

# Quarterly News Letter

## Fall 2011



Summer 2011 is on its way out and Texans could not be happier. We have had record drought and heat this year. Almost 70 days in Dallas with triple digit temperatures and almost 50 in a row at one point. I do not like heat and it cannot get over fast enough for me. The Texas dove season opens September 1<sup>st</sup> and most states we have clients in starts shortly after that. We hope this year brings you many enjoyable days afield with family and friends. I know I have several hunts lined up and am looking forward to each one, plus my son and I are in a new lease near Abilene, Texas we are excited about. Its too bad work gets in the way of hunting some times.

During my summer tour throughout the Southeast in July I worked, visited and fished with several of our outstanding clients and some of their Land Managers. It was very enjoyable and as always I greatly appreciate the hospitality. As always the highlight was working at Ochwalkee Creek Plantation with owner Jeff Lageman helping him get ready for the upcoming deer season and having our annual afternoon fishing and catfish fry. This year my partner Steve Lopez and James Schulte joined us and it was not a disappointment. The fishing was great and the fish tasted even better.

In August Southern Sportsman Aquatics & Land Management attended the Quality Deer Management Association's National Convention along with manning a booth at the Bass Pro Shops Land and Wildlife Expo in Nashville, Tennessee. It was very educational and enjoyable. I recommend if you are into managing deer and other critters on your own property this event is a great place to hear speakers and talk with folks to obtain ideas for your own place. I know I learned a lot myself and got to talk with many interesting folks. I want to give special thanks to clients Mr. & Mrs. Jim Fenton, owners of Doe Run Plantation in Sylvester, Georgia, for the opportunity to get to know them better.

## Aquatics

This quarter I want to talk about drought (since several of our states are experiencing it) and its effects on your water bodies and fish. Occasionally extreme drought (and flooding) is a good thing for waterbodies. Waterbodies that never fluctuate to extreme high and low experience many problems over the years including nutrient build up, vegetation and/or algae issues, and fish populations not reaching their full potential. One of the most famous non-fluctuating waterbodies I have seen first hand was Lake Okeechobee in South Florida, where it was managed for years by the US Army Corps of Engineers at



one level. It went from one of the world's best freshwater fishing lakes to a retention pond encompassing over 700 square miles due in part by no water level fluctuation. However that has changed and it now is allowed to fluctuate (not to historical levels due to flooding issues) which has helped it immensely regain its quality fishery status.

When drought occurs, the acreage and depth of the water body obviously is reduced. It will affect various species of fish and size classes of fish in different ways. As the water drops out of the shoreline habitat (littoral zone) forage fish become more vulnerable and top level predator fish benefit from the overabundance of forage and their ease to catch. If the drought is prolonged, the predators can eat all the forage sized for them and then go into a forage shortage situation. As the size and depth of lake decrease, stress can occur and the probability of bacteria, fungus and disease amongst individuals increases immensely due to overcrowding. Besides overcrowding (depending on the waterbody size and the current state of the fish population) water quality issues can arise from being too shallow, hotter than normal water temperatures, and low dissolved oxygen (DO) levels caused by overcrowding and organics (dead plant material and waste) requiring oxygen to decompose.

If the waterbody naturally has a planktonic algae bloom (green water) on it, the source of nutrients required to maintain the green water will determine if water clarity increases or decreases during a drought. Some lakes will get clearer due to lack of rain and reduction of nutrients entering the system with run-off and some will get a darker green because the nutrients are already present and are becoming more condensed as the water drops and acreage gets smaller. If water clears, submerged vegetation may become an issue, but also helps provide cover for small fish being displaced as water leaves the littoral zone. If water becomes greener, submerged vegetation present may get shaded out and leave smaller fish more exposed and easier to prey on. As the water gets shallower filamentous algae can become more prevalent and a nuisance. Generally during a drought, if water quality maintains itself, sportfish are easier to catch by hook & line, as they are more concentrated. On a private lake where harvest can be regulated this is no concern, but on public waterbodies over harvest can become an issue during a drought.

When drought occurs, spawning success and recruitment can affect and alter the current year class's representation in the population. If the drought is pre-spawn, the spawning activity can be reduced either by not spawning due to stress, poor water quality or adults of small species being consumed at a much higher rate by predators. If water rises back into the shoreline habitat just after hatching, those fry have a higher chance of survival with abundant food for them and hiding areas from predators. If the drought is pre-spawn and the water rises during spawning activity, fish may abandon their nests depending how fast the water rises and how deep the bedding area is. Also sediment washing in can have a negative affect on hatching success. Water rising too fast can also cause water quality issues, especially if a marsh like area is included in the flooding, as the flooding of dead marsh vegetation too quickly can cause local low DO issues. When drought occurs post spawning and hatching, depending how long the drought lasts, many individuals from one year class may not hatch due to poor water quality, be under nourished or be over preyed upon before water levels rise back into traditional shoreline habitat.

Most planned draw-downs are targeted for fall/winter. The air and water temperatures are cooler, DO is higher and runs deeper into the water column than during the summer, vegetation grows at a slower rate or not at all depending on how far north you are,

and fish feed less so while you are exposing the forage base, some will be consumed, probably more than usual, but not all of them so the year class is well represented in the future.

