

Your Side



of the fence

What's Inside

- Page 1** Hooked on Fish: Parasites
- Page 3** Bill Fair Restores Caddo Co. Ranch
- Page 4** Prescribed Burning Association
- Page 6** What's Good for the Chicken is Good for the Cow
- Page 7** Evaluating Wildlife Food Plots



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Hooked on Fish: A Look at Fish Parasites

By Ashley Nealis, northeast region fisheries biologist



Parasites are one of the most troubling organisms in a fish pond because they disfigure the fish and make them

unappetizing. Occasionally, anglers catch fish that show signs of infection or parasitism. The most common questions that follow are: "What is causing this?," "How do I remedy it?" and "Are the fish safe to eat?"

Some of the more common fish parasites and infections, their causes and remedies are listed below.

Grubs

Grubs are small white (shown on catfish below) or yellow worms that insert themselves into the skin, muscle or internal organs of fish. Grubs are in round cysts and hardly, if at all, resemble worms. They appear as tiny specks in a fish's fins, skin, or flesh. Grub problems are most common in clear, weedy ponds.

They go through a complicated



Grub shown on a catfish.

life cycle where they inhabit fish-eating birds, snails, and finally, the fish. To control these parasites, you must eliminate one of their hosts by limiting the access of birds to your pond, or greatly reduce snail populations. One way to reduce snail populations is to stock redear sunfish because they will eat the snails. Snail populations can also be reduced

Almost all fish are safe to eat when thoroughly cooked, smoked or frozen; however, the idea of eating a fish with an infection can be very unappealing.

if grass carp are stocked. The grass carp eat weeds the snails rely on for food. These parasites will not develop in humans, and all parasites are killed by cooking or freezing.

Nematodes (Roundworms)

Nematodes are one of the most common parasites and can occur in large numbers. Nematodes are small, round worms that range in size from one-fourth of an inch to one inch long (shown top right). They are commonly found coiled around

the fish's internal organs or in the liver, while some species inhabit skin or muscle. Parasitic nematodes are difficult to control. If they become



Roundworms shown on fish.

a problem in your pond, a good idea is to take a close look at your water quality,

water quality, fertilization and fish condition. Like grubs, nematodes are rarely seen in well managed ponds.

Fungi

Pond fish are sometimes infected by fungi. Fungi appear as a patchy, gray or white, cotton-like growth on a fish's skin (shown on mouth below). This is usually a secondary infection on fish that have experienced a disease, or are stressed. Fish can be stressed due to overcrowding in a pond, lack of adequate food or low dissolved oxygen in the water.



Note fungi in white, cotton-like growth on the fish's mouth. The fish is still edible if affected area is removed.

Continued on page 2

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Managing Oklahoma's wildlife resources and habitat to provide scientific, educational, aesthetic, economic, and recreational benefits for present and future generations of hunters, anglers, and others who appreciate wildlife.

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Many times fungi are seen on external areas of fish that have been rubbed while spawning or have been mishandled by an angler. Some affected fish will die, but most will recover. A fish infected with fungi is edible, but you will want to trim away infected flesh.

"Ich"

Ichthyophthirius, or "Ich," is a common protozoan parasite of catfish. It occurs on catfish skin and gills, as well as some other fish species. Small, pinhead-size white spots appear on the skin of the fish and sometimes there is excessive mucus (slime) production. Ich cannot hurt humans, so infected fish are edible.



A farm pond can provide hours of recreation and fare for the table, so it can be frustrating when the fish in your pond are being infected or parasitized. Very few fish diseases can be transferred to humans. Almost all fish are safe to eat when thoroughly cooked, smoked or frozen; however, the idea of eating a fish with an infection can be very unappealing. Stressed fish are more susceptible to infection. If you follow recommended stocking rates and strategies and handle fish properly, you can avoid many problems. Take care not to damage their slime coat, as this protects them from infections.



All pond owners should be aware of the risks posed by the introduction of fish from other water bodies. When you move a fish into your pond you may also introduce a disease or new parasite. Many parasites, bacteria, viruses and fungi are already present in water, but if you manage your pond well you can reduce the risk of infected fish. ■

Try stocking redear sunfish to your pond to reduce snail populations. All parasite photos by Oklahoma Fisheries Research Laboratory.

