



## *For Wildlife Only*

**Landowners can now receive tax breaks for managing their land for wildlife—no moneymaking enterprise necessary.**

**T**he yearling buck does not bother to move when we park just a few feet away. He merely watches us from his bed in the tangle of briars, seemingly unafraid of the Gator with the dog box on the back. At least twice a week, the green utility vehicle follows a pack of yipping, yelping beagles as they chase rabbits around this field of thick vegetation. Today the dog box sits empty, the small hounds having gotten their exercise a day earlier. Ron Little cuts the engine, and everything goes silent. Almost everything.

“I heard one whistle then. Hear it?” Little asks, cocking his ear toward the sound. As if on cue, another bird calls out. Then somewhere across the field, from a patch of ladino clover or knee-high lespedeza, comes a proud answer. And so it continues, back and forth like an old-time gospel refrain during altar call. A once-common song of the South that greets Little nearly every morning during mating season. The unmistakable rising whistle of wild bobwhite quail.

written by Shannon Farlow photographed by Melissa McGaw





MASLOWSKI WILDLIFE PRODUCTIONS

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Landowner Ron Little talks with N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission biologist Ken Knight on Little's property that he is managing for wildlife. Little's early successional plantings have increased populations of Eastern cottontails and Northern bobwhite quail.

**According to the N.C. Department of Commerce, North Carolina's population is growing by almost 10 percent annually, which is twice the rate of the rest of the country.**

"There's probably two or three coveys," Little says, looking out across the lush landscape. "They're whistling the most this year that I've ever heard them."

Little was born on this Union County farm and, except for a military stint in the late 1960s, has lived here all his life. The quail and rabbits have always been here, too. But as he watched their populations decline elsewhere across the Carolinas during the '70s and '80s, and as he lost his favorite hunting spots one by one to development, the avid rabbit hunter became determined not to let the wildlife on his land suffer the same fate.

In 1988, Little transformed approximately 46 acres behind his home into a small-game sanctuary where he could train and exercise his beagles. So began his long-term experiment to learn firsthand which types of cover and food produce the most birds, bunnies and other small game.

Since rabbits and quail are both early successional species that require lots of ground cover, Little sowed a variety of grasses and clovers interspersed with small annual food plots. To maintain the early successional stage, he plows half of the 46 acres with a disc harrow in February or March and rotates to the other half the following year. Sweet gums and other tree saplings that will eventually crowd out low-lying vegetation are removed by hand with herbicides.

"It's not a cheap thing. It's not a lazy-man thing because you've got to keep it up," says

Little. Since his retirement from an aluminum foundry in 2009, he has been busy "keeping it up." So when he recently received a notice that his property tax was increasing, threatening to dampen his efforts, Little went to see the tax man. "They told me I could go into forestry or start farming it. I told them farming it ain't an option."

To his surprise, Little had another alternative—the newly implemented North Carolina Wildlife Conservation Land Program. Thanks to the efforts of the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission, the N.C. Wildlife Federation and other conservation groups that worked to get the legislation passed in the N.C. General Assembly, landowners who manage for threatened wildlife or certain wildlife habitats can now qualify for a lower property tax assessment. If the land meets criteria set by the General Assembly and the owner signs a Wildlife Habitat Conservation Agreement to manage for wildlife, then the property can enter the Wildlife Conservation Land Program (WCLP) and be taxed at a reduced rate.

"For the first time ever, wildlife habitat is recognized as a valuable asset to everyone in North Carolina," says Brad Howard, private lands program coordinator for the Wildlife Commission. "Landowners who agree to manage those habitats that we've identified as priorities deserve some type of recognition for doing so. This program provides that for them. And it provides recognition for the

wildlife and the natural resources of the state. We're excited about it."

