

The Bobwhite Bulletin

2022 Edition

Virginia Quail and Early-Succession Species Recovery Team

December 2022



By Marc Puckett, Dept. of Wildlife Resources

Annual Report

It's been a productive but hectic year. As we all began to function beyond COVID, and get back to whatever passes for normal now, we had to knock the rust off old skills...like meeting in person and giving live talks. I doubt things will ever be completely like they were before, as there are some aspects of remote meetings that we can continue to benefit from. With gas prices as high as they are, having team members or constituents drive hours to an in-person meeting may not always be wise. But, from time to time there is no substitute for meeting face to face. And landowner site visits can't be done remotely. Our team never stopped doing in-person site visits throughout COVID. We simply adapted, followed safety protocols, and got on with our mission.

Our team has undergone changes in personnel again this year. As in nature, change is constant in our business. As are adaptability and getting the job done however it has to get done. We said goodbye to Quail Forever farm bill biologist Tyler Newton who is now a Department of Forestry Forester working in his home stomping grounds – Mecklenburg and Brunswick Counties. And we recently said goodbye to private lands biologist Tiffany Beachy – for the second time for a few of us Oldtimers who worked with her when she was here first 12 years ago. She left to pursue her calling as a minister... heading to Papua New Guinea to follow her calling and passion. We thank both of these great people for giving our team and Virginia's private landowners a year of hard work.

One thing we have failed to do after all these years is to see all our private lands positions become permanent staff of our agency, or of a partner agency. Though their hard work is recognized as being important, and they have represented us well, it has proven difficult when budgets and allocations of agency positions, which are set to a maximum level by powers above us, to solidify the positions as permanent. Hence, we will continue to have a higher turn over rate than

we'd like. I plan to continue trying to see these positions become permanent until I retire.

I'll end by saying "Job well done!" to one of our key long term team members, project co-leader Jay Howell. Jay has been with our team since 2009 and has brought more to the table than I can list here. His intelligence, insights and skills have given our us a level of ability we would never have had without him. And his sense of humor, levelheadedness and good nature make him a great teammate and friend, too. Jay received the National Bobwhite and Grasslands Initiative's Chuck Kowaleski Leadership Award for 2021. This recognition was bestowed on him for his tireless efforts in leading the NBGI's Coordinated Implementation Program. The CIP is essentially the largest multi-state quail recovery and monitoring program ever undertaken, with nearly all the NBGI's twenty-five states involved. Jay insured that Virginia was one of seven pilot states...over ten years ago. And he led or helped lead just about every aspect of the program since day one. Conducting numerous CIP workshops, serving as chair of the NBGI's Science subcommittee, helping design monitoring protocols, habitat analysis methods and essentially being a part of every aspect of the CIP, Jay demonstrated that true leadership involves vision, knowledge, humility, dignity, dedicated hard work and perseverance, far more so than any other traits. Congratulations to Jay!



Project Co-Leader, Jay Howell

In this issue...

- Annual progress report
- Meet new team members
- Hear from Private Lands Biologists



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By the numbers....

Fiscal Year	Site Visits	New Contacts	Management plans	Acres of Managed habitat	Total Farm Acres Owned
2010	251	235	104	1,168	21,080
2011	540	406	270	5,354	81,972
2012	429	397	295	5,145	32,955
2013	454	164	300	5,649	41,160
2014	375	196	229	7,844	51,843
2015	503	283	395	1,751	65,650
2016	429	202	308	6,979	65,804
2017	568	281	298	2,012	63,099
2018	625	310	270	4,344	47,700
2019	508	236	214	2,268	39,156
2020	337	220	178	4,827	31,150
2021	321	120	159	3,332	7,654
2022	420	320	176	2,732	15,500
Totals	5,760	3,370	3,196	53,405	564,723



Our team in Fall 2021 with retired NRCS DC and landowner Mike Jones at his farm on the falls of the Nottoway. (Photo by Pat Jones)

Meet the “New” Team Members!



By Jordan Rabon, PLB for Southcentral Piedmont

Hello readers! My name is Jordan Rabon and I am the recently hired Private Lands Biologist stationed in the Farmville USDA office. I will be covering several counties in the southern Piedmont area, from Henry County east to Brunswick and north to Goochland. I started in Farmville September 19th, 2022 and have already met several

landowners and discussed management options they can incorporate on their property to benefit wildlife. I am one of two PLBs in Virginia employed through Quail Forever; Celia Vuocolo is my co-worker covering the Northeast part of the state. However, I will be visiting and collaborating with the other PLBs across the state to soak up their expertise and wisdom on delivering successful conservation in Virginia.

