

Revised Publication on Managing Agricultural Areas for Migratory Bird Hunting

A revised LSU AgCenter publication details changes in the federal migratory bird hunting regulations as they relate to agricultural areas in our state.

Federal regulations give each state the authority to establish official planting, harvesting and post-harvesting practices. These practices are given as official recommendations by state extension specialists of the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture's Cooperative Extension System.

Most people are familiar with the regulation that manipulation of a standing agricultural crop is legal when dove hunting but is not allowed when hunting waterfowl. An additional waterfowl exception makes it illegal to hunt over any unharvested agricultural crop that has been manipulated in any way, even when done as part of an officially recommended agricultural practice. This exception in the baiting law can potentially make an area illegal for waterfowl hunting when standing crops rendered unharvestable by such factors as insects, drought, flooding or wind damage are manipulated in such a way as destroying the crop or preparing the area for future planting.

The revised publication is available on the LSU AgCenter Web site at

www.lsuagcenter.com

Deer Harvest Results for 2008-09 Hunting Season

The 2009-2010 deer season is well under way throughout our state, and the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) recently released the deer harvest results for the past season.

The 2008-2009 hunting season was the start of the mandatory deer tagging and reporting program in which LDWF issued just over 227,000 sets of deer tags, which accounted for a reported deer harvest of 95,718. When Deer Management Assistance Program (DMAP) and Wildlife Management Area harvests were added, the total deer harvest in Louisiana for past year was 116,571. Union Parish led all parishes with 7,915 deer harvested, followed by Bienville (5,387), Claiborne (5,171), Vernon (4,311), Bossier (3,930), Jackson (3,689), Webster (3,652), Iberville (3,398), Natchitoches (3,384) and Tensas (3,376) parishes.

Safe Harbor Program for Red-Cockaded Woodpeckers

A Safe Harbor program is a way for private landowners to become involved in the protection and recovery of endangered species to promote the expansion of the populations of those species.

Landowners often are reluctant to commit to any land management practice that will potentially increase the number of endangered species – for fear of restrictions on the use of their property. To resolve this dilemma, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service adapted the Safe Harbor program for selected endangered species, including the red-cockaded woodpecker (RCW).

Under a Safe Harbor permit, landowners enter into a cooperative agreement with a government agency to maintain or create new habitat for the benefit of an endangered species. In return for these management assurances, landowners are not obligated to protect any endangered species that subsequently move onto the property. The number of endangered species on the property at the time of entering into a Safe Harbor agreement is the baseline population. If no endangered species are present at the time a Safe Harbor agreement is entered into, the baseline population is zero and landowners are not responsible for any that subsequently move onto the area.

In January of 2005 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service granted a Section 10 permit to the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries that allowed this state agency to administer statewide Safe Harbor agreements for red-cockaded woodpeckers. Since that time, the department has enrolled 366,428 acres into the statewide RCW Safe Harbor program.

Wildlife Species Profile

Red-Cockaded Woodpecker (*Picoides borealis*)

The red-cockaded woodpecker was once a common bird in mature pine forests throughout the Southeastern United States.

It is slightly larger than a bluebird, averaging about 7¼ inches in length. The back and top of the head are black with numerous black-and-white, horizontal stripes on the back. Conspicuous white cheeks are another key identity feature for red-cockaded woodpeckers. The only red coloration is a small red streak found above the cheek in males, which is rarely seen unless through powerful binoculars in bright sunlight.

Any other woodpecker of a similar size found in Louisiana will have conspicuous red on the head, a prominent white vertical streak on the back, a prominent white patch on the wing or brown feathers.

Red-cockaded woodpeckers live in groups called clans that consist of two to nine birds, with never more than one breeding pair. In addition to the breeding pair, a clan consists of fledglings produced by the breeding pair, along with older males called helpers. A clan will nest and roost in a group of cavity trees called a colony. While a typical colony usually consists of one to 12 cavity trees, only one clan will use the trees in a single colony. Within any colony, cavity trees can be under construction, finished and in use, or abandoned.

In Louisiana, as well as throughout its former range,

red-cockaded woodpeckers have been greatly reduced – primarily because of changing timber management practices.

Unlike any other woodpecker found in Louisiana, the red-cockaded woodpecker nests in the cavities of live southern pines. Most cavities are constructed in longleaf pine, although they have been found occasionally in loblolly, slash and shortleaf pines. Cavities are rarely found in pines less than 30 to 40 years of age, and most occur in trees 70 years old and older.

Any tree chosen must contain enough heartwood for construction of a roosting chamber. Although the heartwood portion of a tree is usually quite hard, a large percentage of nesting trees have heartwood that is infected with a heart rot fungus called red heart. Red heart fungus weakens the heartwood and makes cavities much easier to excavate.

The red-cockaded woodpecker has strict habitat requirements and an inability to adapt to variations in these habitat needs. Most pine timber in Louisiana and throughout the southeastern United States is managed on short rotations that are not suitable for red-cockaded woodpecker cavity construction. Extensive areas of pine and pine/hardwood forests, maintained at low basal areas, is another required habitat need to satisfy the foraging requirements of red-cockaded woodpeckers. This is another aspect of current timber management trends that is not widely practiced.