Landowner Spotlight

Bill Fair Restores Caddo Co. Ranch

By Brandon Baker, Crosstimbers Wildlife Management Area technician and former farm bill technician



Bill Fair owns and manages 120 acres in Caddo County, where he works hard to encourage all wildlife species to utilize his

property for food, cover, nesting and raising offspring. In 2010, Fair was awarded a contract with the Natural Resource Conservation Service under the Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP). WHIP provides financial aid and a wildlife management plan, created by an Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation biologist, to help transform land to encourage native vegetation growth.

Fair cut down cedar trees that covered 83 of his 120 acres and has hired a contractor to help with a high speed circular saw, for a set cost per acre. Last spring, Fair planted 12 acres of native grasses. His grass

planting, as anticipated, has been slow to establish as, on average, it may take two to three years before adequate vegetation is fully established.

The bottomland sites of Fair's land will be planted to small grains and cover to provide more food and protection for wildlife. The riparian areas are left unaltered to create a protective shelterbelt for wildlife. Fair is in the process of cutting unwanted cedar trees and other unwanted brush under turkey roost sites. The cost share from the WHIP program, which is determined by a rank according to practices installed

or works to be completed in the landowner's project, allows Fair to make this restoration possible.

Fair enjoys hunting on the property, but more importantly, he wants future generations to benefit from this foundation he has started and intends to build on for future years. Fair has no cattle present on the property, but may integrate a grazing program for future management on the acreage. A follow up with prescribed burning to keep the cedar trees to a minimum after cutting the mature trees down may also be on the future agenda. Both prescribed grazing and prescribed fire are cost effective ways to manage land for wildlife habitat. ■



Landowner Bill Fair (far left) stands with views from his land. Photos by Brandon Baker.



Habitat Matters

Prescribed Burning Association's First Burn

By Josh Richardson, migratory bird biologist



The Pontotoc Ridge Prescribed Burning Association (PRPBA) assisted with its first prescribed fire less than a day after Governor Mary Fallin declared a state of emergency in all 77 counties of Oklahoma due to tragic wildfires. Natural and manmade fires have shaped the landscape of Oklahoma

for hundreds of years. Although the disastrous effects of wildfires can never be overlooked, fire itself is a useful and necessary tool in prairie and mixed hardwood habitats.

Native Americans were proficient fire users and knew the many benefits that it provided. In the years since settlement, as fire was removed from the landscape, natural vegetative succession has produced the conditions that lead to these difficult-to-contain wildfires.

A small, yet growing community of prescribed burning advocates have emerged across the country as more people have realized that regular fire on the landscape can be a good thing. Their goals are to restore fire as a useful and beneficial ally in the management of native habitats,

and to educate their peers on the dangers of the fire-suppression mindset. These advocates have formed cooperatives called prescribed burn associations that range in size from a small number of families to organizations with hundreds of members.

The Nature Conservancy led initial attempts for a prescribed burn cooperative in the Pontotoc and Johnston county areas beginning in 2005. After a rocky start, the organization folded, though the need and desire remained. In 2010, the Pontotoc County Conservation District and the local Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) hosted a meeting that brought local, like-minded landowners together with agencies such as the FSA, Oklahoma State University Extension office, Nature Conservancy, and Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation. Together, they formed the Pontotoc Ridge Prescribed Burning Association (PRPBA) with membership that has flourished throughout the past year. Experience with fire among the PRPBA members ranges from those who have been involved in safely burning thousands of acres, to those who have only lit a campfire; however, all recognize that fire can be beneficial when used in the right context.



Prescribed burning group. Photo by Jena Donnell.

Most effort in wildfire situations is in reaction to the fire's activity; while action in a prescribed burn is deliberate and planned. Much work is put in before the fire ever begins and the fire is not started unless the weather conditions match what has been laid out in a set of prescribed burning plans. Each plan is written for a specific area and contains the weather conditions to burn under, how the burn will be lit, known hazards within a burn unit, smoke management, post-burn procedures, and a contingency plan.

