



The Habitat Corner

WRP – A TENNESSEE HABITAT SUCCESS

by Mark Gudlin, TWRA Private Lands Liaison

In the Habitat Corner, we strive to feature habitat successes, along with useful suggestions for managing your land for wildlife and informing you of program opportunities and resources to assist you in your habitat efforts. Most segments to date have featured farm level habitat successes, for which there are numerous examples.

However, some private lands improvements are either fairly small in the “big picture,” or benefits may lessen over time as management follow-through dwindles, or habitat established under short term contracts are reverted back to production when profits to be gained by high crop prices – as we are experiencing right now – override a landowner’s desire for good wildlife cover. Thus, persistent habitat gains at the landscape level can be difficult to achieve, particularly for habitats such as native grasslands and shrublands.

The WRP, or Wetlands Reserve Program, however, is a great example of private lands habitat success in Tennessee. Under the program, administered by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) – Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), wetlands and bottomland hardwoods are restored on wetland soils and are then protected under permanent or long-term (typically 30-year) easements.

In exchange for the easements, the landowner is compensated a fair market price for the land and habitat restoration costs are covered (75 percent for 30-year contracts and 100 percent for permanent easements). The landowner still retains control of the land under restrictions as outlined in the easement, but the easement provides long term legal protection that the habitat restored will be secured.

While simply ponding water on land does not make a quality wetland, the sites restored were historically wetlands or bottomland hardwoods. Over time, much of the former natural community of native plants, invertebrates, and other plant and animal life return. In the short term, newly restored wetland areas quickly attract migrating wintering waterfowl and local populations of breeding wood ducks, and many common amphibians (frogs and toads) rapidly inhabit the sites.

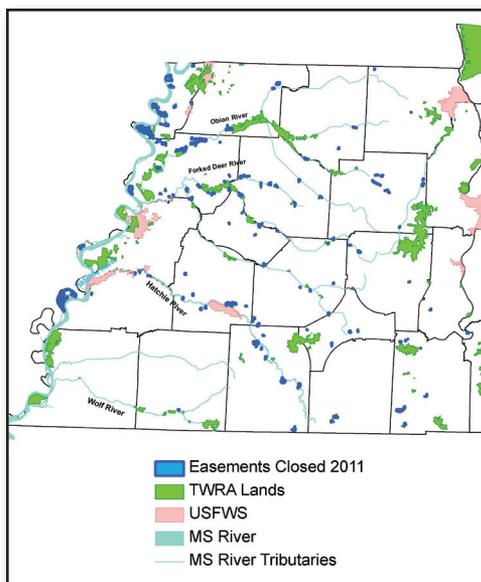
Restored WRP sites are also helping rare animal species return. In a recent two-year research project funded by NRCS

and The Nature Conservancy and conducted by Dr. Matthew Gray and graduate student Beth Summers from the University of Tennessee, declining species including the Swainson’s warbler, prairie warbler, green heron, barking treefrog, southern cricket frog, and the crawfish frog were documented on WRP lands. Decades of widespread removal of forested bottomlands

and wetland drainage had dramatically impacted these wildlife and the ecosystems they rely on.

While wetland soils are located across the state, the requirement for previously drained or altered wetland soils dictates that the bulk of eligible sites occur in West Tennessee. As displayed in the figure, the result over time is that WRP tracts (and some wetland easements under other programs) have helped “fill the gaps” between West Tennessee TWRA WMAs and refuges and U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service National Wildlife Refuges along the Obion, Forked Deer, and Hatchie river systems. Most of the public lands shown are wetlands or flooded areas managed for waterfowl and shorebirds. Since WRP

began in 1994, 37,547 acres have been enrolled in Tennessee. This is a great example of how properly targeted conservation programs, in concert with state and federal lands, can help restore and protect declining ecosystems and wildlife. Over 90 percent of Tennessee is private lands, and addressing private lands habitat is critical to our wildlife preservation efforts.



HABITAT OPPORTUNITIES

At the time of this writing, Congress is still deliberating legislation that will guide USDA conservation programs for the next five to six years. WRP may or may not be included in the next Farm Bill in its current form, but chances are that wetland restoration opportunities will continue. Contact your local USDA Service Center or TWRA private lands biologist (www.TWRPrivatelands.org) if you are interested in wetlands or other habitat restoration and management opportunities, and visit <http://www.tn.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/WRP/wrp-index.html> for more information on WRP.

“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.TWRPrivatelands.org for who to contact for technical assistance and other useful information on habitat management and programs.