The inevitable result of losing suitable habitat for any animal species is a reduction in population size. A reduction in numbers led the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to list the red-cockaded woodpecker on the Federal Endangered Species list in 1970. This listing came several years prior to congressional passage of the Endangered Species Act in 1973.

Since that time, the red-cockaded woodpecker has become one of our most well-known and controversial listed species in Louisiana. Private land management options often are restricted to provide for the habitat needs of red-cockaded woodpeckers as mandated by the Endangered Species Act.

Critter Corner

Muscovy duck (*Cairina moschata*)

The Muscovy duck is a large perching duck that is native to Mexico, Central America and South America. Feral populations in Louisiana are located in many lakes, ponds and drainage ditches associated with urban areas.

Wild Muscovy ducks are solid black except for traces of white on the wings. Feral populations display a wide array of color patterns from black-and-white to solid white.

When mature, males average 33 inches in length and weigh approximately 7 pounds. Females average 25 inches in length and weigh only about 3 pounds.

Adult males have a distinctive bare, red face covered with large caruncles. Females and juveniles have smaller and less bumpy face masks.

Vocalizations in males are a dry, hissing call. Females emit a quite "coo" sound.

Muscovy ducks do not form stable pairs, and dominant males often will breed with three or more different females. Hens lay a clutch of eight to 10 white eggs, and while the species is known as a cavity nester within its original home range, feral populations usually choose alternative nesting sites. Nests in urban areas commonly are found near the base of a tree or under shrubs, under bridges or roof overhangs, near piers or docks, or next to buildings. Eggs are incubated for 35 days.

The diet of Muscovy ducks consists of plant material that is obtained by dabbling in shallow water or grazing in lawns and fields. Small vertebrates and insects also are consumed.

Damage and Control Measures:

Feral populations of Muscovy ducks cause problems by defecating in yards, on porches and patios and within water bodies surrounding homes and subdivisions. Adult birds can produce up to one-third pound of droppings per day, creating a health hazard, especially as their numbers increase. Feathers littering an area are another aesthetic problem associated with large populations of Muscovy ducks.

Feral populations of Muscovy ducks are not protected by the same state and federal waterfowl laws that safeguard our native migratory waterfowl species. Feral populations are basically under the ownership and control of the property owner(s) upon which they reside.

Lethal control by shooting is allowed – if legal within the laws of the area where the birds are located. Keep in mind, however, that in most cases the discharge of firearms is not allowed in urban areas and therefore trapping and removal is the best option to pursue. Muscovy ducks can be easily lured into wire cage funnel traps by baiting with corn or bread. Trapped birds can then be relocated to rural areas or euthanized.

Populations also can be reduced by locating nests and coating all eggs with vegetable oil just prior to incubation. The oil will prevent any eggs from successful development and hatching. Avoid destroying the nest, because under such circumstances, females usually will construct a new nest and begin laying once more.

As a side note to information about population reduction, Muscovy ducks are excellent table fare, and this opportunity should not be missed when available. The species is commercially known as the Barbary duck – with a much larger portion of tasty dark breast meat than any of our native waterfowl species.



Plant Species Profile

Live oak (*Quercus virginiana*)

The live oak is our most recognizable and widely planted oak species in urban areas throughout Louisiana.

Live oaks are members of the white oak group, although they do not display the pale scaly bark that is characteristic of white oaks. The bark on live oaks is dark and thick, divided into deep narrow furrows and broad ridges. Leaves are evergreen, 2-5 inches long by ½-2½ inches wide, dark glossy green above and pale gray pubescent below. Leaf margins are entire and occasionally revolute or rolled on the edges. Live oak acorns are 1-1½ inches long by 1/3 inch in diameter and ellipsoidal.



The native range of live oaks in Louisiana was a narrow zone at the junction of the marshes and higher ground in southeastern and southwestern Louisiana, extending up the Mississippi floodplain to Baton Rouge and Opelousas. It is the general belief that any live oaks in Louisiana located north of Alexandria are either planted trees or the descendants of planted trees.

The history of our country is linked to the live oak and the role it played in our early defenses. Live oaks that are planted in open areas for landscaping and aesthetic purposes display a low-branching, wide-crowned growth pattern. When grown in natural forest stands, having to compete with other species, however, live oaks develop a taller, less spreading growth pattern with a clear bole for many feet. This growth pattern, along with the strong and durable characteristics of the wood itself, led the U.S. Secretary of the Navy in 1818 to survey public lands in Louisiana for the purpose of finding suitable live oaks for ship-building purposes. For this same reason, the first federal forestry plantation was a live oak planting on Santa Rosa Island at Pensacola, Fla.

An interesting hybrid called Compton oak is produced when live oaks cross with overcup oak. Compton oaks display characteristics that are intermediate between live oak and overcup oak. They are often found planted as ornamentals for landscaping around homes and public buildings.

Live oaks are dependable mast producers, and their acorns are consumed by a wide variety of wildlife species.

Louisiana Wildlife News

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