Although the first burn of the PRPBA was only about 40 acres, these same procedures and

Continued on page 5

cooperation can be used to safely conduct burns 100 to even 1000 acres.

My recent experience on my land was kind of scary, because we conducted the burn the day following multiple wildfires. As the owner and the burn boss, you are liable should your fire get out of hand, but I made good preparations, and had good people from the Association present to help. We have burned for several years, but always felt short handed. With their help this year, we had twice as many people on hand.

“It was the first burn we had participated in. My wife had not had any previous training or experience,” Rob Ray, member of the PRPBA, said. “I have previously attended a Prescribed Burn training session conducted by the Noble Foundation but had not participated in an actual burn. We were both impressed with the preparation and the fire



Photo by Josh Richardson.

plan that was used. This experience will prepare us for a burn we have planned on our property in southern Pontotoc County.”

The PRPBA looks forward to continued growth and encourages anyone interested in safely using prescribed fire to maintain a more native Oklahoma to attend an association meeting. Meetings are routinely held in the conference room of the Ada Coca-Cola plant at 6:30 p.m. the first Monday of each month. More information is available at the Pontotoc County Conservation District and NRCS office at 1328 Craddock Road, or by calling (580) 332-3070. ■



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Your Side of the Fence is a FREE publication produced three times a year by the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation for Oklahoma landowners. It is our mission to provide practical information for managing wildlife on your property and address issues that affect you, the landowner. This is your opportunity to tell us what you think. What would you like to learn more about? Do you have any questions for any of our ODWC professionals? Are we doing a good job of providing useful, practical information? Please let us know. If you would like, send your advice to the editor.

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Landowner News

What's Good for the Chicken, Is Good for the Cow

By Chase Phillips, farm bill technician



The Lesser Prairie Chicken Initiative (LPCI) is a program that is made available to landowners within

the eligible range of the lesser prairie chicken (see map on right). Through a cooperative agreement with the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation (ODWC) biologists assist with the LPCI by providing outreach and technical expertise, and preparing habitat management plans. The goal of the program is to restore and increase the amount of suitable habitat for the lesser prairie chicken, and simultaneously, benefit farmers and ranchers who are interested in conservation.

LPCI will provide assistance to help with the cost of selected practices and will be implemented through a variety of NRCS conservation programs. Counties offering signups through the initiative include: Alfalfa, Beaver, Beckham, Cimarron, Custer, Dewey, Ellis, Harper, Major, Roger Mills, Texas, Washita, Woods, and Woodward.

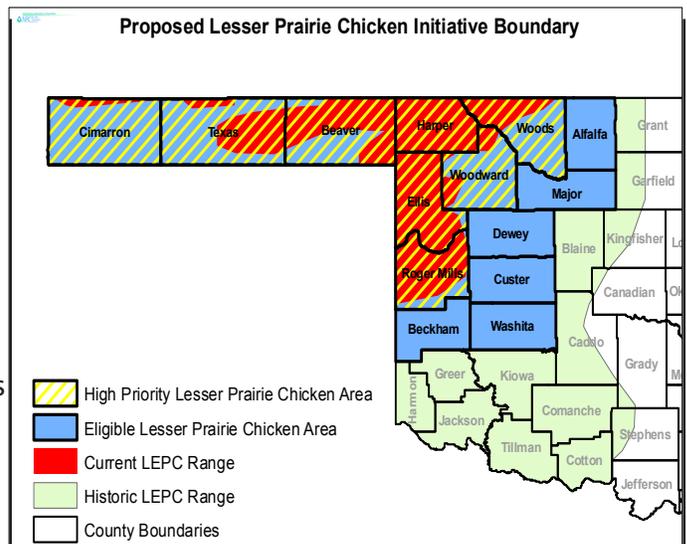
Brush management, prescribed grazing, upland wildlife habitat management, range planting,

prescribed burning, firebreaks, and watering facilities are some of the practices that will be used to improve habitat, and are eligible for cost-share assistance.

