



Just What the Doctor Ordered . . . **PRESCRIBED FIRE HELPS WILDLIFE**

By Barry Baird, Wildlife Biologist, Alabama Division of Wildlife & Freshwater Fisheries

The use of prescribed fire is a major tool in wildlife management used by natural resource professionals in Alabama and throughout the Southeast. The concept of prescribed fire management is pretty simple. It is a fire that is planned, or 'prescribed,' for application on a certain area, at a given time of year, and under predetermined environmental conditions such as wind direction and speed, humidity, and fuel moisture. These parameters are used to obtain a predetermined result. Despite its growing popularity, prescribed fire is often misunderstood.

Throughout history, fires, especially unplanned or 'wildfires,' have resulted in

destruction of human property and the loss of life. Because of this, the term 'fire' is often associated with a negative consequence. This perception is most often the result of a lack of understanding regarding the vital role of fire in native landscapes.

The key term to focus on in the phrase 'prescribed fire' is prescribed. Prescribed fire, like a medical prescription, has a desired outcome and guidelines or a set of directions for application. To obtain the desired outcome there must be a specific, detailed plan, or 'prescription,' followed by the proper execution.

Fire affects wildlife by altering the animals' habitat. Cool-season (sometimes referred to as dormant-season) burns are

typically conducted between the months of December and April. Environmental conditions of a cool-season burn usually have a temperature of 70 degrees Fahrenheit or lower combined with minimal new vegetation growth. This type of burn is often used to reduce heavy fuel loads or in areas with dense overhead canopies. It produces lower overall temperatures, which limits potential damage to over-story vegetation, decreases levels of forest litter, and helps diminish the intensity of a wildfire should one occur. Cool-season prescribed fires also stimulate the growth of forbs, legumes, native grasses, and the re-sprouting of small trees, woody vines, and shrubs – all of which benefit wildlife.

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Warm-season (or growing-season) burns are applied from early spring to late summer. Typical environmental conditions of a warm-season burn are temperatures in the mid 70s or higher, moderately-to-exceptionally damp soil, and active vegetation growth. This type of burn is used to control woody brush, stimulate the growth of native grasses, and open up the midstory and understory to sunlight. Increased sunlight will provide a diverse understory of high quality browse and cover to benefit wildlife.

Each type of prescribed burn has its own set of specific guidelines and outcomes determined by individual circumstances. Wildlife, including white-tailed deer, wild turkey, bobwhite quail, select song birds, small mammals, reptiles, and even amphibians can all benefit from appropriately applied prescribed fire. Many wildlife species will immediately utilize the freshly-burned bare areas as a place to forage for insects or to pick up newly-exposed seeds and nuts. Fires release nutrients into the soil, which stimulates the growth of quality native plants. As this vegetation develops, different animals will utilize the area for nesting cover, protection from predators and weather, and for forage or travel corridors.

The use of prescribed fire can be very beneficial to wildlife. It is cost effective, and with a little training and a properly followed plan, it is relatively easy to apply. Prescribed fires can benefit wildlife habitat on a larger scale more economically and quicker than most other habitat enhancements. More acres are managed for the benefit of wildlife as a result of prescribed fire than any other type of management throughout the Southeast.

Before you conduct a prescribed fire, many considerations should be made. A prescribed burn manager's certification is recommended to ensure liability protection. A training program is offered by the Alabama Forestry Commission that consists of fire behavior and burn manager courses. These classes will provide the information required to develop a burn plan. A plan should consist of specific goals, safety precautions, optimum environmental conditions, assistance, materials, cost, etc. Private companies and the Alabama Forestry Commission also conduct prescribed burning for landowners for a fee.

If you decide to pursue prescribed fire management, contact your local natural resource professionals such as the Alabama Division of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, or the Alabama Forestry Commission for more information. ♣