timber management research projects continues on the area. The project, now entering its 24th year, focuses on how plants react to prescribed fire. Annually biologists monitor the effects of fire on the vegetation and they have documented beneficial results for several wildlife species, especially turkey, deer and elk.

Prescribed fire, forest thinning and other timber management practices are helping biologists restore the area to its historical ecosystem, as was observed by Nuttall and company in 1819. The end result is increasing Pushmataha WMA's wildlife carrying capacity to its full potential.

The valuable information gained from this study will not only aid wildlife biologists, but also landowners in managing habitat for wildlife on private property. Those interested in touring the Pushmataha Forest Habitat Research Area are encouraged to contact Jack Waymire, senior wildlife biologist for the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation at (918) 569-4329. Waymire is always willing to share his grass roots knowledge about wildlife habitat with landowners and land managers. 🌿



JACK WAYMIRE

*At one time the roads through Pushmataha WMA were essentially tunnels through the forest. By manipulating a vegetation buffer near the road, area managers provide a more diverse plant community and therefore more food and cover for wildlife on the area. Shown above is a helicopter aerially spraying a herbicide to set back forest succession. Grants were provided by the National Wild Turkey Federation for this important project.*

### For Additional Information and Area Attractions:

**Jack Waymire, senior biologist at Pushmataha, Gary Sherrer, and Yourman WMAs**

(918) 569-4329

**Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation  
Higgins Office**

(918) 297-0150

**Pushmataha County Chamber of Commerce**

(580) 298-2488

**Oklahoma Tourism and Recreation Department**

(800) 652-6552 or (405) 521-2409  
[www.travelok.com](http://www.travelok.com)

**Kiamichi Country**

(800) 722-8180 or (918) 465-2367  
[www.kiamichicountry.com](http://www.kiamichicountry.com)

**Sardis Lake**

(918) 569-4131  
[www.swt.usace.army.mil/](http://www.swt.usace.army.mil/)

**Clayton Lake State Park**

(918) 569-7981

**James Vincent, southeast region fisheries biologist**

(918) 297-0153  
[jvriver@directway.com](mailto:jvriver@directway.com)