I grew up in Gales Ferry, CT. Though I had not been raised in a fishing and hunting family, I embraced these recreational activities while completing my undergraduate degree. Today, I have been an avid hunter of upland game for the past 10 years and each year I cannot wait for the fall hunting season so I can get in the woods, explore new areas, and try to bag a few birds and rabbits. Throughout my wildlife career, I have hunted several gamebird species including Sharp-tailed Grouse, Dusky and Sooty Grouse, Ruffed Grouse, Chukar, California Quail, and Merriam's and Rio Grande Wild Turkeys, just to name a few species. I look forward to exploring the public lands in Virginia from the mountains to the coast and finding good hunting areas.

Rabon... continued on pg. 6



By Elizabeth Elliott, NRCS Natural Resources Specialist Area 1

From the prairies of Oklahoma to the mountains of Virginia!

In September 2021, I moved from Oklahoma to Virginia. Eastern OK had been my home for 3 years as I worked as a farm bill biologist. I left behind a landscape of Tall Grass Prairies where a culture of

fire still exists on a large scale. I was saying goodbye to large cattle ranches and open skies.

I was off on a new adventure to the Shenandoah Valley of the Blue Ridge Mountains. What I found when I arrived in my new home was rolling mountains and wide valleys. A quilted landscape of farms, forest, and towns. Farms where corn grows with a Mountain View. Trees too numerous to count and roads not mapped on a grid.

Within my new landscape familiarity began to emerge. Big Bluestem, Indiangrass, New England Aster, Mistflower, Monarchs, Catbirds, Wild Turkey, and the Bob White! People's passion for wildlife habitat management on their property remained the same. Landowners desire to provide a home for the species that live on their land and to leave their property better for the next generation!

While I miss the Midwest I love being on the East Coast. I get to explore so many different environments and work with amazing people!



Grasslands from Osage County, Oklahoma (left) and Madison County, Virginia (right). (Photos by Elizabeth Elliott)

Highlights from the Private Lands Biologists



By Andy Rosenberger, Senior PLB Southwest Virginia

In Search of the Perfect Habitat

What specifically is the perfect habitat? Habitat is the natural environment of an animal. More specifically habitat management (what most of us are seeking to do) is identifying the elements that a specific species requires and manipulating those

elements to improve the habitat so limiting factors are improved to the point that the population of a targeted species grows.

Regardless of what type of land management project you intend to implement, many have a hard time getting past the overwhelming aspect of the task at hand. They are overly concerned with creating the perfect project. My advice, stop! Stop worrying about everything that needs to be done. Stop worrying about if you will have enough time. Stop worrying about if this is the perfect location. Stop worrying if invasives will take over. Stop worrying!

We have all heard the adage "Q. How do you eat and elephant? A. One Bite at a time". Don't allow paralysis through analysis. Go spray the fescue. Go treat the ailanthus. Go disk the brood habitat. Go prep the fire line. Go implement some Timber Stand Improvement (see the sidebar on pg. X)

I am not suggesting that you throw caution to the wind and completely forget about planning. There should always be time set aside for planning. Work with your local Private Lands Biologist (PLB) and review that plan. Get their thoughts of potential issues to consider (See the article in this issue written by PLB Bob Glennon). Discuss your concerns and evaluate potential hurdles. With habitat management we seldom can predict the result with 100% accuracy. Every piece of land and its prior management are different. This means every result after implementing change is different.

In wildlife management we deal with predictive results as opposed to hard results. In math, every time we add $2 + 2$ the answer is always 4. In wildlife management we can predict the outcome, but the answer is never as definitive as 4. There are always surprises; sometimes for the better like a new desirable species that shows up after prescribed fire (see the pictures below), sometimes for the worse like Johnson grass dominating a newly herbicided fescue patch. Even if some of these unpredicted issues arise, chances are the land/habitat is better than doing nothing.

For those that are past the first year of implementation you have likely realized nothing is one and done. Everything we do to manipulate the land requires maintenance and upkeep. Since we know nothing is static, we understand and plan for future manipulation. Take the hurdles as they arise and just incorporate them in your future maintenance instead of allowing them to prevent you from beginning. What is important is that you take that first bite.



Partridge pea that showed up for free after burning (photos by Jon Cooper)

Did you know that there is a concern for the future of our oak forests? For a variety of reasons, oak trees are not growing in the understory of many oak-dominated forests, but other trees are. The oak dominated forests exist today because of land management activities that were practiced around the time they started growing, and the common land management activities have changed. To have healthy, oak dominated forests again, we must intentionally manage hardwood forests to create the conditions for oaks to regenerate.

