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Old-growth, Forestry, and Waterfowling

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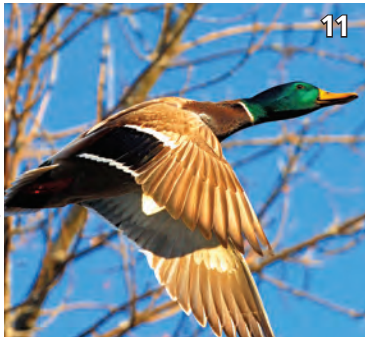

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MASSACHUSETTS WILDLIFE

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FEATURES

On the Cover: Forest Monarch: An old-growth Eastern hemlock, *Tsuga canadensis*, rises majestically above the forest floor on the upper slopes of Mt. Wachusett. Its deeply furrowed bark and heavy, gnarly, oft-broken upper limbs attest to the roughly 300 years of storm and wind events it has endured. The surviving green canopy, spreading horizontally, creates a vague resemblance to a head of broccoli, hence the reason "broccoli top" is often used as an indicator of old-growth trees. Captured digitally with a Nikon FX camera at 32mm on tripod, with slow-sync off-camera fill flash. Photo © Bill Byrne

The Working Forest & Hunters: A Symbiotic Relationship

by Tom Wansleben

"It's no coincidence that working woodlands have a number of factors that make them ideally suitable for those who hunt."

The logger's thick French Canadian accent made it difficult to understand if he was angry that I had walked onto his job site or excited just to see another person. But the moment he raised his hands up above his head with fingers splayed out, our failure to communicate ended abruptly; he was making the universal sign for a big whitetail buck! Now this logger was a master at forest charades because I could tell from his exuberant motions that he had seen this deer only moments ago. It was dumb luck that I happened to wander down his skid road. I was a 17-year-old kid who hadn't seen a deer all season, and now, knowing that a big buck was nearby, meant I had a chance of success no matter how small. The logger pointed me in the right direction and I was off.

That was close to 20 years ago and I never did get that buck. But that moment surfaces back into my mind every time I see a skidder, hear a chainsaw or sometimes even a French Canadian accent; a great memory all thanks to a logger and also a landowner who was engaged in forest management. I didn't realize it then, but I would come to appreciate how the many facets of forest management played an important role in my 20+ years of hunting and observing wildlife in New England.

Many of us take to the woods year round to scout, hunt, and hopefully harvest a variety of game species. Much of the land that we choose to hunt on has an owner who has provided us, as hunters, with an invaluable resource that is often

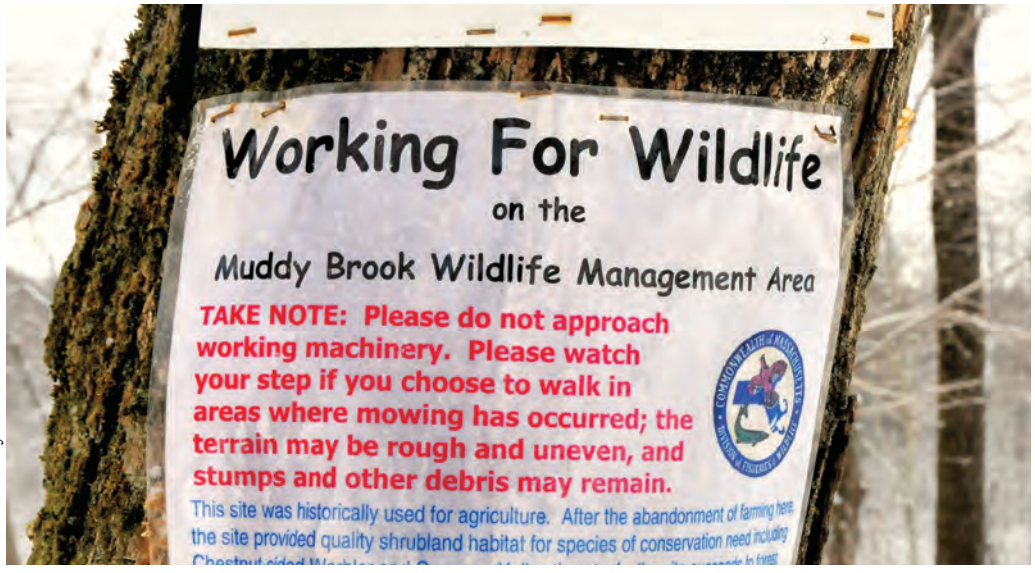

Photo © Bill Byrne

The Division of Fisheries and Wildlife conducts various timber harvesting operations on many of its properties to enhance wildlife habitat and improve public access.

overlooked and under-appreciated. When I look back at many of the lands I have hunted, my favorites in terms of abundance of game, aesthetics, and overall enjoyment are almost always working timberlands. It's no coincidence that working woodlands have a number of factors that make them ideally suitable for those who hunt. Let me give a few solid reasons why.

