

So You Now Have the Old Home Place

Part 1: Planning/What Do You Want?

by James L. Cummins

A well-planned road system helps a family manage and enjoy their property.



A barn or shed is essential for storing equipment.

PHOTO BY JAMES TOWNSHIP

You have inherited all or part of your family's old home place, or maybe you have purchased a piece of property and are not sure what to do to make it your little piece of "heaven on earth." For the next 2 years, Wildlife Mississippi will focus one article in each issue to assist landowners in doing just that. We will start with planning and determining what you might want, and in each issue after this one, we will focus on a new topic. They will include: 1) thinning and forest management; 2) roads, trails, fire lanes and bridges; 3) food plots and open areas; 4) farm ponds and small lakes; 5) the cabin; 6) landscaping, barns, sheds and shooting areas; 7) wildlife management; and 8) economics of the old home place.

I will base these articles on realistic experiences. My father inherited 70 acres, or the "Cummins Place," that has been in the family since 1910 and is located in Webster County. My mother inherited 140 acres that has been in her family since 1833. I have been working on these properties for the past 15 years.

Now, let's discuss your situation. To start, you may be asking yourself, where do I go from here? What are my goals for the land? Do I want a place to hunt, fish or view wildlife? A get-away from it all? Or a permanent place to live? Do I need to produce some income from the property? These are some of the first questions that need to be answered before a plan can be developed.

Most people think they would like large tracts of land until costs are considered. Be realistic as there will be annual taxes and maintenance costs from now on. If you have inherited land, now would be a good time to consider whether or not you will need to sell some of the land to make your dream a reality.

For the purpose of this series of articles, we will examine some of the possible goals and objectives related to landownership. So, how do you determine what your goals and objectives might be?

One of the first things you need to do is determine your personal inclinations. It is very important that this is done before starting any land management programs. When your goals include fish and wildlife, it is important to recognize several points:

1. Goals and objectives should be realistic;
2. Goals and objectives should be measurable; and
3. Other land-use objectives should be preserved.

Goals and objectives should be realistic and set at attainable levels. You should assess your situation in regards to available time, available equipment, the size of the area under consideration and the amount of resources available for the project. The potential of fish and wildlife resources and habitat already

existing on the property should also be taken into account in the initial stages of planning. For instance, in the red clay hills of Tishomingo County you should not expect to harvest deer with the same antler quality as those around the Big Black River in Madison County. Conversely, smallmouth bass do not exist in the Big Black River but they do in Bear Creek.

Goals and objectives should be measurable. Without measurable progress, you are not able to make necessary changes to your management plans. When goals and objectives are not measurable, it hampers your ability to determine the success or failure of implementing management practices.

Other land-use objectives should be preserved. More often than not, you have multiple objectives in mind for your land. Whether these goals include grazing, timber harvesting or agricultural production, it is important that you keep these objectives in mind when developing your fish and wildlife management plan. It is vital that land-use objectives are properly prioritized to determine where fish and wildlife management can feasibly be incorporated into the overall scheme of things.

Once all goals and objectives are established, it is important to then take an inventory of the property. A thorough evaluation of the land's fish and wildlife potential is essential to implementing

habitat improvements or configurations. A detailed ground-level inventory and a top-view (satellite or topographical map view) inventory should be conducted.

Food, water and cover are the three essential ingredients of good fish and wildlife habitat. Therefore, an all-inclusive inventory should be taken to determine the availability of these items.

First, evaluate the vegetation on the property. Note the amount and distribution of grass, shrubs, crops and trees. The types of vegetation found on your land will help determine the types of animals that can survive on the land. Nature's food cycle begins with plants. Plant-eating animals – deer, rabbits, insects, etc. – convert plant energy to protein and fats. Meat-eating animals – owls, hawks, bobcats, insect-eating birds, predatory insects, etc. – then feed on the plant-eating animals. Therefore, this food cycle would collapse without plants.

Next, water sources should be noted. Water requirements vary among the different species of fish and wildlife. Bobwhite quail need surface water only during long, extremely-dry periods whereas salamanders need a fish-free pond for spawning. Also, some animals require water for hydration. For these reasons and more, water should be considered a top priority in implementing a fish and wildlife plan.

Cover is another essential element to a successful management plan. Both natural and artificial covers provide protection, roosting, nesting, resting and foraging areas. Natural cover is effectively managed by pruning, thinning, clearing and planting.

Artificial cover includes nesting boxes,

birdhouses, brush piles, rock piles, log piles and other similar structures.

While ground-level inventories are exhaustive and all-inclusive, top-view inventories begin by obtaining a drawing, map or aerial photo of the land. As it is usually helpful to divide the property into fish and wildlife habitats, the top-view inventory will aid in the layout of the different management compartments.

The five main types of habitat are grassland (including pasture), woodland, cropland, idle areas and water areas, including streams, rivers, lakes and ponds. It is also helpful to include cardinal directions, approximate size of land-use areas and a distance scale on your top-view map.

After completing the inventory, a management plan can be developed that will not only increase the quantity and quality of species on your property, but will also increase the overall productivity and value of your property.