This spring look for more information from the Virginia Department of Forestry (VDOF) for assistance with improving your future oak forest. DOF will assist landowners in identifying hardwood management practices that will promote oaks via Virginia's Hardwood Forest Habitat Initiative. The Initiative seeks to increase active management of hardwood forests to improve quality of future oak forest. The following practices are being promoted by VDOF as being most successful at managing hardwoods:

1. *Stand Assessment
2. *Competition Control / Invasive species control
3. *Prescribed burning
4. *Timber Stand Improvement
5. *Stand Marking
6. *Crop Tree Release
7. Thinning
8. Shelterwood
9. Periodic Partial Harvest
10. Silvicultural Clearcut
11. *Liberation

* Denotes part of Hardwood Habitat Incentive Program



Nesting bobwhite—(Photo by Lynda Richardson)

Rabon... continued from pg. 3

I graduated in 2012 from the University of Connecticut where I majored in Natural Resources and the Environment with a concentration in Fisheries and Wildlife Management. In the following winter, I was hired as a seasonal field technician for a quail research project in Beaver County, Oklahoma. I assisted trapping, radio-collaring, and tracking Northern Bobwhite and Scaled Quail. I also conducted whistle count surveys, habitat surveys, and monitored nests and broods. After the position ended in Oklahoma, I spent a few years as a seasonal field technician on other research projects in various states in the Mid-west and East Coast. I assisted with captures and collection of ecological data on other gamebird species, like ruffed grouse, prairie-chickens, wild turkeys, and spruce grouse. In January 2017, I started a Master's degree program at the University of Idaho where I conducted research on Greater Sage-grouse. My thesis compared habitat preferences during the brood-rearing season between hens raising a brood and hens not raising a brood, and how habitat characteristics influence stress levels in hens. I defended my thesis December 2019 and by October 2021 both of my thesis chapters were published, along with two scientific notes documenting unique observations in sage-grouse ecology.

In June 2021 I started work as a partner with NRCS in southwestern North Dakota where I primarily worked with the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). I designed pollinator habitats, diverse tree plantings, and educated a few producers in managing their CRP fields for wildlife, specifically for Ring-necked Pheasants. After getting a much better understanding of USDA programs and conservation practices, I wanted to get back to the east coast and be closer to my family but still help landowners provide high quality habitat for wildlife. The Private Lands Biologist with Quail Forever in Virginia fit my career and personal goals. I am excited to be here and part of the Southeast Quail Forever team and Virginia's Private Lands Biologist team.



By Bob Glennon, Senior PLB for Southeastern Virginia

Cost of Making Assumptions and Failing to Conduct Follow-up

I started in the conservation field more than 40 years ago at a time when we addressed a wide range of challenges: cropland erosion, irrigation water management,

animal waste utilization, stabilization of critically eroding areas, forest management, wildlife habitat development, and the conversion of cool season pastures and hayfields to native warm season grasses. More importantly we had clerical staff to type up our custom-written conservation plans and a different agency to handle financial assistance. So were free to and expected to conduct comprehensive reviews of the property of landowners, help them decide on appropriate conservation practices, and MOST IMPORTANTLY follow up on those practices after they were installed.

All of the current private lands biologists are challenged to determine how to convert non-native vegetative cover to native grasses and/or wildflowers for forage production, wildlife habitat, and pollinator habitat. Some of us have predominantly cool season plants to control, some of us have predominantly warm season plants to control, and some of us have combinations of cool and warm season plants to control. Sometimes the non-native stands are managed forages and sometimes they are fallow fields with diverse mixtures of plants. We seldom have a crop field that appears to have had excellent weed control.

The stands with non-native cover to control often require different herbicides to control the warm season grasses, warm season broadleaf plants, cool season grasses, and cool season broadleaf plants AND tillage AND smother crops. It often requires two growing seasons to prepare an area for a

seeding of native plants. Over the last 11 years, I've had good the fortune to get those weeds controlled before seeding the native species and have had the time to follow up on a regular basis and recommend control measures for the weeds that appeared.

This year I had two large seedings for the Conservation Reserve Program. Both seedings were being sown by contractors with native no-till drills into crop fields that appeared to be weed-free. The seedings were in counties where I do not have a heavy workload. I was pre-occupied with revolving applications, planning, and contracting in other counties and failed to follow up early and often as I should have done. Both fields were dominated by weeds by the time I saw them and the weeds were too mature to control with herbicides. I must hope that the landowners can get the herbicides applied early next growing season when the weeds are susceptible to the herbicides. These are both seedings that cost \$300 per acre for the seed and the landowners are in 10-year contracts that require them to have each of the seeded species present in the stands for the entire 10-year term.

