

# Cooperative Restoration

## A Success at Percy Priest Wildlife Management Area

By Paul E. Moore

It has the potential to be a world class facility for field trialers. At least that's the sentiment of those immersed in the ongoing rebuilding project at Percy Priest Wildlife Management Area (WMA) in Tennessee. A major renovation project at Percy Priest WMA over the past three years is reversing years of neglect and rebuilding Unit 1 which comprises around 1200 acres. The project is a cooperative effort between the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency (TWRA) and the Tennessee Field Trial Association. Along with an intern program from the University of Tennessee at Martin and help from others, the field trial facility at Percy Priest is gaining attention and may be destined to be one of the best in the nation.

Percy Priest WMA fell on hard times during the 1990s when a lack of funding and cutbacks forced the loss of an area manager. It didn't take long for the area to degrade. With no supervision and little maintenance, the area was headed toward total demise.

Fields, hedgerows, and other areas grew up into

impenetrable thickets. Roads deteriorated into quagmires of mud and potholes. Ditches became overgrown and littered. Trees grew alongside the roads to the point vehicles could not meet without scraping tree limbs as they passed. The landscape became littered with all manner of refuse. The lack of a security presence led to the dumping of truckloads of garbage, trash, stoves, mattresses, and more. There was rampant poaching of deer and turkey.

The individual clubs tried to do what they could. Mainly, they did what maintenance was needed to hold their individual events. However, there were always conflicts because one group wanted one thing and another group wanted something different.

"They weren't accomplishing a common goal," says Tim Aston who is a TWRA Wildlife Officer and an avid field trialer himself.

Around 2001, Aston was approached by a few old timers with questions on what could be done to save Percy Priest. Aston says, "They asked for some help getting a program started so they could reclaim

a lot of the land that had grown up into thickets and was not usable." This initial conversation launched what would soon become a huge success story and a win-win situation for all involved.

Aston and TWRA Lands Management Biologist Russ Skoglund began working on a plan to implement some part-work at the WMA. They were able to establish an intern

*Percy Priest WMA hosts numerous field events for a all types of outdoor endeavors.*



program through the University of Tennessee at Martin which would provide a student to work on the Percy Priest project and allow him or her to receive college credit while doing so. Much of the funding for the intern program is provided from monies donated by the Tennessee Field Trial Association and the individual field trial clubs. The remainder of the cost is picked up by the TWRA. This way, the management goals can be met at the WMA without the TWRA bearing the full burden of the cost.

The intern is picked from students who are seeking a career in wildlife management. This program allows the intern to work within his or her chosen field and get some hands-on experience while still in college. It also provides additional benefits for both the student and the TWRA.

The intern will be job-seeking after leaving college. Participating in this program allows the intern to learn about the programs and methods of the TWRA and also meet and work with the personnel at the agency. The TWRA also gets a long look at students who may be potential full-time employees in the future.

A variety of duties are assigned to the intern at the WMA. Habitat management is performed such as bush-hogging and planting food plots. The intern also does maintenance on gates and buildings along with a variety of other chores. Because the TWRA helps fund the intern program, they have the opportunity to expand the duties of the intern and better utilize the program. This gives the student more experience at the same time. Interns may help with projects away from Percy Priest such as goose



banding and relocation or working with the fisheries people.

Once Russ Skoglund and Steve Patrick, the Region 2 Regional Manager, saw the program was working, they began opening up contracts so sharecroppers could come in and plant row crops at the WMA in areas that were suitable. This solved some problems and created others.

The farmers cleaned the row crop areas using mowing and herbicides. This removed a lot of the blackberry thickets and overgrown areas. While this made a good situation for the bird dog people, it created some problems for the rabbit dog owners. A management plan was then developed which would try to meet the needs of all concerned groups. Certain fields would be set aside for sharecropping and would be available for anyone's use. These areas were preferred by the bird dog and retriever clans. Other areas were set aside and not manipulated and were designated for use by the rabbit dog enthusiasts.

A grounds maintenance committee was established to provide direction for maintenance and recovery at Percy Priest. Each club appoints two members to represent them on the committee. Aston is the chairman of this group and admits it's been a challenge. He says, "We've gone through some

growing pains coming up with a very workable program that will satisfy the needs of this very diverse group of individuals. With this many clubs and this many different breeds of dogs – the diversity of the habitat is quite extensive.”

The committee has worked out most of the major problems according to Aston. Annual meetings allow the exchange of ideas and help form a management plan. Then the committee makes recommendations to the TWRA regarding what they would like to see done at Percy Priest.

Many thousands of dollars are being donated by the Tennessee Field Trial Association and the individual clubs which make up the organization. Donations also have been made by individuals, businesses, and corporate sponsors. These funds are earmarked and allocated for either the intern program or for grounds maintenance at Percy Priest WMA



and nowhere else. This money goes directly into the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Foundation and is allocated from there.

Much has been accomplished during the first years of this program. In addition to the sharecropping, trees have been trimmed away from the roads, ditches have been cleaned, and gravel has been added to the roads. Trash has been cleared and gates have been mended. Three barns and a clubhouse have been constructed. Poaching has been curtailed tremendously. Still, there is a lot to do.

The roads need much more work. There are miles of roads at the area which are a constant challenge to build and maintain. Bringing in heavy road equipment and putting down gravel is a major expense and huge investment in labor. Additionally, Aston says there may be some work done with the Corps of Engineers to construct more ponds in the area. The



continued maintenance and intern program is ongoing as well.

Percy Priest WMA is highly valued by field trial participants and is well-used. Aston says, "The number of people who utilize the area is astounding. There is an event scheduled every weekend on Percy Priest from the end of September through the end of June. People are also out there through the week training their dogs if there are no events scheduled." Events ranging from individual club functions to national championships are being held there regularly.

The facility is very nice with the aforementioned clubhouse and barns. The clubhouse allows a meeting place for the clubs and also provides an educational facility to bring in guest speakers and professional dog trainers for seminars and other programs. There are also a series of kennels and a limited number of RV hookups for overnight participants.

This project has had the residual effect of benefiting many others outside of the field trials. The field trial events provide a huge economic contribution to the area surrounding Percy Priest. With hundreds of participants coming into the area, local motels, restaurants, stores, gas stations, and other businesses have reaped the dividends. The field trial events are a boost to communities such as La Vergne, Smyrna, Murfreesboro, and others.

Aston is very passionate about the field trial association and events held at Percy Priest. He says there is a common bond between all the clubs and it provides a "good wholesome family atmosphere."

Aston believes Percy Priest has the potential to become "world-class." He says it has the natural geographic lay of the land and diversity of fields, ponds, hedgerows, and thickets to make it so. It's a great piece of clay with which to work and now it has the funds and personnel to mold it.

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