



It's All about Family at the Old Place, Barkers' Cane Creek Farm

*By Allen Varner, Stewardship Forester,
Alabama Forestry Commission*

Family. That one word says a lot about James, Joyce, and Bradley Barker – part of six generations that have enjoyed this TREASURE Forest since 1839! Although the Cleburne County property has seen many changes throughout the years, the one thing that has remained constant over time is the family's passion for the land.

The early generations farmed the land raising cattle, hogs, and chickens for personal consumption and “peddling” some of the harvest for income. Later, bottomland fields were rented out for a short time to supplement income. In general, the landowners tried to make a living off the land until 1959, when James Barker's grandparents, the third generation, moved off the property to pursue other income opportunities.

For the next 32 years, the appearance of the land changed as no one was actively managing it. Then in the 1980s, James's father started planting corn for cattle feed. It was during this time that James's personal interest for the land began to develop. As a teenager, he plowed his first piece of ground, sparking a growing fascination with wildlife. Seeing the property differently, he was not interested solely in making money from it.

As understanding of the needs and management of wildlife took root in James, and he established the first wildlife food plot on the farm. This “planting for nothing,” meaning not as a source of income, was not a popular thing to do in the early 80s. But his strong passion for wildlife was growing, and James has been

quoted as saying, “the big bucks or turkeys that could be harvested is payment enough!”

In 1986 the first forest management plan was written for James’s grandmother, owner of the property. This plan was implemented by Kenneth and James Barker, father and son. TREASURE Forest certification followed a year later after completion of a number of accomplishments such as road maintenance, broad-base dip construction, boundary line establishment, and wildlife food plot planting.

At this point in his life, James knew he wanted to call this place home. To that end, he and his wife, Joyce, purchased 60 acres from his grandmother in 1991. An Alabama Forestry Commission employee, he knew that he could use his training and knowledge to achieve his vision for the property. The 60-acre portion was re-certified in 1994 under the management of James and Joyce. Not long after this, his father, Kenneth, purchased the remaining 140 acres, ensuring that all of the property remained in the Barker family. As James and Joyce surveyed the property, they realized the best home site was where the old farm house stood. Since it was no longer habitable, it was torn down so they could build their home.

Ownership increased the land ethic for the Barkers, as well as their sense of pride in accomplishment. James hopes that what was instilled in him at an early age has also been instilled in their own son, Bradley, the fourth generation of the family to have been raised on the farm.



The Barkers’ primary objective is wildlife management, and you can be assured, any deer, turkey, quail, or other small game that comes onto this property will not lack for habitat, food or water! With nine distinct food plots, finding food is not a problem.

There are 15 acres in the bottomland along Cane Creek that consist of two separate fields. Each season they are planted in *Roundup Ready*® corn and soybeans, which is left for wildlife. The fields are divided by planted rows of sawtooth oaks, white oaks, water oaks, and swamp chestnut oaks on a 15x15 spacing.



The wide spacing provides understory cover, making great rabbit habitat.

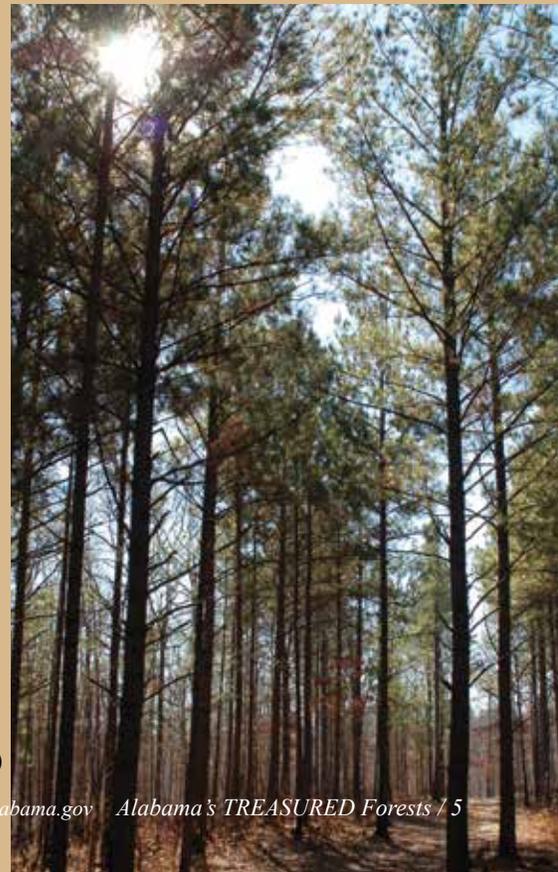
Between these two fields runs a 30-foot wide green field planted in wheat, oats, clover, and chicory, as well as turnips and radishes. Sixty-foot wide Cane Creek connects the fields and is the east border for three-quarters of a mile. On a hillside of mature hardwoods mixed with pine just up from the creek sits a 5x8 shooting house. It is nestled in the woods, providing a clear view of the fields. Nearby there are two acres planted in brown top millet making for a small dove field that is enjoyed by family and friends each season.