The continuing challenge for every seeding is the control of woody plants. Many seedings are on the edges of fields and the entire area is subject to invasion by light-seeded tree species that are disseminated by trees in the adjacent forests. Larger whole-field seedings will have invasion of those species around the edges of the fields. Although prescribed burning is the most efficient way to control those woody plants, few landowners are willing to burn. In mixed grass and wildflower stands, the landowners cannot broadcast herbicide over the stand so they must spot spray those hardwood seedlings and saplings. The two new seedings already have volunteer tree seedlings in the stand. The landowners are aware of their presence and the need to control them. It will take continued close follow-up to resolve the weed problems that threaten the future of the stands. .



Native grass seeding invaded by annual grasses that could have been controlled. (Photo by Bob Glennon)



By Celia Voucolo, PLB for Northeastern Virginia

Working with Farmers to Save Grassland Birds: The Virginia Grassland Bird Initiative

Most folks that have spent time in grassy fields and pastures know the call of the meadowlark. Its song is plaintive, and the sweet notes fall over each other

with a bright delicacy; loudly distinctive over the otherwise quiet, open landscape. The Eastern meadowlark makes a living in cool season grass fields in the quail country of the Midwest and Southeast and is often joined by its neighborhood gang of the grasshopper sparrow, bobolink, savannah sparrow, red-winged blackbird and Henslow's sparrow.

Many of these birds, including the Eastern meadowlark, are obligate grassland species. This means they need grassland habitat to survive, and with more than 80% of the US's native grasslands gone, they are in trouble. Since 1970, 53% of our grassland bird population has been lost. And three in four meadowlarks have disappeared over the past 50 years.

There are over 50 species of birds that depend on grasslands in Virginia, and much of the grassland habitat that remains is in working farmland. This means that scientists and conservationists need to work hand in hand with farmers if they want to save birds. That's where the Virginia Grassland Bird Initiative (VGBI) comes in. VGBI was founded on a partnership between Smithsonian's Virginia Working Landscapes program and the Piedmont Environmental

Council, with Quail Forever and American Farmland Trust as lead partners. Quail Forever and American Farmland Trust serve as technical advisors, while Virginia Working Landscapes acts as the research arm of the partnership, and the Piedmont Environmental Council provides coordination. Collectively, VGBI aims to identify science-based best management practices that support grassland birds and farmers, and then assist producers with implementing these BMPs on their properties.

"What we have created with this partnership is the ability to conduct research on working lands that is locally relevant, addressing the needs of our community of landowners and producers, and then translate that research into tangible management practices." Justin Proctor, VGBI Coordinator- Virginia Working Landscapes, explains. Virginia Working Landscapes (VWL) has been conducting biodiversity research on working landscapes since 2010, has trained 300 citizen scientists and has over 82,000 acres in its survey network.

VWL's research has shown that a suite of grassland birds, including the meadowlark, use cool-season grass fields, comprised of tall fescue, orchard grass, etc., for nesting. This finding led to the creation of the partnership's flagship project, the Delayed Haying and Summer Stockpiling Incentives Program. With funding support from the Cornell Land Trust Bird Conservation Initiative, VGBI partners had a successful inaugural year in 2021 and enrolled 1800 acres in bird friendly practices. The Piedmont Environmental Council, a regional land trust and environmental advocacy nonprofit, stewards the program. They pay farmers to delay their haying to avoid a critical period in the grassland bird nesting season and/or set aside fields to stockpile grasses for grazing later in the

year. "Many of these species nest directly on the ground, so they're vulnerable to the way that we manage fields. By delaying haying and removing cattle out of fields for summer stockpiling, it allows them to fledge at least one nest successfully. By implementing summer stockpiling, you extend your grazing season and should need less hay to feed your cattle," says October Greenfield, VGBI Coordinator- Piedmont Environmental Council. Agriculture makes up a third of Virginia's landscape, so VGBI's impact could be far reaching. My hope is that the initiative is recognized as a model that can be replicated wherever the meadowlark calls home.



Eastern meadowlark (Photo by October Greenfield)



By Tiffany Beachy, PLB
Central Mountains and
Piedmont

Until we meet again...

Well, sometimes life takes unexpected twists and turns. I waited through Covid for this PLB position to come back open so I could apply, and I was stoked when I was offered the opportunity to rejoin the VA Quail family again. It has been a

delightful year of traveling the byways of this beautiful state, assisting landowners in wildlife habitat management. I had every intention of staying here many years, however...