Let's start initially with something that is easily recognizable by most people: the woods roads and log landings. The roads include anything from a temporary skidder track to a maintained, permanent woods road on which you could drive a car. The log landing is a cleared area, anywhere from less than a ¼ acre up to 2 acres in size, where the cut trees are piled, processed, and then trucked off to the mill. A good forester lays out these roads in order to efficiently move machinery and harvested trees throughout the woodlot, and they can provide the same efficiency of travel for a hunter who needs to cover a lot of ground.

While rarely appreciated, woods roads created for logging operations (left) provide hunters with easy, efficient access, and wildlife (such as these wild turkeys) with travel lanes, insect-rich openings for feeding, and unobstructed views for strutting and other activities.

Photo © Bill Byrne

Taking advantage of the woods roads on the land you hunt can allow you to discover new remote hunting grounds, avoid other hunters (most of whom never hunt more than a mile from their cars), and can significantly cut the time spent hiking to and from your tree stand or blind. It can all add up to a few extra valuable minutes of sleep or help ensure you're home in time to pick up the kids. If you're like me and always running late, stepping foot on that woods road that leads back to your truck – especially as the light of day is quickly fading – is a big relief and confidence booster.

My deer scouting always begins with an examination of the local woods roads on the property I'm hunting. In the fall when the whitetail breeding season or rut kicks in, the first evidence I always come across is a fresh scrape line that always follows one of these woods roads. A whitetail buck paws the ground until it clears a small area of bare soil, then urinates on the spot. That's a scrape; it's how bucks mark their territory and communicate with other deer in the area. Deer utilize roads in much the same way as us: to move quickly and unobstructed through the woods. Examining this information can yield valuable insights into what stage of the breeding season the deer are in, which in turn can dictate where you may

want to set up your stand and maximize your hunting efforts.

Fast forward six months to the spring and the woods roads and landings are now covered in grass and other succulent greens that provide great foraging opportunities for those deer that made it through the winter. And just like in the fall when I am scouting for deer, these roads are the first place my spring turkey season scouting begins. Wild turkeys love to forage for insects in grassy woods roads and landings; these features also provide the occasional bare spot that turkeys cannot resist turning into a dust bath.

The unobstructed views provided within the roads and landings also offer ideal settings for the flamboyant toms (male turkeys) to puff up and "strut their stuff" in front of hens that utilize these locations on their daily travels. Here feathers, droppings, and tracks easily stick out, helping to answer the hunter's questions of where are they going and what are they doing. It's no coincidence that roads and landings provide some of the best setup spots for matching wits with a big spring gobbler. Knowing this info on the parcel you hunt can mean the difference between a good hunting season and a great hunting season.

One of many examples of how a woods road created for forest management purposes helped me initiate a perfect hunt occurred this past fall. I was scouting some unfamiliar but promising looking wetlands one morning, and watched as numerous flocks of ducks flew in to feed at the distant, shallow end of this particular marsh. I knew that's where I had to be in the morning. Normally I would have used my kayak, but this was going to be a long paddle, in new territory, in the dark: Experience told me it was going to take a lot of time.

Being a field biologist, I knew that I should at least look at an aerial photo map to see if a more efficient access alternative could be located. You guessed it; there was a woods road that would bring me within walking distance of all those ducks. I immediately went to task and got permission from the landowner to use the road. Although I was only allowed foot access, it saved me over an hour of time, and because I had to hike to the spot, I was provided with the fun challenge of picking out a light yet effective decoy setup. In the end I was treated to a spectacular waterfowl hunting experience; all thanks to a woods road that was created for forestry purposes.