Although the lesser prairie chicken is the primary focus of this program, farmers and ranchers may benefit in that, "What's good for the chicken is good for the cow," which is a common phrase used to highlight the fact that management strategies used to benefit lesser prairie chickens will benefit livestock production and other wildlife.

Lesser prairie chickens thrive in areas with a patchy grazing pattern and grazing at a low to moderate rate allows some of last year's grasses to be carried into the following year providing prairie chickens with suitable amounts of cover for nesting. Grazing in this manner will improve or maintain healthier grasses, improve odds of making it through drought, and reduce supplemental feeding.

To become part of LPCI, submit an application to a local Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) office. If you are unsure your land would qualify as an initiative candidate, a technical assistance visit can be arranged to appraise the land by contacting Chase Phillips with the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation at (580) 571-5820. ■



What's good for the chicken is good for the cow. Submit your Lesser Prairie Chicken Initiative Program application to your nearest Natural Resource Conservation Service today. Photos by Doug Schoeling, upland game biologist.

Evaluating Wildlife Food Plots

By Jena Donnell, quail habitat biologist



Have you ever wondered about the success of your wildlife food plot? How much forage actually grew in the plot? How much

was removed by wildlife? Was it lack of fertilizer or rain that caused low production or was it something else? Questions like these have plagued the recreational hunter since the first food plot was planted.

If you are interested in taking a closer look at plot production, consider installing small enclosures or cages around this year's planting. These cages protect small patches of vegetation from grazing pressure, giving land users an idea of production potential for a specific mixture, utilization of the plot, and even which plants wildlife prefer.

Enclosure Construction

Food plot enclosures have a straightforward design and a short supply list—allowing cages to be built and installed within hours of planting. Although nearly any mesh material can be used, 4 foot tall 2" X 4" welded wire is both tall enough to protect vegetation from browsing deer and tight enough to exclude rabbits and other small wildlife species. The simplest "tomato cage" design can be built using a 10 feet of 2" X 4" welded wire. Roll the wire in a loose circle and fasten the slightly overlapping ends together. The finished cage, a 3 foot wide by 4 foot tall cylinder, can then be staked upright with rebar, wooden posts, or even t-posts. Consider adding additional stakes for stability if feral

hogs are a problem in your area and make sure the bottom is adequately secured to protect against rooting. Depending on your wildlife objectives, placing one enclosure per plot acre is usually enough to determine how much vegetation is being grazed or removed from the plot.

Putting the Enclosure to Work

Once vegetation is actively growing, visually inspect enclosures at least once a month. Take a close look at vegetation height and plant abundance by species inside the



Visually inspect food plot enclosures at least once a month. Photo by Chris Cook, Alabama Division of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries.

enclosure as compared to the rest of the food plot. Estimation of the plot's production and utilization can be made if the protected vegetation is significantly taller or denser than outside the enclosure. For a more precise evaluation, consider a "clip and weigh" study. This consists of clipping protected vegetation to ground level at plot maturity. Compare this test weight to the weight of a similar sized sample from

outside the enclosure. Data obtained from the clip and weigh study is used to calculate pounds of forage produced per acre, and percent utilization of the plot; data may even help in gauging next year's inputs. For more information on forage sampling, contact your local Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) office.

Enclosures may also be used to determine which plants in your food plot seed mixture are most preferred. Deer, as with any grazing animal, will forage on the most desirable plants first, moderately preferred plants second,

and continue on to low preference forages. This plant grazing order allows appetizing plants to disappear quickly from the plot. Without the use of an enclosure, food plot managers may not see the plant, assume low seed production, and try another plant in next year's seed mixture. However, with an enclosure, land users can determine if the absence of a plant species is due to lack of growth or to wildlife grazing. Plant species that are not found throughout the plot but are present in the enclosure are likely highly preferred by wildlife and therefore heavily grazed. Conversely, if a plant is equally abundant inside and outside the enclosure, it may be of little value to wildlife.

Food plot enclosures have the ability to provide a wealth of information about your plot; provided you do your part. Monitor the enclosure consistently, collect forage samples, and identify forage species within the enclosure. Food plot enclosures are the onsite test for evaluating your food plot's production, determining the utilization of the plot and even which plant species wildlife prefer. ■