On Pi Day, I found out that my missionary friends needed a science teacher for the Ramu Valley Academy, a boarding school for tribal kids from the Ramu Valley of Papua New Guinea. Their science teacher had to leave suddenly, and my friends were familiar with my science background. I have felt called to the ministry in PNG for over 10 years, and ever since I first heard in 2018 about their plans to start the Ramu Valley Academy, I felt very specifically called to teach there one day. So, when I read the message my friend sent me that morning, I immediately knew that my life would never be the same.

My last day as a PLB is (was) November 4th. But if history continues to repeat itself, I may be back! I was here in 2010, and again in 2022, so you never know. For some crazy reason, these quail people still like me. I'll leave you with one of my highlights from this past year. I am not a landowner,



Dickcissel perched on Lambs quarter plant. (Photo by Tiffany Beachy).

although I aspire to be one someday. In lieu of owning property, I get to enjoy my neighbors' farms and forests.

Pictured here is a pasture right next to my house in Augusta County. My neighbors farm organically and had allowed this field to grow up throughout the summer. In late June, I heard the unmistakable song of a Dickcissel coming from that field. Dickcissels don't typically breed this far east, so I was very excited to find them here. Sometimes if their nests are unsuccessful in their midwestern range, they will come east in cohorts to try again. According to another neighbor, the last

Beachy... continued from pg. 9



Fallow field with patchy shrub cover that attracted Dicksissels and other grassland species (Photo by Tiffany Beachy)



**By Jeff Jones, Team Leader,
NRCS State Biologist**

For fiscal year 2022, the Natural Resources Conservation Service continues its commitment to habitat improvements throughout the Commonwealth of Virginia. Despite continued pandemic, staffing, and budget challenges and ever-increasing conservation challenges

on the ground, our team of Private Lands Biologists continues to take the lead on habitat creation and management efforts throughout Virginia. Overall, this was another very successful year of Farm Bill program implementation for wildlife projects!

This year, through our partnerships with DWR, Quail Forever, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Conservation Management Institute at Virginia Tech, and others, resulted in over 3,000 acres of habitat restored. Through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the Working Lands for Wildlife (WLFW) initiative we were able to obligate 93 wildlife habitat contracts; totaling \$2.9 million dollars that will assist with the recovery of many at-risk species and their associated habitats.

The coming 2023 fiscal year, technical and financial assistance for wildlife habitat projects will once again be available through the EQIP to eligible landowners and producers. Along with our EQIP general wildlife habitat improvement program, we will continue to promote bobwhite recovery through the WLFW Northern Bobwhite in Pine Savannas initiative – management strategies to convert commercial loblolly and shortleaf pine plantings to highly valuable pine savanna habitats and the WLFW Northern Bobwhite in Working Grasslands initiative – native grass restoration to address habitat loss while maintaining or improving cattle production on the land.

More specific details can be found on our Virginia NRCS webpage. If you have any questions or interest in creating or improving wildlife habitat on your land, please call your local Private Lands Biologist or contact your local NRCS Service Center today.



Beachy... continued from pg. 8

time they bred here was in 2014. The farmer agreed not to mow the field this summer, and it was a magical month of watching the Dickcissels and many other species make use of this overgrown pasture.

I had the opportunity to go on an evening flight in my neighbor's single engine airplane to do some 'recon' of that field. We knew that the Dickcissels were nesting in the clumps of blackberry, and we wanted an excuse to get a bird's eye view of the dispersion of thickets for our colleague Amy Johnson of Virginia Working Landscapes, who studies grassland birds in Virginia (see photos).

No one had heard or seen Bobwhites around here in years, but I heard them singing in that field on two occasions this summer! It just goes to show how valuable fallow fields and 'waste' areas prove to be when left alone. Allowing a few thicket 'islands' in your pastures and hay fields can make a big difference to many critters. My neighbor had to mow the field in August to prepare for winter stockpiling, but I know they will plan to allow it to grow late into the summer next year as well. If you have any fallow fields that you don't need for pasture or hay, consider only mowing or disking them once every 2-3 years, and timing your mowing for February or March to allow the tall vegetation to provide cover and food all winter. Of course, doing a full conversion to remove the thick cool season grasses and replace them with native grasses and wildflowers is a boon for many wildlife, especially because of the enhanced open structure at ground level. But simply mowing less often and allowing a few thickets to grow up is better than a clean-mowed field. And just look at the list of bird species below to get a glimpse of who benefits from this form of management! (Link to bird list for 7/19/22: <https://ebird.org/checklist/S115404185>).



Pollinator habitat in Accomack County, Virginia (Photo by Bob Glennon)