

The Habitat Corner

Fall Burn Helps Yield Big Buck

By Chris Hunter, TWRA Wildlife Habitat Biologist

I received a call to visit with Charles Harding at his farm in Cottage Grove in Henry County. The farm consists of gently rolling hills surrounded by row crop, but his two open fields had been in the USDA Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) for more than a decade.

After speaking with Charles and looking over the farm, we came up with a plan for habitat management. The farm was more than satisfactory from a soil health standpoint but was in need of management when it came to wildlife habitat. The 25-acre CRP fields portion of the farm consisted of an estimated 75 percent native warm season grasses, 15 percent tree saplings and around 10 percent in forbs and legumes. Forbs are non-woody broadleaved, seed producing plants; legumes are a type of forb that fix nitrogen in the soil and can have very nutritious seeds. We came to the decision that a fall burn was needed to release some additional forbs, eradicate most of the tree saplings and thin the thick grasses so wildlife such as deer, turkey, quail and other grassland songbirds could better utilize the space.

The habitat planning led up to the day of the prescribed burn. We decided to meet at the farm in September to conduct the burn and were met by Charles Harding and his son, Chris. We had a wind from the south on the day of the burn, so we decided to begin on the north side. Recent research indicates that if you get tree saplings to around 130-135 degrees Fahrenheit, the cambium layer of the tree will pop and the tree, root and all will die. Usually a back-burn against the wind gives you a slower and more successful burn.

With the hot weather and great fuel load (grasses), everything seemed to be a success. After the burn, I met

with Charles and Chris for a debriefing to give them an idea of what to expect. I told Charles and Chris that you should have some good growth of the forbs and legumes before winter. I advised that with some good luck and the right weather, this could be a great place to hunt this fall because the deer and turkey would likely be out grazing on the luscious new growth.

Charles and Chris were excited about our discussions and really hoped the information I gave them would come to fruition. This farm had been in the family for decades and even though there had been several deer harvested from the property, they had not been much luck on mature whitetail bucks, so Chris and his family had been hunting across state lines in recent years.

Chris and his youngest daughter, Adrian, decided they would give the property a try on the first morning of the 2014 Tennessee youth hunt. They hunted from a ground blind positioned right out in the middle of the field. At this time, new growth was only a few inches high. Chris advised that there were deer all around as sunrise approached. Chris was more than happy to allow his daughter to take any deer, but Adrian was very patient and waited until a mature buck stepped out into the field with a doe. The deer was



Adrian Harding, with her big buck

harvested and not only became her first deer, but was also the largest buck ever harvested on the family farm.

Below is a direct quote from the Chris Harding:

"Thanks to you and the TWRA for your management practices and advice. The quality of the deer population in our area is improving."

"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.