Now not all roads and landings are created equal. A poorly constructed road can quickly become a creek during heavy rain events, resulting in significant rutting, erosion, and the carrying of sediments and pollutants into streams and wetlands. Most people don't realize this, but the primary cause of erosion in timber harvesting operations is not from the loss of tree cover, but from poorly planned roads that did not incorporate Best Management Practices (BMPs). The state Department of Conservation & Recreation (DCR) has recently revised its Forestry Best Management Practices Manual. The manual presents solid advice and regulations that protect soil and water resources during forestry operations.

Why does this matter to wildlife? Well, an eroded road doesn't grow the grass and other greens on which deer and turkeys like to forage, plus it pollutes the seeps from which they often drink. BMPs also encourage buffer strips of intact forest bordering streams and other wetlands in order trap and prevent sediment from entering these vulnerable habitats. These buffer areas provide the thick cover and subsequent terrain that naturally funnel deer and other game, offering perfect spots to set up tree stands or ground blinds.

The roads and landings for the most part are an aspect of forestry that we can easily recognize on the ground, but one thing many of us often don't recognize or pick up on in the woods is the actual forest management practices that have taken place and how those actions have benefited the health and well-being of both game and non-game wildlife that inhabits the property and beyond. In the simplest sense, foresters manipulate light levels through the harvesting of trees to either enhance the growth of existing trees or to allow for successful regener-

A buck rub in the foreground hints at the relationship between deer and logging. Bucks typically make their rubs and scrapes along woods roads, and all deer will readily forage on felled treetops whenever that resource is available.

In the decade or so following a major forest cut, a dense profusion of young growth provides abundant browse for moose and deer, as well as essential habitat for young-forest species such as ruffed grouse and New England cottontail.

ation of new trees. For example, timber stand improvement and crop tree release practices that encourage the growth of big healthy trees such as oak and hickory also enhance the ability of these trees to create an abundant mast crop (acorns and hickory nuts). And just like lots of humans, lots of wildlife loves mixed nuts. Abundant food resources like these can carry wildlife through the lean winter months or the rigors of migration, which in turn can help to maintain healthy populations and improve hunting and wildlife viewing opportunities. Large trees also provide critical den and nesting sites for species such as gray squirrel, wood duck, fisher, raccoon, and barred owl.

The winter of 2011-2012 offered a perfect example of how management for big healthy trees can impact hunting opportunities. That winter it was pretty much snowless in my neck of the woods, but the preceding fall there was an abundant crop of acorns and beech nuts. While scouting for turkeys the following spring, I was initially having trouble locating them in the green fields. What I soon discovered was that they were sticking to the woods – and for good reason: The area I was hunting was a professionally managed woodlot in which one particular forest stand was dominated by mature red oaks that had dropped so many acorns the previous fall that the turkeys had been feeding in there all winter long!

While my hunting buddies complained that they weren't seeing as many turkeys in the fields, I already had a bird in the freezer. There were so many turkeys that I directed my neighbor to this same location where his 14 year old grandson harvested a huge tom turkey on Mother's Day. If that property hadn't been under the management of a good forester those oaks probably would have been long gone, and with them the critical

food source that not only the turkeys needed, but other wildlife as well. But the greatest loss would have been the memories of that young hunter and future conservationist who was feeling on top of the world because a forester managed a great stand of healthy oaks.

Over the years many of our woodlands have suffered from high-grade harvesting. "High grading" is the cutting of all the largest, most commercially valuable trees for maximum, one-time profit, leaving only poorly formed, low value trees behind. It is an unsustainable practice that results in forest habitats that are left impoverished in terms of both commercial and wildlife values. Professional forestry, in contrast, typically promotes healthy trees of all sizes and species that in turn provide abundant food resources and habitat for wildlife; the option for the landowner to conduct regular, sustainable, and profitable timber harvests; and very good hunting opportunities. Obtaining the assistance of a professional licensed forester is the best way to ensure the health of your woodlot and the wildlife we all enjoy seeing and hunting. To find a licensed forester and other natural resource professionals in your area visit the UMass Forest Conservation Program website at ***www.masswoods.net***.

Photo © Bill Byrne

Timber harvest aimed at tree regeneration such as group selection harvests and clear cuts (and yes, under professional guidance clear cuts are very acceptable) can create the dense patches of shrubs, forbs, and saplings on which moose, deer, and upland game such as ruffed grouse, rabbits, and other early successional species thrive. During one of my not so proudest moments in the woods I once had to retreat hastily from a vicious female ruffed grouse that was hell bent at keeping me away from the five chicks she had recently fledged. Now granted this was no ordinary woods chicken, but from my view (other than looking for a path of retreat!) what really helped these young birds from egg to full flight was more than an overprotective mother, it was the ideal habitat created through professional forestry.

