



The Habitat Corner



OAK SAVANNAS – A RARE HABITAT RETURNS

By Michael McCord, TWRA Private Lands Biologist

Habitat management is often a compromise. What benefits one species will not benefit all species, and practices that increase one resource may reduce another. For example, clear cutting increases browse, berry production, and fawning and nesting cover all but eliminates acorn production on that site for at least two decades. You can, however, have both desirable grass and shrub habitat and hard mast production plus generate timber revenue by converting at least part of your forestland to savanna.

So what is a savanna? A savanna is a transitional state between grassland and forest. A lush understory of native grasses, forbs, and brambles provide nesting and brood cover for a variety of birds including wild turkeys, bobwhites, and many kinds of songbirds. Scattered mature nut-bearing trees comprising a canopy cover of 20 percent or less still provide good mast production.

Savannas historically developed from repeated wildfires set by Native Americans and from lightning strikes, which killed much of the forest overstory and subsequently maintained an early successional plant community. However, efforts to suppress fire during the last century have allowed most of our former savannas to revert to mature forest, and others have been cropped or converted to pastures of non-native grasses with little wildlife benefit. Oak savannas are now among the most imperiled ecosystems in the United States.

Grandview Partners operates a 557 acre tract for the Grandview Hunting and Fishing Club. In 2007, they began the process of creating a 100 acre oak savanna. The club's primary objective was to enhance the wildlife habitat and hunting opportunities on their property which is located in a landscape that is largely closed canopy forest.

"We purchased this property about 20 years ago so we would have a place in the country, isolated from development," says John Lyman, one of the original members. "The forester who prepared our stewardship plan originally recommended

clear cutting and replanting to pines, but about this time we learned about oak savannas and how good they can be for wildlife."

Grandview began to create their savanna through the Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP), and 100 acres of mature forest was selectively harvested. They cut everything but oaks, favoring white oaks over red oaks. After the initial cut, prescribed fire was used to stimulate the seedbank and

maintain a grass, forb and shrub community. "Until this point, we had focused on food plots, but properly used prescribed fire is much more economical," said John. Grandview also installed 19,000 feet of firebreaks to facilitate the burns. The savanna was first burned in spring of 2010 and again in 2012.

Grandview's savanna has benefited wildlife beyond the property's borders. "We have the only forest opening of this size on 12,000 acres," John explains. "Twenty years ago, the tract seemed fairly lifeless. Now we have great browse for deer, and great cover for turkeys to raise their young. Before we started burning, I think I may have seen three rabbits. Now they are everywhere, and we have more songbirds than ever."

If you have a lot of forested acres and you want to improve

them for wildlife, you might consider including a savanna. The ability to perform prescribed burns periodically is an important consideration in maintaining a savanna, and growing season burns may be necessary to effectively control returning saplings. If the savanna turns out not to be what you wanted, you can ignore it and the forest will return over time. Begin your planning by consulting your local forester and TWRA private lands biologist.

If you want to check out what an oak savanna looks like, visit the 3,100 acre restored savanna on the Catoosa WMA in Cumberland County.



"Helping Landowners and Wildlife Through Habitat Enhancement"

The Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency has Private Lands Biologists that will assist you in developing a management plan for your property and a strategy to implement it. See www.TWRAprivatelands.org for who to contact for technical assistance and other useful information on habitat management and programs.