The exposed bottom may or may not begin to dry up, depending how low the water level gets and the type of sediment present. This drying is most beneficial if there are a lot of organics present. Shoreline plants that were not in the water will gradually begin to grow outward on the exposed bottom. When it re-floods these plants temporarily provide habitat for fish and depending on the plant and how long they were allowed to grow before re-flooded could provide food for waterfowl. Plants that were growing in the water and migrated with the waters edge are out from shore in deeper water once re-filled and may or may not survive the re-flooding, but if they do survive, they supply habitat that was probably not there prior to the drought.

Keeping the water level constant with a well is acceptable some years, but on occasions it should be allowed to go down naturally and rise with only Mother Nature's help. Keep in mind well water has no DO and probably a different water chemistry make-up than your waterbody and cycling to much during a drought can cause fish kills and you may not know it. Fish could die very slowly and you never see floating fish. Again, our opinion is the benefits of a drought every 15-25 years outweigh the short term setbacks of never allowing it to happen.

As you can see there are many things occurring during a drought in your pond or lake. Some good, some bad, but overall occasionally it is a very good thing to occur. If this happens too frequently then your fish population receives more harm than good and cannot reach its full potential.

## **Uplands**

I will continue with the theme above and discuss drought and its effects on your wildlife. Unlike a lake, drought rarely has positive effects on upland wildlife, but it does have for waterfowl, which I touched on briefly above. Drought affects different upland species in different ways. Depending on when the drought occurs, deer, turkey, quail and waterfowl are all affected differently including yearlings versus adults within the same species.

The most common question we receive is "How will the drought affect my whitetail deer and/or turkey?" Most areas of the southeast have enough physical areas for deer to obtain drinking water during a drought. The Southeast from East Texas to Florida is dotted with swamps/wetlands, farm ponds, springs, creeks and rivers that get low, but always have watering holes. But, these areas can become ambush sites for coyotes and even hunters. Most hunters and landowners regulate themselves and do not

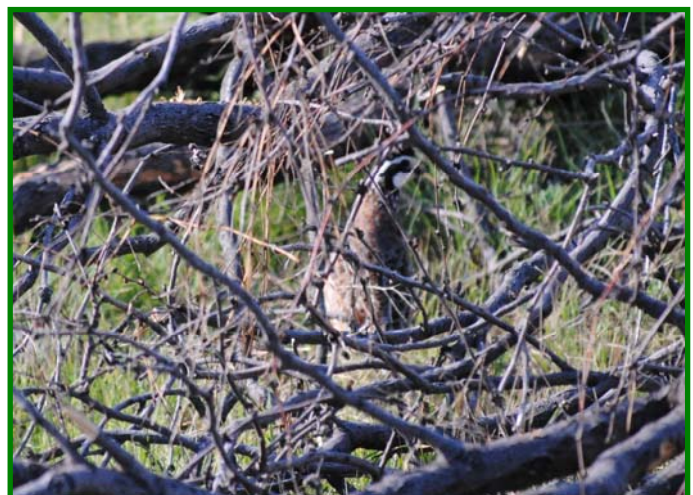




overharvest, but coyotes on fawns do not. Neighborhoods and golf courses with lakes are also spots where animals will begin frequenting if water is scarce. The lack of watering holes will reduce animal's home ranges, as a deer in order to digest food needs lots of small drinks of water, so not wandering to far away from a known safe watering hole is the norm. This abnormal congregating of deer at only a few watering holes can also accelerate the spread of any types of diseases, viruses, bacteria etc. It has been documented wild turkeys need to nest within  $\frac{1}{4}$ - $\frac{1}{2}$  mile from a water source.

A bigger concern is that there is very little quality food for antler growth and fawn survival during a drought. The last item on a buck's nutritional needs list is for antler growth. The first is to maintain health and weight, second is to build up excess fat for the rut and lastly is to grow big antlers. If there is a food shortfall, antler growth is the first item to suffer. If food is really scarce then fat reserves are not built and if food is nonexistent, maintaining their current weight and health starts to become the issue. This can cause a delayed affect by having bucks literally running themselves to death during the rut due to being under nourished. A drought can affect antler development for two years, the year of the occurrence, and the following year as the buck catches up with all his nutritional needs. If the drought occurs really early or carries over from the year before many fawns will not even be born if the mother is not receiving enough quality food. A nursing doe will stop nursing and abandon the fawn if she is not consuming enough food to maintain herself and generate milk. This equates to fewer deer in a year class and fewer bucks to reach maturity in the future.

In areas where center pivot farming takes place, there is less of an impact. We currently have a few clients that have sent us some trail camera pictures from this year where there is drought, but there are also big antlers. Why – because agriculture in the surrounding area (where center pivots/irrigation are common) is temporarily supporting the deer. Those who are lucky enough to have that situation enjoy it and consider yourself lucky! Texas is getting ready to experience one of the worst free range antler growing years in a long time as we have experienced both record heat and drought this summer throughout most of the state. Un-irrigated areas look like winter, and the drought is so extreme I have seen trees dying or that are already dead from drought, which indicates catastrophic.



