



MAKING A DIFFER

©Maslowski Photo

Bedford County accommodates wildlife in the face of growth

by Bruce Ingram

Bedford County is like many counties across the commonwealth that struggle to deal with growth and simultaneously maintain agricultural and rural areas. Upscale townhouse developments are crowding the shores of Smith Mountain Lake; rapidly expanding suburbs are extending out from such communities as Forest and the city of Bedford; and the agricultural areas that historically have made this piedmont domain one of the top places in the commonwealth to pursue deer and turkeys are slowly being paved over.

To help protect the traditional rural nature of Bedford, the county's Board of Supervisors created the 12-person Bedford Agriculture Economic Development Advisory Board. Jerry Craig is one of the individuals appointed to what is known as the "ag board."

"Before the ag board, I think many landowners were only thinking agriculturally but not natural resources," he said. "Corn, cows, and hogs are very important, but natural resources go hand in hand with agriculture. Name one farm anywhere that doesn't have trees and wildlife. Our goal is that when farmers think agriculture today, they also think wildlife."

To learn what Bedford is doing to protect its outdoor heritage, I spent a day with Craig touring the county. Our first stop was at a 283-acre tract that the county owns within the Bedford city limits, where we met Todd Kready, a county forester for the Virginia Department of Forestry (DOF).

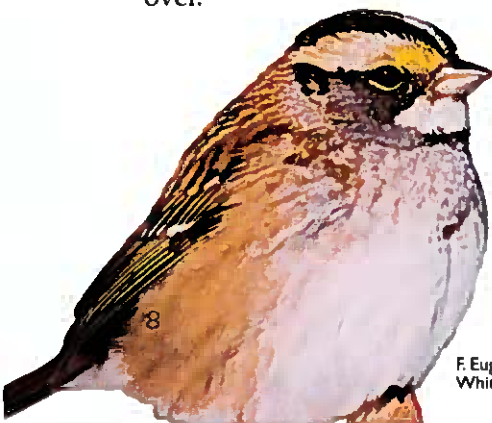
Food Plots and Riparian Zones

Many of Virginia's counties have traditionally owned rural land, but the all-too-typical ways to deal with it have been to sell, develop, or post the properties.

"The ag board approached the DOF and asked us to come up with a stewardship plan for this land," Kready told me as we were driving across the property. "DOF foresters across the state are available for free to help local government agencies come up with plans to enhance wildlife habitat on county-owned lands."

So after talking with county officials and the ag board, Kready devised the following stewardship plan that identified sites:

- ◆ For food plots and wildlife viewing areas where urban and suburban school children could learn the connection between wildlife and habitat;
- ◆ Where trees such as black walnuts and sycamores could be planted along Poor House Creek and create a wider buffer zone;
- ◆ Where hedgerows could be planted to create habitat for songbirds, rabbits, quail, and other wildlife;
- ◆ Where warm season grasses could be planted;
- ◆ Where historical interpretative opportunities existed in the form of old barns and graveyards; and



F. Eugene Hester
White-throated sparrow



©Maslowski Photo

ENCE FOR WILDLIFE

◆ That could be made handicapped accessible, near a pond.

“Everybody can be happy with this plan because of all the different user groups that could benefit,” said Kready as we prepared to leave. “Just think what this property will look like in five to ten years.”

Fifth-Generation Farm

Our second stop was at the Fellers farm, where Pete Fellers is the fourth generation to live on the Bedford County property. Pete wants to make sure that this rural heritage continues for another generation.

“I am one of the few people that were fortunate enough to come back to my granddaddy’s place to live,” Fellers told us as we stood in his front yard and looked out over the land. “But every morning after I returned, when I woke up I could hear bulldozers on the north and east sides of the property and see more of those ‘McMansions’ going up.

“I didn’t want our family farm to end up like that, so I invited Roger Holnback of the Western Virginia Land Trust (WVLT) to come, and he showed me the benefits of conservation easements, like tax breaks.”

Jerry Craig said that the ag board is actively promoting conservation easements, especially on farms such as this one. Roaring Run flows through the property and serves as an important wildlife corridor, as Fellers maintains a 35-foot buffer on one section and plans to improve the riparian zone on the rest.

With encouragement from the WVLT, and of course Fellers himself, his cousins and aunt are now considering placing nearby family land under a conservation easement.

Later, Fellers shepherds us to the

creek’s riparian zone. As we walk along a path, we spot a turkey dusting bowl, jump up several deer, and hear eastern wood pewees and yellow-billed cuckoos.

Outreach Education, Community College Style

Our third stop was at the Central Virginia Community College (CVCC)-Bedford Center. There we met Dr. Robert Lowry, college director. What’s a higher learning institution have to do with wildlife? Plenty, as I learned.



©Bruce Ingram

DOF forester Todd Kready shows ag board member Jerry Craig a field on Bedford County-owned land that would be a good place for warm season grasses.



©Bruce Ingram

"The CVCC has partnered with the ag board to create an educational pipeline that moves farmers as well as students who want to become farmers into agricultural and environmental studies," Lowry told us. "Our objective is to educate as many of Bedford's populace as we can on the essential and interrelated nature of agriculture and wildlife. And that what is often good for one is good for the other.

"If, through this program, we are able to influence current and future farmers on how they can both make a profit and improve their farm's habitat for wildlife and thus have their parents and their children after them remain on the land, then we will have accomplished that objective," he said.

