

# FLAT ROCK

*By Terry Ezzell, Alabama Forestry Commission*

In the early 1990s, Neal Taylor, an avid hunter, realized that as the white-tailed deer population grew in North Alabama, hunting leases would become harder to locate and grow increasingly expensive. With this in mind, he began searching for property close to home that he could call his own.

In 1994, he and his wife, Pamela, purchased 232 acres of land in Colbert County, only 15 minutes from their house in Russellville (Franklin County). This property was special because it was very close to where he had grown up and hunted small game as a boy. Neal knew this would not only give him and his sons their own hunting area, it would also be a great investment for his family's future. Since buying that first parcel of land, the Taylors have acquired five different adjoining parcels



*Pamela and Neal Taylor enjoy managing their TREASURE Forest/Tree Farm and sharing it with family and friends.*

bringing the total acreage of "Flat Rock" to 332.

As a forest ranger with the Alabama Forestry Commission, Neal's experience with forest and wildlife management helped turn this once unmanaged track of land into the showplace it is today. In fact, the Taylors were named the Northwest winners of the 2007 Helene Mosley Memorial TREASURE Forest award. Neal also credits much of his management success to his father, a TREASURE Forest landowner in the 1980s and a retired conservation employee. He says his dad started teaching him good stewardship at a very young age.

Certified as a TREASURE Forest in 2002, Neal's primary objectives are managing the property to increase the wildlife habitat and establish a healthy, productive forest using sound timber management practices.



Additional land management activities on the property included conversion of pastureland to pine stands. Today the Taylors have over 250 acres of pines ranging in age from 10-16 years old. Over the years, Neal has also carried out extensive road construction, doing all the building and maintenance himself. All of the work on the Taylor's property is conducted by him, his family, and friends.

### **Wildlife Management**

At the time of the original purchase, the property consisted mainly of unmanaged upland hardwoods and an area where a "high-grade" harvest had taken place. While some game species were present, the density and quality were not what Neal desired. His first step was to plan a clearcut timber harvest that would produce income to help increase the diversity of the site and build a solid foundation for his wildlife management plan. Ultimately, this harvest would allow him to establish a productive forest, the basis for his investment plan.

In his pre-harvest planning, extra-wide streamside management zones (SMZs) were maintained. These areas would retain



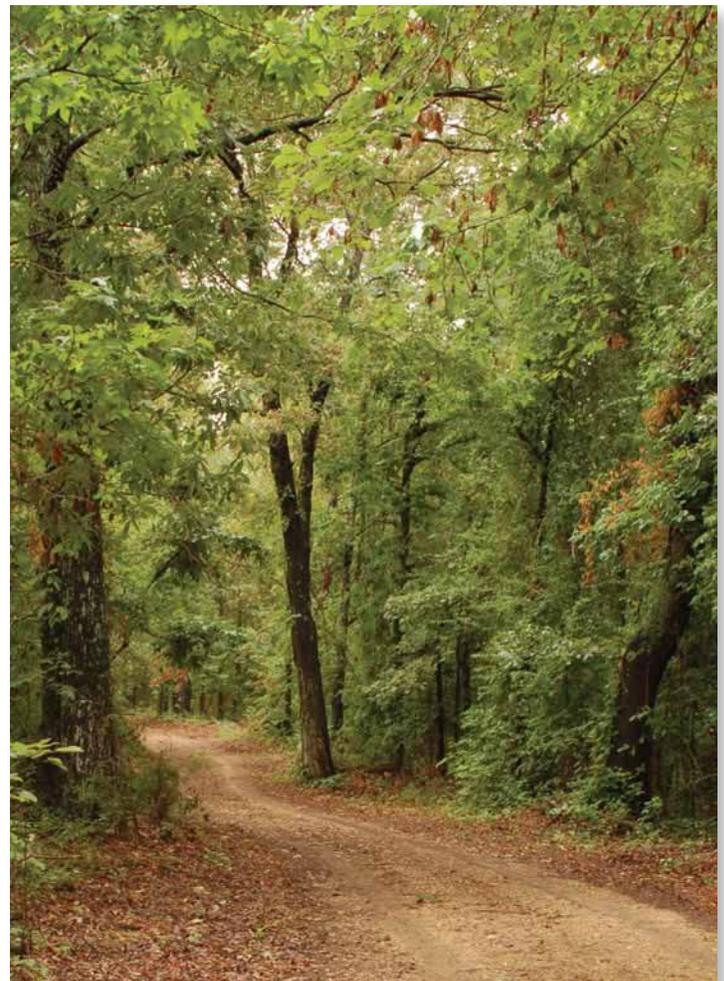
*Landowner Neal Taylor (center) discusses timber management techniques with AFC foresters Terry Ezzell (left) and Johnnie Everitt (right).*