Now that you've done your inventory, improving your habitat will involve adding and removing vegetation. Fish and wildlife management depends on plant management. This is evident in the fact that you can change the supply of plants to attract different species of fish and wildlife. If one of the goals is to attract rabbit or other ground feeders then plants can be added to provide their food supply. If another goal is to attract deer, then planting trees and shrubs or simply controlling the growth of existing plants should be implemented. The plan should incorporate an all-season variety of seeds, berries and plants. In this case, a soil map can help find the best locations for planting. Incidentally, this map will

also indicate the most suitable sites for pond construction.

So, you've determined your goals and objectives for the land and how to prepare for and maintain the land in order to attract fish and wildlife. Now it's time to decide where you fit into the plan.

Next in the planning process, you will need to determine if you want to construct a pond or small lake on the property. If so, site selection is very important. The Natural Resources Conservation Service can assist you in site selection, soil suitability and design. The service is free and I highly recommend you use them.

Topography must first be considered when planning for a pond. You may also want to locate a pond in view of your cabin. A good location is where you can construct the dam across a narrow section of a deep valley that will flood a large area with sufficient depth. Try to avoid an area where the stream flows year round as this will cause management problems for the pond or small lake. An adequate water supply is also needed. Surface runoff is the most common source of water. A good rule of thumb is to have at least 5 acres of drainage area for each acre of impounded water.

Soil should also be considered. Soil with at least 20 percent clay is necessary to hold water. Too much sand could result in a pond that doesn't hold water.

Food plots and grassy areas are also an important component and need to be considered when planning your property. Food plots should be located on fertile soil with good drainage. They should not be located on highly-erodible

Farm ponds can provide many hours of enjoyment.





The author enjoys collecting and restoring farm equipment owned and used by his predecessors like the molasses mill and hay rake pictured here.



soil. Also, do not locate them near a public road or where they can be seen from a utility line as this will increase the likelihood of poaching. The size of the plot can vary, but it needs to be at least 1 acre in order to receive adequate sunlight. Plots should be scattered over the property. For example, it is better to have 10 plots that are 2 acres each than to have one 20-acre plot. You may also want to locate a food plot in view of your cabin.

If your forest inventory and your objectives dictate that some timber needs to be thinned, you will want to work with your forester to determine the location of the logging roads so that they will also serve as roads/trails for you to access and enjoy your property. Loading decks can be located so they can be made into food plots or open areas after the harvesting operation.

I installed fire lanes around the inside of the perimeter of our property, which is needed for controlled burns and also for hunting. We have two creeks that run year-round and we constructed bridges over them so that we can cross with a small tractor. Foot bridges were constructed where fire lanes intersected the creeks.

Many people desire an area for kids to practice shooting or for one to sight in a rifle. For this, the primary factor for a shooting site is safety. Choose an area that is relatively flat. The surface of the ground should have a rise in elevation at the end of the shooting lane to serve as a back stop or dirt can be mounded up at the end. When planning, make certain there are no homes, public roads or other safety concerns in the line of sight.

Many writers, such as Russell Annabel, Anne LaBastille, Robert Service and Jack London have fostered the romantic appeal of a small, simple cabin nestled in a remote hideaway. Henry David Thoreau lived and worked in his one-room cabin on Walden Pond. *Outdoor Life* field editor, Charlie Elliott, had a cabin in Beech Bottoms. The list goes on and on but the point is that there are not many people who love the outdoors that do not dream of one day owning “a cabin in the woods.”

Deciding on the perfect location for your cabin in the woods can be an exciting adventure, or a horrible nightmare. It is the single most important step in building a cabin because the best cabin ever built, on a wrong site, can be nothing but burdensome and expensive.

As you contemplate your cabin site, write down a description of what you visualize as the setting of your cabin. Take your time and write a detailed description that includes location of the sun and shade during different times of the day, surroundings, desired climate, size and style of cabin and recreational interests you hope to pursue. Once you have a picture in your mind's eye of your cabin and its surroundings, you can begin surveying the land in order to find the ideal place.

While walking the property, try to pick out the best cabin site and stake off the approximate blueprint of the size cabin you would like to build. If there is already an old home site on the property, consider why the site was chosen and whether or not it fits your ideal, as this could save you the trouble of walking off the whole property. If

necessary, move the stakes around to find the position that best suits you. You will then need to figure out how you will get a water supply, as well as the availability of any utilities you want run to your cabin.

Other considerations and decisions to be made include answering the following questions: How much land preparation needs to be done? Is the ground satisfactory for footings? Are the views what I was expecting? If there is no existing logging road, access road or driveway into the site, how much will it cost to construct one? Is there adequate drainage around the site? How secure is my site? Do I want to include a barn and/or a shed nearby? What about an area for a few horses? These are the kinds of questions you should ask yourself as you decide on the location of your cabin.

Start a journal, if you haven't already, when work has begun on improving the land and as you decide on the location of your cabin. This journal can be used to track your progress, including when, where and how the clearing, planting, building and other improvements are developing. This record will assist in future plans and help avoid mistakes such as planting plants in an area that is prone to weeds. Taking photos will help to determine, and track, habitat changes. Before and after photos help to ensure that goals are being achieved. They are also a great source of encouragement as you face the challenges that sometimes come with accomplishment.

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