

Youth for Wildlife

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Abstract: The author explains how he involved high school FFA students in wildlife depredation control, hunter education, and wildlife habitat improvement programs in a large, rural west-central Arkansas county.

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What do you do with teenagers who have nothing to do? Teenagers living in the heart of the Ouachita National Forest in western Arkansas. Teenagers in sparsely populated Scott County which consists of 2326 km² of rugged terrain and 1 traffic light in the county's only town of Waldron. A county that contains no dance floors or recreation halls.

Sixty-three percent of that 2326 km² is United States Forest ownership and another 11% is owned by Arkansas Kraft, International Paper, and Weyerheuser Timber companies, leaving the number one recreational activity dependent upon the areas natural resources which include hunting and fishing activities.

Scott County is known for its excellent turkey hunting and its high density black bear population, and the residents enjoy good smallmouth bass and great crappie fishing. Scott County's top industry, along with timber sales, is the production of poultry and poultry products.

So what do you do with teenagers who have limited recreational activities? Give them something to do with the only resource available to them—wildlife.

I took the only high school's Future Farmers of America (FFA) class in the county and gave them programs to work on. Our Acres for Wildlife Program is where the students would visit individual landowners and have them dedicate at least 0.4 ha for which they would receive seed packets and even plant bundles, if desired, to plant an area set aside for wildlife. I also placed them in charge of some Hunter Education classes. The students would set up the classes, make arrangements and enroll the interested pupils. I would teach the 10-hour course, along with other instructors, and the students would assist in grading the test results. The FFA instructors even took the Hunter Education course and I became an instructor himself. These programs were instant hits with the students, but both programs are more or less seasonal programs.

The Arkansas Game and Fish Commission has a nuisance animal control program that is headed up by 5 officers in the state and they use the help of the local wildlife officer. If a citizen has a problem with an animal, we do what we can to resolve the problem.

So, I got the students involved in a nuisance animal control program. Beaver are creating ever-growing problems throughout the state of Arkansas. Armadillos weren't even present in most of the state in the 1970s, but now have migrated in and can cause major damage to farmlands. And, everyone is familiar with stories of skunks and other wildlife using the neighbor's house.

The students and their instructors became very interested in the idea so we began the program by becoming familiar with Arkansas Game and Fish laws and regulations. They were taught some trapping techniques, and I discussed and stressed the importance of public relations with the landowners and other complainants. We studied in depth the safety factors of our program while working around the water and controlling some of the problems with firearm use. They then publicized their program by placing ads in the local paper and setting up a booth at the county fair providing information on beaver and armadillo control. Then the calls began to pour in.

The beaver and armadillo problems required the most attention, as expected, but the students have also set live traps for raccoons in watermelon patches and caught as many as 7 opossums under 1 home and trapped and removed a stowaway house cat from a local flower shop. All of these animals were safely released in appropriate areas.

Armadillo control has the highest danger factor due to the animals being disposed of during the hours of darkness acting under depredation permits. A permit is obtained only after a complaint was filed and a study of the area was made to determine that the problem at hand was caused by the animal in question. We tried to maximize the safety of removing the armadillos by limiting the number of students at each sight and having adequate adult supervision. Eleven armadillos were taken from a single pasture in less than 2 hours making the landowner feel free once again to ride his horse through a hole-free pasture and pulling a hay bailer without worrying about damages. Depredation work was also performed on the local 9-hole golf course in cooperation with the club members, resulting in more than 20 armadillos being harvested and minimizing the chances of a hole in one.

There has not been anything yet to match the excitement of a young man stepping into 30-degree water to set a conibear trap or snare near a beaver run. Nothing quite as amusing as returning the next day and realizing the same young man had failed to activate his conibear set by neglecting to remove his safety catches from the spring. There has been nothing more rewarding then seeing a smile on the face of one that has just snared a 18-kg beaver.

These FFA members tore out beaver dams from private pond spillways completing the trapping of the area. They have lowered water levels from beaver backup waters off roadways so farmers can again bail hay in the north forty. They drove many miles to accomplish their work and all was on their own time. They have

learned how to identify wildlife problems and have been taught to take care of it safely and to use the most effective method.

Something that seemed trivial to me and most of the state's wildlife officers proved to be rewarding to the students. They received 2 awards from Future Farmers of America. One was a safety award for their part in sponsoring Hunter Education programs. The other was a Building Our American Communities (BOAC) award for the Nuisance Animal Control Program.

In all of this we have tried to teach them that we are not out to destroy the beaver and armadillo populations but are only trying to minimize the cost of damage they can cause. In addition to all of the fun we have had and all the friends we have made, it has proven to be a good public relations tool for the youth, the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission, and to myself in teaching them to understand wildlife management and enforcement practices.