

## Prescribed Fire Brings Improved Habitat on Hunter Access Property

*By Mike Pruss, PGC Private Lands Section Chief & Pete Sussenbach, NE Region Land Management Supervisor*

THE Voluntary Hunter Access and Habitat Improvement Program has completed plans and is contracting with companies to improve more than 3,000 acres of habitat on 48 different projects on private lands open to public hunting.

In northeastern Pennsylvania, one of the unique habitats is pitch pine/scrub oak forest. These forests are disturbance dependent, and the disturbance that created and maintained most of them for centuries was wildfire. Wildfires can threaten property and public safety. Improvements in firefighting suppression techniques have become quite effective over the last five decades. Although those improvements are a benefit to society, many habitats that depend on fire as a regular disturbance are in decline. A safe and cost effective alternative to potentially damaging wildfire, called prescribed fire, is now being used by the Game Commission and The Nature Conservancy to help restore these fire dependent areas.

One of the largest restoration efforts is taking place on the Bethlehem Water Authority property east of Long Pond. This 7,000-acre group of parcels was enrolled in our Hunter Access program in 2003 by then local WCO Pete Sussenbach, and is part of 23,000 acres Bethlehem has enrolled in Hunter Access.

Pete recognized the recreational value to hunters of the property, but also saw the potential to improve it even more with some of the same tools we were using on the adjacent 5,488- acre State Game Lands 38. Pete is now working as the Region's Land Management Supervisor, and in conjunction with similar-minded Land Manager Mike Beahm, they are implementing Pete's original vision for the area.

Restoring fire, safely, as a habitat management tool is a long-term process. Together, Pete and Mike developed a landscape scale plan to maximize efficiency, using existing fire breaks and roads on the Game Lands and Bethlehem lands to create a new 1,400 acre prescribed burn habitat project on the property.

Simultaneously, TNC was working with Bethlehem to develop a management plan for the property as part of its Working Woodlands program that tied in with Bethlehem's goals of achieving sustainable forestry certification and restoring ecologically sensitive areas.

With careful planning to reduce unnecessary disturbance, VPA-HIP is funding the construction and improvement of firebreaks, and 177 acres of mechanical tree and shrub cutting near firebreaks to prepare for the prescribed burning that will occur over the next few years. This work is being done by local contractors, contributing to the local economy and community.

Because this is a high elevation area, over 1,800 feet, young forest areas are being created with patches of mature desirable trees such as oaks and pitch pines with native shrubs to benefit snowshoe hare, ruffed grouse, white-tailed deer and golden-winged warbler. In addition, there are many wetland areas within and adjacent to the project, so removing and burning the unproductive woody vegetation will also create large areas of new breeding habitat for American woodcock.

After the preparation phase, the 1,400 acres will be burned in smaller 100- to 200-acre blocks from east to west, using the adjacent burned areas on Game Lands for fuel breaks. The Nature Conservancy will assist PGC on the burns with both personnel and equipment. The burned scrub oak will respond by vigorously sprouting at the bases of the burned shrubs. The resulting lush, nutrient rich new shoots are tasty to deer, and will provide ample food for insects that feed the many species of birds that will use the area, including eastern towhees and whip-poor-wills. It also will result in short, thick stands of scrub oak that support important populations of snowshoe hare and bobcat. Recent reductions in snowshoe hare hunter opportunity in the Poconos are directly related to the loss of young forest habitats. Habitat projects, such as this, on a landscape scale, are necessary to halt the decline of hares in the Poconos.

Pitch pines are fire-adapted, and most will not be killed, even if they catch on fire. The mature trees will benefit from the reduced competition of surrounding vegetation, and their pitch covered cones will release their protected seeds when heated by the fire. The combined disturbance of both the fire and the mechanical equipment will result in a new crop of pitch pine seedlings on the forest floor, which will provide new nesting habitat for birds and replace the older mature pitch pines as they grow old and die.

## Pennsylvania Game News – Volume 83 No. 7 July 2012

---

Finally, the herbaceous vegetation response to the fire will reveal numerous common and rare plants that have been laying dormant for years, waiting for the exact right conditions to emerge. Many of these plants perform unique ecological functions in the forest, supporting rare insects and their larvae. Many are preferred by deer, turkey and grouse, and these common forest dwellers are sure to show up for the buffet.

When walking through an area that has been burned in prior years, there is never any doubt about the complexity of the ecological web that is woven throughout our pitch pine/scrub oak forests, and their dependence on fire for long term survival. If you get a chance, get out and enjoy one of our prescribed burn areas throughout the state. And one more thing, there seem to be fewer ticks in burned areas than their surroundings, an added bonus.