Early on, James realized that wildlife management actually begins with purposeful timber management. Over the past 20 plus years, understory pines and non-mast producing hardwoods have been gradually removed from a 25-acre mature hardwood stand to allow younger oaks to grow. The older mature hardwoods are over 60 years old. A checker board pattern – made up of small stands of planted longleaf pines, planted loblolly pines of varying age classes, and naturally regenerated upland hardwoods – enhances the edge effect and is designed to complement the primary wildlife management objective. To promote native forbs and grasses throughout the property, prescribed fire is utilized routinely on a three-to-five-year cycle, depending on the stand.

Because of poor production, 20 acres of mixed pine was clear cut in 1992 and reforested in loblolly pine. Then Hurricane Opal blew through, loosening many of the planted trees. James and his family painstakingly went through the stand, tightening many of the loose pines by hand. Thanks to such tender loving care, today, the surviving trees are healthy. A prescribed burn was performed at age 10, and now the pines have undergone a third row thinning with the harvesting debris scattered back within the stand.

Another 35-acre area damaged by southern pine beetle in 1995 was harvested, mechanically site prepared in 2000, and planted with 605 trees to the acre. It was broken into six individual blocks by fire breaks and roads to facilitate a three-year prescribed burning rotation, with the goal to minimize fire stress on the crop trees.

(Continued on page 6)



Barkers' Cane Creek Farm

(Continued from page 5)

With the purchase of the remaining 140 acres from his father in 2009, a dream was fulfilled. Since then, fences have been built, property lines surveyed and painted, and corners marked. All timber stands have permanent fire breaks which have been planted in native grasses for erosion control. All roads are approximately 20 feet wide, with the main roads topped in gravel. Secondary woods roads are crowned and water barred with proper turn-outs. Along these fire-breaks and roads, "daylighting" has been accomplished by trimming overhanging vegetation to 12 to 14 feet in height, permitting the sun to shine on the roads so they can dry quickly.

A common occurrence with many TREASURE Forest landowners is the incorporation of multiple uses, eventually embracing all five of the TREASURE Forest objectives:

Timber, Wildlife, Recreation, Aesthetics, and Education. As stated earlier, wildlife management and timber management were originally the primary objectives for the Barker property. However, as knowledge of multiple-use concepts was gained over time, a shift towards wildlife habitat management and aesthetics took place.

What set these TREASURE Forest landowners apart and qualified them for the 2012 North Region Helene Mosley



Memorial Award is their commitment to education. The desire to share knowledge and property, providing others with a natural resource experience, is unique to TREASURE Forest landowners. The Barkers not only share, but are often active participants in the learning process. Educational activities at Cane Creek Farm include training of the local high school 4-H Forestry Judging Team of which Bradley is a member, and hosting Classroom in the Forest/ Forest in the Classroom for

all fifth grade students in Cleburne County for three years in a row. This particular educational activity is a cooperative effort between Farm Services Agency, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Soil & Water Conservation District, the Cleburne County Forestry Planning Committee, and the Alabama Forestry Commission.

In addition to school students, adults have also received training at Cane Creek Farm. The Barker family hosted the Agricultural Explosives Class on Beaver Dam Control where representatives were in attendance from the Forest Service, Soil & Water Conservation, *Progressive Farmer* magazine, as well as ten private landowners. Several tree identification training ses-



sions for new employees of the Alabama Forestry Commission have also been conducted at the farm.

While it is apparent that the Old Place, Barkers' Cane Creek Farm is special to all the present-day family members, it can actually still be called home for the first four generations . . . dating back to 1870, the family cemetery is still in use, providing the final resting place not only for James's ancestors, but also his father who passed away as recently as 2010.

Whether it is remembering the past generations that have been a part of its history, or the current generation that enjoys the abundant wildlife on the Old Place, home and family are recurring themes at Cane Creek Farm. The principles of TREASURE Forest are strong in the hearts of James, Joyce, and Bradley Barker. Their commitment to the land, along with their willingness to share their "TREASURED" forest for the benefit of others, is why they are truly deserving of the designation of Helene Mosley Memorial TREASURE Forest. 🌲