Before the WCLP went into effect on Jan. 1, 2010, only private landowners engaging in agricultural, forestry or horticultural production were eligible to receive a reduced property tax assessment through North Carolina's present-use valuation program. Landowners who wanted to utilize their property for wildlife conservation were simply out of luck when it came to tax relief. In fact, property owners enrolled in the present-use valuation program were penalized with a higher property tax if they quit farming or producing timber and started managing for wildlife. Conservation was costly. The lack of any property tax incentive was a major stumbling block for the Wildlife Commission and conservation groups such as land trusts when they tried to encourage private landowners to preserve open spaces and wildlife habitat. (See "With What Time Remains," Oct. 2010.)

*Getting Crowded* According to the N.C. Department of Commerce, North Carolina's population is growing by almost 10 percent annually, which is twice the rate of the rest of the country. We're currently ranked 10th in the nation with almost 9.3 million people—190 people per square mile.

"The biggest threat that wildlife and wildlife habitat face is people coming here in greater numbers and building roads and

houses and businesses. There's just not as much wildlife space left," says Chris McGrath, coordinator of the Wildlife Commission's Wildlife Diversity Program. "It's under pavement or buildings or turned into things that aren't habitat for wildlife anymore, and that's going on every day. It's just gone, and we're never going to get it back."

Almost a decade ago, a committee of Wildlife Commission biologists began assembling data in an attempt to map out a viable strategy for sustaining the state's wildlife habitat and open spaces. The biologists formed descriptions of habitat types they considered the most threatened in North Carolina. They combined these with the inventory of animals from the state's list of protected wildlife species to create the state's Wildlife Action Plan. The General Assembly took that information, crafted a bill identifying six of those habitat types and all of the species, and voted it into law in 2008, forming the Wildlife Conservation Land Program.

To enroll in the WCLP, landowners must first have their property evaluated by a representative from the Wildlife Commission to see if it meets the requirements. "We do not provide actual physical work on their property," Howard explains. "Our job is to tell them what they should do, make suggestions, give them advice as to what they should do to help wildlife. We can assist them in developing this Wildlife Habitat Conservation Agreement, and we will help

## WCLP Requirements

Landowners wanting to participate in the Wildlife Conservation Land Program must

- Own 20 to 100 contiguous acres of qualified habitat in one county.
- Have owned the land for at least five years or purchased property that was already in a wildlife conservation land program. Landowners can move their property from a present use valuation program to the WCLP without any penalties provided they have owned the property for five years.
- Sign a Wildlife Habitat Conservation Agreement with the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission.

For more information, visit [www.ncwildlife.org/wildlife\\_species\\_con/wsc\\_land\\_program.htm](http://www.ncwildlife.org/wildlife_species_con/wsc_land_program.htm) or contact Brad Howard with the Wildlife Commission at (828) 294-2605.



**More people usually means fewer open spaces and less wildlife. The effects of human development and sprawl are far more permanent for wildlife than those left behind by any hurricane or oil spill.**

**Ann Berry Somers uses the Wildlife Conservation Land Program to assist her in the management of her wetland property that hosts numerous amphibians such as the tiger salamander. Wildlife Commission biologist Jeff Humphries has no problem locating wildlife on Somers' property.**

them identify if, in fact, they do have qualifying habitat.”

There are two ways landowners can qualify for the WCLP. The first is by conserving one or more of the wildlife habitat types listed in the Wildlife Habitat Conservation Agreement: bat cave, rock outcrop, small wetland community, stream and riparian zone, early successional or longleaf pine forest. The landowner must possess at least 20 adjoining acres of one of these types of habitat, or a combination of these habitats, to be eligible. Each category comes with specific requirements to be considered qualifying habitat. But they all have one thing in common.

“You have to be active in promoting and keeping up your habitat,” says Howard. “It’s not an idle land program. It’s an active management program.” Landowners applying for WCLP status must show that they have been actively managing that type of habitat for at least three years. With more than two decades of management history, Ron Little’s land was easily accepted into the WCLP.

“The process for me wasn’t any problem at all,” says Little. “I just had to fill out some papers, and [the biologist] put in the coordinates on his GPS and wrote down all the types of cover that we had. You can’t find any better people to deal with. They’re just willing to do what they can to help you.”

