

TECOMATE OVERVIEW OF FOX CREEK PLANTATION

TECOMATE BIOLOGIST ASSESSMENT

Current State & Future Management Potential of Wildlife on Fox Creek Plantation

by David Morris & Mark Newell

The state of wildlife and wildlife habitat on Fox Creek is currently excellent, whether talking about quail, deer, turkeys, doves, ducks or even those Southern favorites, rabbits and squirrels. A few hogs move on and off the Plantation and control efforts are underway. Our research shows the current populations of target wildlife species (quail, deer and turkey) are stronger than we initially thought. Still, the full potential with proper management is yet to be realized. It was that future potential that attracted us most when we first considered buying this property for development as a Tecomate SIGNATURE Property. Now, **after better familiarizing ourselves with the property and its wildlife, the upside potential for Fox Creek is even better than we thought.**

BOBWHITE QUAIL

Current State

Fox Creek Plantation quail numbers are very strong under existing traditional quail management, such as prescribed burning the uplands, strategic timber harvests, mowing and disking to create more edge, planting plots and strips for cover/food, seasonal supplemental feeding, and limited predator control. Quail courses are well-defined by roads and hardwood drainages and are set up for classic Southwest Georgia quail hunting. The southern half of the property generally has more open “plantation” woodlands, due in part to more frequent burning, and more fields and plots. While the northern half is generally more densely forested, it still has classic open woods and excellent quail hunting. Quail plots of bicolor lespedeza and milo strips/plots are well distributed throughout all the uplands, and a network of hunting trails provides easy access.

Future Management Potential

While Fox Creek is currently home to high numbers of wild quail, even by Plantation-Belt standards, the following additional management steps will further enhance quail numbers if the goal is to maximize quail hunting opportunities.

- 1) Thin the thicker upland timber stands, especially on the north half. This will allow sunlight to reach the forest floor to grow more of the understory plants quail need for food and cover.
- 2) Burn 70-75% of the primary quail pine uplands annually, leaving about 25-30% unburned in various sized areas ranging from 1 to 10 acres. Include the unburned areas in next year’s burning rotation.
- 3) Increase “edge” by increased disking and mowing, primarily in the early fall.
- 4) Intensify predator control, which may require professional help.
- 5) Start a consistent, widespread supplemental feeding program. Broadcast grains starting in early fall and continue through the summer months. Don’t just feed the roads, thus exposing the birds to predation, but also broadcast into cover.
- 6) Add more food plots for better food and cover and even more edge. The old standbys – milo, sorghum, corn, millet, etc. – are always good. One of our favorite perennial plots, Tecomate Monster Mix, (white clover and chicory, and we like to throw in some alfalfa) will provide excellent quail food and cover and good spring bugging grounds when they need the extra protein for egg production. We have found that quail really use Tecomate Horn-maker Extreme

plots (sunn hemp and forage cowpeas) because it grows in such thick stands that the “floor” beneath is clear for quail to maneuver in.

Intensified management will certainly result in more quail and better hunting, but there’s a limit to the pressure wild quail can take during a season. Plus, wild quail natural mortality is relentless, as much as 80% a year. Early fall numbers erode from bad weather, predators, accidents, illnesses, you name it, without a shot ever being fired. Of course, good food and cover, healthy birds and fewer predators slows and lowers losses.

Now, factor in hunting pressure. On many plantations, the fast-paced wild quail hunting of early season understandably slows as season progresses. When and to what degree depend in large part on hunting pressure. To stretch out great hunting, some plantations carefully control hunting pressure, like hunting a course no more than once every 10 days of so and only shooting covey rises, but other plantations take more aggressive action.

Many plantations elect to supplement wild quail with specially raised pen birds stocked into the wild one or more times over the season. The goal is to have them “adopted” by existing coveys and soon behave like wild birds. We realize pen-raised birds are a no-no for some, but with the right birds and stocking strategy, it is possible to closely simulate wild bird hunting with supplemental stockings. Pen-rearing techniques and stocking strategies have greatly improved in recent years, resulting in birds with higher survival rates that behave and perform much like wild birds. With the resources tied up on a quail plantation, an option for more recreational return may be of interest.

WHITETAIL DEER

Current State

When we first bought Fox Creek, we knew it had everything necessary to be a primo Southern deer property under the Tecomate Management System. **The 225 acres of openland meant we could grow more high-nutrition food than the deer could eat.** Thanks to fire, open woodlands, fertile soils and just the right mix of hardwoods, the native deer habitat was superb. Though the Plantation had been leased for several years to a handful of Florida hunters, their annual harvest of 12-14 bucks, mostly young and intermediates, and about as many does was relatively modest and didn’t overly concerned us. We also knew Fox Creek was surrounded by large landowners who either didn’t hunt or hunted very little. From sign, sightings and reports, we knew Fox Creek supported a high deer population. Factoring all that in, we anticipated a high-density herd with a reasonably balanced sex ratio and good buck age structure. We were right, except every index was better than we expected!

