



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)