

Landowner Spotlight

Just Keep it Simple

By John Hendrix, US Fish and Wildlife Service Partners Biologist

Every now and then, simple things lead to better results. Now, that's if all the natural factors help out when we are managing for wildlife species such as bobwhite quail. Land managers can create the best habitat but weather will provide the environment for wildlife species to thrive or just go into what I call the survival mode. As land managers we cannot control the weather but we can provide quality habitat for wildlife species so when the weather becomes favorable species such as bobwhite quail do respond well.

John Hurd is the ranch manager for Bluestem Ranch in Osage County. Mr. Hurd has been around ranching all of his life, working on either cow/calf or a stocker operations. He has seen both management styles and the results whether "good or bad" they have on wildlife species. Prior to Mr. Hurd becoming the ranch manager, the Bluestem Ranch was managed exclusively for livestock production using a stocker operation. A stocker operation can be detrimental to wildlife especially ground nesting birds in a variety of ways. For example, to maximize livestock gains each year, all pastures are completely burned in late spring, follow-up with herbicide application then heavy stocked with calves during the growing period. This style of management practice will take away the nesting habitat then kill most of the food resources, and in some instances, remove important shrub cover. This style of ranching will still support some wildlife, but when weather factors become unfavorable for production then this ranching style will become a very poor place for wildlife to be productive.

Mr. Hurd has been the ranch manager on the Bluestem Ranch for the past nine years and his management style is completely different than the previous owner. Mr. Hurd understands the important aspect of livestock and wildlife production in that they are both important resources for a ranching operation. Both must be productive and in return the ranch as a whole is very productive when nature tries to show us she is still in control. The Bluestem Ranch is a very large ranch so



John Hurd has come to accept weeds as an integral part of range ecology. Photo by John Hendrix.

keeping it simple using natural methods such as prescribed fire and livestock grazing is by far more productive for wildlife, livestock and the wallet!

Mr. Hurd grazes the ranch with buffalo and some cow/calf pairs depending on the bison herd production. His top habitat management tools are prescribed fire and livestock. He rotates prescribed fire across the ranch trying not to burn the same area twice in a 3-4 year rotation. Most pastures are burned using creeks and ranch roads as firebreaks leaving some parts of the pastures unburned. The burned areas are typically grazed heavier becoming sometimes overused while the unburned areas are usually left ungrazed. The next year, Mr. Hurd burns another area of the ranch, the livestock and bison move on their own to these newly burned areas. The initial burned area becomes "weedy" and not used

by livestock. The weedy area of the pasture becomes an instant food plot for wildlife and these plants produce well even in poor growing conditions. This style of management is called "patch-burn-grazing." Over the past nine years, the large open draws have recovered with brush such as sumac, sand plum, buck brush, and rough leaf dogwood. Most of the pastures on the ranch have this habitat structure which provides more usable space or what I call insurance in poor weather conditions; i.e. "survival mode" for wildlife. Mr. Hurd recognizes the importance of not spraying his pastures until it is absolutely necessary to control a nuisance plant like sercia lespedeza. This plant is controlled when possible with spot spraying to reduce unwanted forb and legume loss (wildlife foods).

The result of Mr. Hurd's management activities over the last nine years has improved the production stability for livestock and wildlife on the ranch. For example, bobwhite quail numbers over the past five years have been above the regional average. This past fall, lease hunters on the ranch have averaged moving six coveys per day with several limits being taken home. The turkeys are also rebounding on the ranch. Implementing this style of management has enhanced wildlife habitat on the ranch and on years of bad production from weather events the wildlife numbers can rebound a bit easier and much faster than before.

I hear from other hunters and land managers in the area asking what is causing the Bluestem Ranch to have good quail numbers. I love to share my personal experiences with the Bluestem Ranch and their management history, so I usually ramble on about habitat, weather, and other things, but I end my conversation with, "just keep it simple." We can control how we treat our landscape but we cannot control the weather. Weather will always cause wildlife numbers to fluctuate. But in the end, quality habitat will help a ranch rebound in great production years not only for wildlife but for livestock production! ■