From data gathered by our preseason camera census ending August 30, 2019, **we put together a herd reconstruction model and were, frankly, shocked by the results...in a good way!** Our 10 Reconyx Cameras revealed the following:

135 distinct bucks

Buck age structure:

1.5 yrs. – 32

2.5 yrs. – 32

3.5 yrs. – 33

4.5+ yrs. – 38

An amazing 71 bucks over 3.5 years old and 87 with 8 points or more!

Buck/doe ratio – 1:1.35

Resulting in 182 does

Recruitment rate of 85%

Resulting in 155 fawns

Minimum population of 472 (with no factoring for deer NOT censused)
Resulting in a deer/4.8 acres and an adult deer/7.2 acres

Those numbers alone would be extraordinary, but the reality is that those numbers do NOT represent a total census. **From experience, we think the actual total number of deer living on or frequenting the Plantation is over 600.** While Fox Creek does indeed support a high-density herd, it is obvious that the abundance of nutritious food and prime habitat on Fox Creek is drawing in lots of deer from surrounding properties, which fortunately for us have little or no hunting pressure!

The size of bucks impressed us even more than the number of deer! Many of the mature bucks (3.5 and older) grossed over 130, several topped 140 and a few bettered 150! BIG for Southern bucks! But it didn't end there – five were in the 160s, with one over 170! Giants anywhere, and far better than we expected! More BIG surprises are sure to come. With management, the deer potential is as great as any place in the South!

Future Management Potential.

While a current population estimate of over 600 deer and photos of multiple bucks topping 150 may seem as good as it gets, **Fox Creek will only get better as the Tecomate Management System matures.** The future strategy is simple – enhance the already good nutritional plane and implement a disciplined harvest strategy.

For even better nutrition, we would plant the 225 acres of open ground in nutritious food plots and/or ag crops. **By far, the most important part of the plan is warm-season, high-protein plantings.** Our strategy is:

- 1) Plant at least 50 acres in high-protein mixes of perennial white clover, chicory and alfalfa.
- 2) Plant another 50 acres in high-protein, warm-season annuals, namely sunn hemp mixed with forage cowpeas and lablab.
- 3) Follow that up in the fall with cool-season, energy-producing cereals like oats, wheat, etc., laced with red, crimson and/or arrowleaf clover, if the grain is NOT to be harvested as an ag crop.
- 4) On the remaining 100-125 acres, farm warm-season ag crops such as corn, milo and especially high-protein soybeans and/or peanuts.
- 5) Then follow that planting in the fall with cool-season cereals. (Grain only if an ag crop.)
- 6) If we see a need, we would keep increasing the high-protein perennial plots, which are critical since they supply essential high-protein nutrition in the spring, before the annuals come on, when antlers first start growing and fetus growth really kicks into high gear. Missing that window is at the cost of antler size and fawn health.

The large acreage and distribution of food plots/ag land on Fox Creek make it doubtful supplemental feeding will ever be necessary. But if it is, the next step in the nutritional strategy would be:

- 1) Supplemental feeding of high-protein pellets and/or whole cottonseed. Both have pros and cons and both provide good nutrition. We suggest testing for at least 3 months to determine which the deer prefer before making a final choice. Generally, it takes longer to get deer on cottonseed than pellets, but once on it, they (and we) like it. If supplemental feeding is employed, we would expect the heaviest use during the spring and fall “shoulder” months between annual crops and in early summer right after fawning, when the does are reluctant to travel far from the fawns.
- 2) One supplemental feeding site per 150 acres (about 15 on Fox Creek) is a good place to start. Place between food plots and ag fields to provide ready access to does during the summer.
- 3) If usage is high, add supplemental sites to fill the obvious holes in coverage.

- 4) Once we reach a feeding site/100 acres, rather than continue to increase the logistical difficulties of feeding more sites, we prefer to place additional feeders at each site to increase access for more deer. The drawback to supplemental feeding is that access to feed is largely based on a deer's position in the herd hierarchy. "Nose-to-nose" competition prevents does, fawns, younger bucks and some submissive older bucks from getting their "fair" share. That problem does NOT exist on food plots where deer have SPACE!

A critical part of management is a disciplined harvest strategy weighted toward inferior bucks, i.e., cull/management bucks. Generally, a cull is a 2½-year-old or older buck that is FAR below average in quality for his age class. They should be removed when legal opportunity presents. Until a program is advanced and being fine-tuned, we don't recommend harvesting 1½-year-olds because their genetic potential cannot dependably be determined at that age. Management bucks can be defined as 3½ and older bucks that are average or below average, most often with less than 10 points, for their age class. While management bucks, of which there are many, generally don't have the antler size or characteristics to warrant carrying them to peak age and having them compete for breeding rights with quality bucks, they do represent a valuable recreational component of the deer hunting program.

The goal for above average bucks ("quality bucks"), especially 10-pointers and better, is to allow them to reach peak age for size and maximize their genetic contribution. These are the deer you want to sire the next generation of deer. The deer on a property at any given time are a direct genetic reflection of their fathers (and mothers but we can't effectively select the better of them) and to a lesser but still significant degree their grandfathers. Given that, simple logic dictates that better bucks produce better fawns, and vice versa. This is true and why a strategy that removes inferior bucks and gives quality bucks every chance to breed will result in better and better deer (both bucks and does) with every new generation.

