



Managing Shallow Water Areas for Waterfowl

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A shallow water area that has been flooded.

Shallow water areas and mud flats occur naturally in river bottoms around open sloughs and oxbow lakes. These areas are scoured and replenished by flood waters each year. This habitat is used by many creatures, including ducks and several non-game species. Most of these species feed in water that is less than a foot deep, while some even use mud flats.

This type of habitat can be created on your property by building a levee and installing some type of water control structure. The best site will be relatively flat pasture land or cropland with few or no trees.

The most common type of control structure is the flash board riser. This structure uses wooden or plastic “boards” to hold water. It allows the land manager to slowly flood or drain the area by adding or removing boards.

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Timing of water drawdown in the spring can impact the amount and type of food grown within the shallow water area. Early drawdowns tend to produce more total seed production, while mid and late drawdowns produce different plant communities.

One good option is to use a slow drawdown. This works best when using narrow boards in the riser. In other words, using 2x2” or 2x4” boards allows a slower drawdown than 2x6” boards because less water is being removed with each board that is pulled. Pull one board around the first of April, and then pull another every 10 to 14 days after that until all boards have been removed. It is often best to leave the last board in so that natural evaporation will very slowly draw down the remaining water. This leaves a shallow pool of water that is utilized by many types of wildlife.

Timing of reflooding is as important as timing of water drawdown. Slowly reflooding in stages is best. This allows access to all foods over time without flooding the lowest areas too deep too quickly. It also allows time for ducks to access the area in stages, so that foods do not all deteriorate at the same time.

A reliable supply of water for reflooding is best. This is particularly true in dry years such as occurred in 2006. A creek or lake can be used to pump water into the shallow water area. This is expensive, but worthwhile to provide at least a little bit of water for ducks to land and feed. Some ducks can feed in water that is only a few inches deep.

Naturally grown or “wild” duck foods are very beneficial, so planting corn or other crops is not necessary. Wild plants

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Blackberry

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of tasty and nutritious fruit from spring through late summer. Juicy berries are preferred, but even dried berries left on the canes into fall and winter are eaten. Both game and non-game birds enjoy the fruit including dove, turkey, cardinals, robins, orioles, brown thrashers, red-headed woodpeckers, thrushes, and the towhee. Other animals that like the fruit are opossums, raccoons, squirrels, foxes, chipmunks, coyotes, mice, and black bears. Deer and rabbit browse the stems and tender leaves. Butterflies, bees, moths, and other insects feed on the nectar of the flowers in spring.

As evident in the popular children's tale, "Brer Rabbit," the dense thickets of blackberry canes also provide home and cover for many small animals including rabbits, birds, foxes, and small birds.

Blackberries have long been known for their healing properties. For thousands of years, Europeans have been

gathering them from the wild for food and medicinal purposes. The ancient Greeks called the plant "goutberry" as it was used to lessen gout-related joint pain. It is also able to sooth the symptoms of diarrhea. It was believed that crawling through the brambles would cure boils, rheumatism, and whooping cough. Native Americans used the plant to make teas to treat dysentery, cholera, and upset stomach.

Almost all parts of the blackberry plant are edible and can be used for food or medicinal purposes. Rich in vitamin C and other vitamins and anti-oxidants, along with minerals such as potassium, phosphorus, iron, and calcium, the fruit is also a good source of dietary fiber. The berries make excellent jelly, pies, wine, and vinegar. Blackberry jelly and wine were considered fine cordials, especially with the addition of a little brandy.

Young stems can be peeled and eaten raw or cooked and even put into salads. Blackberry tea can help prevent dehydration by replenishing lost fluids, and it can be gargled for sore throats. The leaves can be chewed to cure bleeding gums, as well as for treating inflammation of the mouth and throat. It is also recommended as an astringent.

American Indians made a strong rope out of blackberry stems. The berries, leaves, and roots can dye fabrics any color from yellow to gray, purple, or green. You can even make a writing ink out of the berry juice.

Whether you want to encourage blackberries on your property for your own use or for the local wildlife, there are management practices that you can implement to encourage them on your land. Contact your local Alabama Forestry Commission office or a wildlife biologist for more information. ♣

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sprout from seeds in place naturally. Some of these natural foods include smartweed, sedges, barnyard grass, ragweed, and beggar ticks. Japanese millet – closely related to wild barnyard grass – is a cultivated plant that needs no disking. It can be planted to supplement natural foods simply by overseeding mud flats that are created soon after the water has been drawn off.

Common rushes, shrubs, and trees will begin to invade a shallow water area within a few years. For this reason, it will be necessary to disk or herbicide the area to keep these unwanted plants from taking over. This should be done at least once every three years.

Agricultural seed can be planted by those that have the time and money. While corn is popular for ducks, milo tends to be a better choice in many situations. It has nearly the same food value as corn. Milo is also more drought tolerant and less likely than corn to suffer damage from deer, raccoons, and other critters. Chufa, known as an excellent turkey planting, is another good food source for ducks. All three of these

choices provide high energy fare for many species. Soybeans, on the other hand, are a poor choice for ducks. They provide comparatively low energy value and also deteriorate very quickly after being flooded. As with any supplemental food source, fertilizer and lime should be applied at planting per soil test results.

Of course, the flatter the land, the better the results when it comes to a cost effective duck management flooding unit. Technical assistance is available by contacting your local USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service field office. They can provide assistance with soil maps and soil cores that can help you determine whether your particular spot will hold water without seepage. They can also run a simple waterline to show you exactly how

much area your levee will flood. Remember, the average depth will only need to be 18 inches for best waterfowl use.

In the next issue of *Alabama's TREASURED Forests* magazine we will discuss cost-share and easement options available for waterfowl habitat under the Wetland Reserve Program. ♣



This photo shows a flashboard riser water control structure that has been placed in a newly-constructed levee.