The CVCC has received a grant from the Tobacco Commission as its funding source. The college will have a continuing education program for current farmers and a full curriculum in Agriculture and Environmental Sciences for full-time students. Interestingly, ag board members will be enrolled as students in some of the

classes, so they will be better able to communicate to the community the benefits of this agricultural and environmental synergy. "Virginia is losing its farms at a rapid rate," concluded Lowry as Craig and I prepared to leave. "CVCC sees our agricultural and environmental curriculum as a prototype, a way to create a new type of farmer / conservationist, and a curriculum that can be used across the state. What's good for Bedford might not be good, for example, for Tidewater. But our concept of benefiting both farms and wildlife is portable."

An Urban Wildlife Oasis

To reach our next stop, Craig and I had to drive through downtown Forest to arrive at the 355-acre farm of Gene and Laura Goley. We threaded our way through traffic and past mini-malls and gas stations. Then, and even more now, the property serves as a wildlife oasis as development engulfs all but one side of the property, which the Goley family has farmed for five generations and which was once owned by Thomas Jefferson.

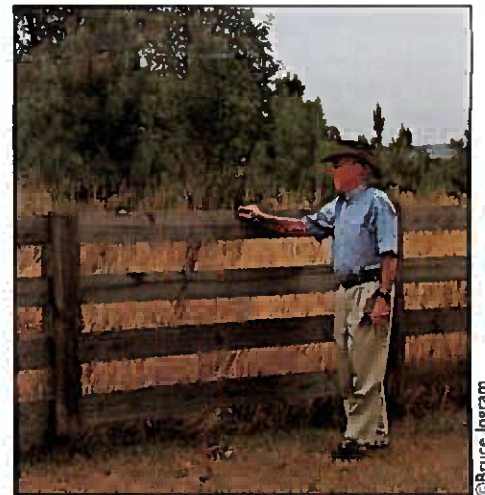
Gene Goley is a member of the ag board and wants his land to serve as an example of how other farmers can still earn a profit, yet also make wildlife-friendly management decisions.

"Laura and I have fenced off all our creeks to keep the cattle out," Gene told us as we walked down a



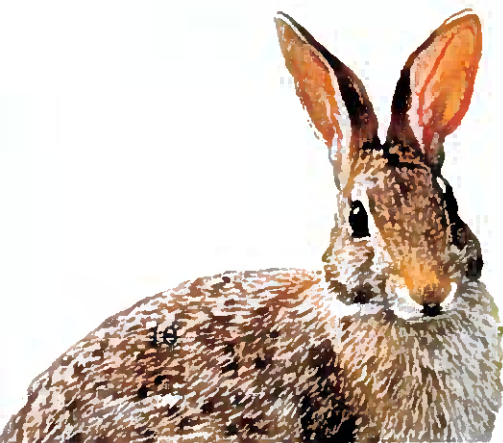
©Bruce Ingram

Pete Fellers walks down a lane that runs through his land and provides transitional habitat between two stands of trees.



©Bruce Ingram

Gene Goley shows us where he built fences to keep cattle away from a stream.



F. Eugene Hester
Cottontail rabbit



©Maslowski Photo

farm lane. "We have created over 30 acres of riparian buffer along our streams. And we have planted thousands of trees such as oaks, ashes, and dogwoods to help slow runoff from our cattle operations and enhance wildlife habitat.

"The Farm Services Agency and the DGIF through its WHIP (Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program) showed us the benefit of planting warm season grasses for quail and other wildlife. This year, we got 54 rolls of hay off 12 acres of switchgrass. So we've planted 36 acres more in such warm season grasses as switchgrass, big and little bluestem, and Indian-grass. All in all, we have almost 60 acres in warm season grasses, and the quail just love it. And I'm harvesting plenty of hay for my cattle," he said.

Almost as if on cue, we heard the whistling sounds of a bobwhite, and I remarked what a rare sound that was these days. But then another quail chimed in, then another, and then another until the fields seemed to be alive with bobs—which they were.

Gene then showed us where he has planted loblolly pines for future timbering operations and where he conducted some selective timber cutting to improve wildlife habitat. But he cheerfully admitted that he has made money off these projects while assisting wildlife.

"The ag board is continually encouraging Bedford farmers and rural landowners to look into conservation

easements and find out about the financial and tax breaks of doing so," Gene said as Jerry Craig and I prepared to leave. "And I also like to point out to folks that there's nothing wrong with a farmer making money and helping wildlife at the same time."

Our last stop was at the business of Jeff Powers, chairman of the ag board. Powers tells us at 90-minute-long monthly public meetings (where the county administrator and director of economic development also attend), the ag board discusses a host of issues having to deal with agriculture and wildlife.

Ag board committees exist on marketing agricultural products, outreach education and events, and land

protection and conservation. For example, the board brought in Virginia Tech experts on the financial and wildlife benefits of reintroducing native warm season grasses. As a result, some Bedford landowners entered into agreements to establish such grasses on their properties.

"I am also proud that another Virginia county recently contacted us and asked how the folks there could set up an ag board like ours," said Powers. "We were glad to help. I want the word to spread that preserving agricultural lands benefits wildlife." □

Bruce Ingram is the author of The James River Guide, The New River Guide, and The Shenandoah/Rappahannock Rivers Guide. To obtain a copy, contact Ingram at P.O. Box 429, Fincastle, VA 24090 or be_ingram@juno.com.



©Bruce Ingram

DOF forester Todd Kready helped Bedford County draw up a stewardship plan for this 283-acre tract that it owns. DOF will do the same for any county in the state.