There is an "ideal" age and a "realistic" age for harvesting quality bucks and the two may not be the same, depending on mortality rates outside your control, especially neighbor hunting. You have to realistically determine the right age to try to harvest quality bucks based on the risk-reward of waiting another year in hopes for bigger size. In heavily hunted places or on small tracts, we sometimes recommend a minimum harvest age of 3½ if the risk of loss is too great to wait longer. In places with modest pressure or good-sized tracts, say 500-1,000 acres, 4½ might be the right age for quality bucks.

On Fox Creek, we recommend a minimum harvest age for quality bucks of 5½, and especially so for trophy-class bucks, i.e., the top-ends. However, as a rule of thumb, we never like to take more than 50% of the quality 5½-year-olds. Why? Because they are prime breeders and the genetic heart of the herd and with more age a few will "pop" and get bigger and/or become interesting "character" bucks.

As the Tecomate Management System progresses, what is "average" will increase and adjustments must be made in what constitutes the different classes of bucks. In time, with a disciplined harvest and great nutritional program, the number and size of quality bucks and trophy bucks on Fox Creek will increase, providing the opportunity to harvest some of the biggest bucks in the South!

Normally, we give a "top-end" estimates after an assessment, but the truth is we don't know what the ultimate potential is on Fox Creek! It's well over 160! We already have several of those. It's over 170! We already have at least one of those! Bucks topping 200 have been taken in the area! **Suffice to say, the top-end potential is "HUGE" on Fox Creek Plantation!**

One last word on deer and quail. On Fox Creek, it is possible to have your cake and eat it too, meaning you can have exceptional hunting for both quail and deer with relatively modest compromises in

management intensity on both programs to reach a “happy balance.” Only the owner can decide THE priority or how two or more priorities are weighed in the ultimate management plan.

EASTERN WILD TURKEYS

Current State

Like quail, turkeys are a numbers game and Fox Creek Plantation is loaded with them. The open upland woodlands intersected by hardwood bottoms and laced with food plots and cropfields make for ideal turkey country. We can vouch for great hunting – in a short few days, two of us limited out, with four of the six toms being 3 years old or older! Fox Creek has turkeys!

Future Management Potential

As for the future, good quail and deer management generally makes for good turkey habitat, though some intensive quail management practices, like annual burning, can affect turkey numbers. Nearly all intensive deer management practices are good for turkeys. “Hybrid” management for both deer and quail will certainly result in great turkey habitat and ensure outstanding spring hunting for years to come. We’ve already done some of the simple things to further enhance the turkey population – like put in an expanded road system, add to the size and number of food plots, implement a checkerboard burning regime, protect key hardwood areas from fire and more. These actions will increase nesting/poult-rearing grounds, resulting in greater turkey production on Fox Creek...and as a bonus, draw more turkeys from surrounding properties and generally make hunting turkeys easier. **The future looks bright for even more long beards and hooked spurs on the Plantation.**

DUCKS

Current State

With the abundance of water on Fox Creek, the duck hunting is quite good as is, especially for wood ducks. Several of the small hammock ponds and the upper reaches of the 75-acre lake offer good hunting for wood ducks...and certain times of the year, some migratory species.

Future Management Potential

For a serious duck hunter/manager, Fox Creek offers the potential to develop major duck habitat in association with the 75-acre lake and on a natural steam-fed wetland complex on the north end on the Plantation. Water-control structures and targeted plantings can greatly improve duck habitat and hunting on the upper reaches of the 75-acre lake. Additionally, some wetland sites are conducive to the use of water-control structures to create “greentree reservoirs” and floodable duck ponds, which can be planted in Japanese millet, golden millet, corn, milo or the like in summer and flooded during duck season. **With the addition of these “duck holes,” waterfowl hunting opportunities will increase not only for wood ducks but also for various migratory species.** We are currently working with waterfowl professionals to determine the feasibility and cost to create these water-controlled “duck holes” around the property.

DOVES

Current State & Future Management Potential

Southwest Georgia is known for its great dove hunting, and there are doves galore on and around Fox Creek. With the many fields on Fox Creek, **the quality of dove hunting is a function of how many fields and what crops are planted** and how they’re managed for maximum dove usage. It’s just a matter of planting and managing favorites of doves – corn, milo, millet, sunflowers, etc. – and you can be assured they will be on Fox Creek in force when hunting time arrives.

OTHER SMALL GAME

Rabbits flourish in the lush native habitat. Fun can be had with a couple of friends and a pack of beagles! Grey squirrels are abundant in all the hardwood bottoms and hammocks. Fox squirrels of various color phases are common in the open pine uplands. No management necessary. Just enjoy.

TECOMATE IS READY TO HELP!

Tecomate biologists would welcome the opportunity to help the new owner realize the full potential of Fox Creek. Upon request, we're available to work out a future relationship with the owner. Afterall, **we want to see this phenomenal Tecomate Signature Property called Fox Creek Plantation realize its full potential!**