clear-cut provided them the opportunity to replace unproductive upland hardwoods with a vigorously growing forest. After the harvest was conducted, loblolly seedlings were planted. Herbicide was applied by hand and skidder-mounted sprayer to the seedlings' competition to aid stand establishment. Great care was taken during this application to avoid the unharvested white oak trees. The planting was successful, resulting in a fully stocked stand of productive timber now occupying the site. The understory prescribed burn mentioned earlier did a good job in reducing the wildfire fuel load that had accumulated in this young stand. Later this year, Neal is looking forward to the first thinning of the pines. In the year 2010, he plans to do the next prescribed burn.

It's readily apparent that Neal endorses the outdoor lifestyle, a fact supported by the Taylors generously sharing their property with others. In addition to hosting church groups, Boy Scouts, and others at Flat Rock, he invites individual landowners who are interested in learning from his ongoing natural resource management practices.

His aggressive wildlife management program and sound timber management plans have paid off. Although rarely seen when he first purchased the property, the deer population has increased 15-fold over the last several years. Turkey, other small game, and even non-game species have also benefited and are abundant today. While taking his grandsons ATV riding, he loves to introduce them to the great outdoors, showing them various tree species and wildlife signs. Several young hunters, including one of his grandsons, have harvested their first deer under his guidance. According to Neal, these are the true rewards. Enjoying the land with close friends and family is what it's all about. 🍄



hardwoods for mast production and provide wildlife with much needed diversity in the future. Neal also marked two or three large white oaks per acre to be left unharvested. Although this would take up growing space in the pine plantation he would later establish, he felt the mast produced by these trees would be important to his wildlife management. He continues to fertilize selected trees each year to increase productivity.

Neal also worked with the loggers to pre-plan loading sites in areas that were well suited for food plots. These first plots were the basis for his wildlife plantings program, which now includes 14 plots totaling 20 acres. While some of these areas are planted in the spring with soybeans and corn, others are planted in the fall with wheat, oats, and chicory. He also manages year-round for white ladino clover. Neal noted that for the last couple years, he has planted with "Roundup Ready" corn on about 10 acres, an experiment that has proven very successful.

Along the edges of these plots and in a few of the "orchard" type settings, Neal has planted sawtooth oaks, crab apples, and domesticated fruit trees such as Yates apples, golden delicious apples, and yellow harvest pears. He protected most of these with plastic tree shelters that were removed as the seedlings grew. Now that they are producing fruit, Neal has been so pleased with their success that he has continued such plantings.

Included in the last land purchase was a small amount of abandoned pasture land. Neal has employed six acres on the site to maintain in early successional stages, promoting the growth of some persimmon trees and bushhogging.

Understanding that burning would greatly enhance wildlife habitat, Neal conducted his first prescribed burn on the property in the winter of 2007. This understory burn was applied to 250 acres of pine plantation.

Neal has taken great care in managing his whitetail deer herd through selective harvesting, even participating in the Deer Management Assistance Program with the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources from 1994-97. Today, precise numbers of deer are harvested to keep the balance between habitat and carrying capacity. He encourages those hunting his land to harvest numerous does, but only mature bucks, determined by age and body size.

## Timber Production

Even though wildlife remains his top priority, Neal knows owning the land is a good financial investment. The original  
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