Here's how that ideal habitat was created: The forester had conducted a group selection harvest. Under this management practice, all the trees in groups or patches of ½-2 acres are cut, leaving uncut patches in between. Five years later, an immense amount of dense tree regeneration grows within the harvested sections. These stem-dense habitats provide the food and cover that grouse and a plethora of other wildlife species from songbirds to native bees benefit. Anyone who hunts upland birds like grouse and woodcock knows that active forest management is crucial for creating this habitat.

Timber harvests, especially in the winter where the treetops and branches (or "slash") is left on the ground, provide a cornucopia of tops and fresh branches on which deer and moose capitalize. Talk to any logger and they will tell you that the sound of a chainsaw is like the dinner bell to deer in the winter. Two winters ago I was inspecting a timber harvest that had recently been completed on one of the properties I manage. The harvest was an intermediate thinning with most of the trees cut being of firewood quality. The machinery used in this instance left all the treetops and limbs on site.

A recent snowfall had just blanketed the ground in a white carpet, and as I looked around I saw deer tracks everywhere. I even saw four does that day. Now I had been on this piece of land quite often and occasionally I would see some deer sign, but nothing to the extent that I witnessed that day. These deer were coming for the young, nutritious branches and buds left as slash, a feast that was normally out of reach 40 feet in the air, but through the result of timber harvesting was now an all you can eat buffet.

As a natural resource manager, I know that overabundant deer populations are causing ecological havoc in some areas. I've seen abundantly sprouting oak saplings entirely eliminated as they became fodder for a local, high-density deer herd that seemed to have eaten every single shoot in the area except for the beech. This is where the symbiotic relationship between hunter and forest landowner begins.

A symbiotic relationship is one in which both members of the relationship benefit from their association. The landowner who has a professionally managed woodlot provides a place to hunt, access through infrastructure, and abundant wildlife through his forest management. The hunter assists the landowner by helping to control the size (or more specif-

ically, the density) of the local deer herd, which in turn helps promote successful timber regeneration and lessens the foraging impacts of deer on other native plants. Hunters obtain the opportunity to enjoy healthy outdoor recreation and superb, entirely natural, organic meat, while the landowner obtains assistance to help keep the local deer herd in balance and protect the future timber potential of his forest; a real win-win. Just as forested lands provide critical ecosystem services for people (e.g., clean air, clean water, carbon storage), the small percentage of people who hunt provide a critical service to the forest by helping keep deer numbers at a level the woods can tolerate.

But the best relationship concerned hunters can have with our forest landowners and good forestry is not so apparent, yet extremely important. We often take for granted that someone else has to pay the taxes and pay for the management of the land we hunt on, yet there are ways we can help. We as hunters and users of private land need to support and promote federal, state, and local programs that provide technical and financial assistance to private landowners to help them obtain professional forestry assistance so they can grow healthy trees and create high quality wildlife habitat. We also need to support and maintain our forest products industry, which includes sawmills and loggers; after all, you need people who can cut and process the wood. And finally we need to support efforts to keep working forestlands around forever through conservation easements and other land protection efforts. It is critical that we support a sustainable wood products industry as hunters and non-hunters alike. In a world that is becoming more urbanized with more people who neither understand forestry nor hunting, it's imperative for all of us to realize how much we depend on working forests for the many great experiences we've had, either missing a perfect shot at a ruffed grouse, tracking the monster buck of a lifetime, or introducing your child to the great outdoors. After all, working forests are a local, sustainable resource that's good for people, good for wildlife, and great for hunting.

Tom Wansleben lives in Keene, NH and is the Stewardship Biologist at Mount Grace Land Conservation Trust in Athol MA. In addition to having oversight on 5000 acres of private conservation restriction property, Tom manages over 1400 acres of land for multiple uses including forestry, wildlife habitat and public recreation. He is a natural resource management professional with a Bachelor's degree in Natural Sciences and a Master's in Conservation Biology; and is also a professional member of the Forest Guild. When he's not creating wildlife habitat or planning the next timber harvest, Tom is passionate about being outdoors feeding healthy addictions like waterfowl, turkey and deer hunting along with fly fishing any chance he can.

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