The second approach to qualifying for the WCLP entails land that protects at least one of the many wildlife species recorded as endangered, threatened or of special concern on the state’s list of protected wildlife species, such as the Northern flying squirrel, several species of bats and the red-cockaded woodpecker. “To our knowledge this is the first or one of the first programs like this in the country that actually recognizes nongame wildlife species and rewards the landowner for managing for nongame priority wildlife species,” Howard says. “For the first time, these animals actually have a value other than just the intrinsic value. Now these things actually have an economic value.”

Landowners must present three years’ worth of documentation, such as photos, to prove that the species maintains a stable existence on their property and that they are managing the required habitat. This can be the most difficult part of the process.

*Gathering Evidence* “One species that’s found here is called the mole salamander (*Ambystoma talpoideum*),” says Ann Berry Somers, as she takes a break from cutting down tree saplings. “My son and I collected the largest one ever found of the whole species in 1991, and that’s become a voucher specimen in the state museum. But

you can’t just have a record from 20 or 30 years ago. In order to qualify for the [WCLP], it has to be active habitat.”

When Somers and her husband first bought their property on the outskirts of Greensboro in 1980, one of the natural features she was most excited about was a low-lying area, about an acre in size, just below where they planned to build their home. A creek ran through the center of it, and it occasionally flooded. “I thought, ‘Oh, wouldn’t it make a good site for a pond,’” says Somers, who teaches conservation biology at UNC Greensboro. After examining the area, she recognized the biological significance of the wetland, which was home to multiple species of salamanders. Somers scrapped the pond and saved the salamanders.

Since then, overgrowth of the forest canopy has begun altering the wetland. Elms and sweet gums prevent sunlight from reaching the wetland floor, stunting the growth of smaller flora that the salamanders depend on. The trees also remove too much moisture from the soil. As a remedy, Somers began a selective elimination, picking out the most damaging trees and axing or girdling them.

To help offset the expense of a professional’s removing the larger trees, Somers decided to enroll the property in the WCLP. “The tax break is going to help me cover

that cost,” Somers says. “I’m not going to end up with more money, but I’ll end up with better habitat.”

In addition to the wetland, the salamanders need the surrounding upland forest, where they spend most of the year, to survive. With 1 acre of wetland and 20 acres of surrounding upland forest, Somers met the size requirement for the WCLP. She just had to provide a record of existence for the salamanders. Two of the species that live in Somers’s wetland—the mole salamander and the four-toed salamander, which Somers found in 2010—are listed as special concern species. “It’s hard when you’re dealing with such a cryptic species as we are here. To think you can just go out in a year and get a record, you can’t,” said Somers. “But we were able to this year, so that was very exciting.”

After eligibility has been confirmed by a Wildlife Commission representative, landowners are required to sign a Wildlife Habitat Conservation Agreement. Once that is complete, the role of the commission is essentially over. The landowner must present the agreement to the county tax office to complete the process. If a landowner fails to maintain the management strategy as spelled out in the Wildlife Habitat Conservation Agreement, then the county tax assessor will enforce noncompliance penalties.

“You have to stay in compliance with the rules of the program. If you don’t, then you’re going to have to pay three years of back taxes,” Howard says. “We stress to the landowners that if you’re going to do this, you better commit to do it.”

All indicators and statistical models consistently suggest that immigration to the Tar Heel State will continue at a record pace. And who can blame others for wanting to move here? But more people usually means fewer open spaces and less wildlife.

The effects of human development and sprawl are far more permanent for wildlife than those left behind by any hurricane or oil spill. There are no huge government agencies rushing in to remove housing developments and strip malls located on former wildlife habitats.

“We can’t stop it. We will never stop it. It’s the nature of our state, the nature of this country that we live in,” says Brad Howard. “But if we can allow some of the rural lands in this state to stay rural for just a little longer, that would be a very positive thing. I would like to leave some green space green for as long as we can. This program is attempting to do that.” ♦

*Shannon Farlow is a writer living in Asheboro. This is his first article for WINC.*