Turkeys are greatly affected by drought, whether it is desire to breed is reduced, hatching success, seed production



for adult food and insects (that require live vegetation) for young birds to feed on. If drought comes early, plants do not have enough time to produce seeds for turkeys. If there is little vegetation (cover) for nesting or for young turkeys to hide predation on them becomes high from birds and mammals.

As we stated above, waterfowl can benefit from a drought, if the water rises in time for them to utilize it when they arrive during migration. This is predominately what moist soil management is, lowering the water so seeds can germinate grow and produce seeds before waterfowl arrive.

Without the drastic water fluctuation, the plant species make-up will change and no longer be desirable for waterfowl. This is also true in flooded timber. Generally ducks come for the acorns, but if the water does not recede annually, the oaks and others will die and the ducks will stop coming because there is no food present. If no food is present for waterfowl in entire regions, they continue to migrate farther. Drought does provide hunters with more concentrated birds during the hunting season as they have to be on or near water.

Another issue that affects wildlife during extreme drought is wildfires. These can be man induced or naturally. They can be started by sparks from farm implements such as a harrow clashing with a rock or by carelessly parking a tractor or vehicle in tall parched grass and grass catching fire from laying on a hot engine or exhaust. Naturally is caused by lightning strikes in pastures or amongst struggling or dead trees. These are much different than controlled burns, as wildfires can burn large sections of land (100,000 plus acres) leaving wildlife with no food or cover for miles. And during a drought, no vegetation may return for weeks after a fire, apposed to days if adequate moisture is in the soil or rains come.

## **Events of Interest**

The Forest Landowners Association (FLA) is hosting a Regional meeting in Live Oak, Florida with Special Guest Speaker and Ochwalkee Creek Plantation owner and manager Jeff Lageman. "Mark your calendar for the October 11 FLA meeting at the Coventry Conference Center near Live Oak, FL. The meeting will begin with an 8:30 registration and will adjourn around 4:00 p.m. Included on the agenda are topics on wildlife management, varietal pine and Eucalyptus, a forest markets report, update on state and federal policy issues, and lunchtime guest speaker and FLA member, Jeff Lageman. Jeff is former NFL player and current announcer for the Jacksonville Jaguars." I will actually be in Florida that day working, but if we get a bad weather day Steve and I will definitely be attending and we invite you to do the same.

To the see a full agenda and register: <http://forestla.affiniscap.com/cde.cfm?event=360601>

I encourage newsletter feedback and suggested topics, upcoming events that readers may be interested in attending and any of our clients with fish or game pictures to please submit to me via E-Mail or through our Blog and we can include them in the Quarterly News Letter and/or add them to the "Photos" page of the company web site. Also, if you are

inclined to write a short paragraph to be published on the "Testimonials" page of our web site, please do so, as I am always updating it and would like to have more of those up from our satisfied customers. In future editions of our news letter we are considering adding Landowner Profiles and Merchandise/Manufacturer Spotlight. All previous Quarterly News Letters and links of interest can be found at:

<http://www.southernsportsmanaquaticsandland.com>.

Southern Sportsman Aquatics & Land Management wants to remind you about our Lunker Fish & Bruiser Buck Programs. A commemorative plaque will be presented to landowners who experience an exceptional fish being caught from their waterbodies or whitetail deer harvested that we manage lakes and/or land on a regular basis. The landowner need not be the successful angler or hunter, but we do need a quality photo, date and time caught or harvested, the length, girth and weight of the fish or antler measurements of the deer. The categories for fish are bluegill, redear sunfish, black crappie, channel or blue catfish and largemouth bass. The size categories are as follows: largemouth bass  $\geq 25$ " or 10 lbs, channel or blue catfish  $\geq 33$ " or 20 lbs, bluegill  $\geq 10$ " or 0.75 lbs, redear sunfish  $\geq 11$ " or 1.0 lbs, warmouth  $\geq 10$ " or 0.75 lbs and black crappie  $\geq 14$ " or 2.0 lbs. Whitetail deer qualify if it scores  $\geq 140$ . Plaques will be presented to qualifying land owners during winter site visits for achievements the previous year. To date no one has submitted anything for 2011 and we know there have been some quality fish caught, so don't forget about this program.

If you are pleased with the services and products you receive from Southern Sportsman Aquatics & Land Management, please tell your friends and associates about us. The best compliment you can give us is a referral. We are always looking for additional clients from Texas to Florida. Our fall work schedule has some openings for electrofishing, but spring 2012 is almost full. If someone you know is interested in our services, they need to contact us sooner than later to assure their work gets scheduled this fall or they may have to wait a year for pond sampling to be conducted.

If you want us to order or bring feeders (parts), aeration/fountain (parts), build and deploy fish attractors, bird nesting boxes, etc. during fall site visits please contact us immediately so we can make all the necessary arrangements to get things done. It is also time for fall fish stockings. If you need them ordered, let us know and we will get them delivered, if available.

If you wish to be removed from this mailing list please E-Mail me and you will not receive these in the future.

***Scott G. Brown, Owner***