

# WOODS 'N WATER™

MAY 2025

47TH YEAR 10TH ISSUE

\$4.50

**TIME TO  
HIT THE  
WATER!**

**Gag Grouper  
Rule Changes**

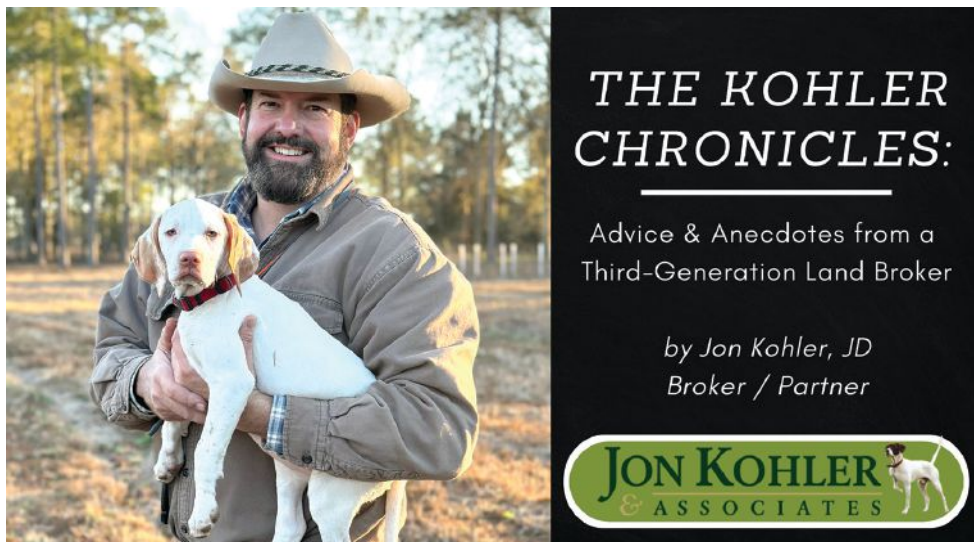
**Bow to the  
Silver King**

**Fishing  
Reports**

**America's  
Serengeti**

**Real Estate  
Listings**





# America's 'Serengeti': Where fire still walks the land

by Jon Kohler

Africa has the Serengeti – the last great, naturally-functioning upland ecosystem on Earth. A vast, contiguous landscape where the ancient cycles of flora and fauna play out just as they did in the Book of Genesis. It's something beautiful to behold – and something worth protecting on a global scale.

What many don't realize is that here in the American South, we have our own Serengetis. In fact, we have four. And, like their African counterpart, these ecosystems were preserved not through government decree, but by a modern economic system powered by outdoorsmen – men and women who came to hunt and, in doing so, funded the conservation of wild game and the land it depends on.

We call them Quail Plantation Belts – geographic clusters of high-quality recreational hunting properties. Many of these properties were once cotton plantations. Then, about 140 years ago, Northern industrialists – former

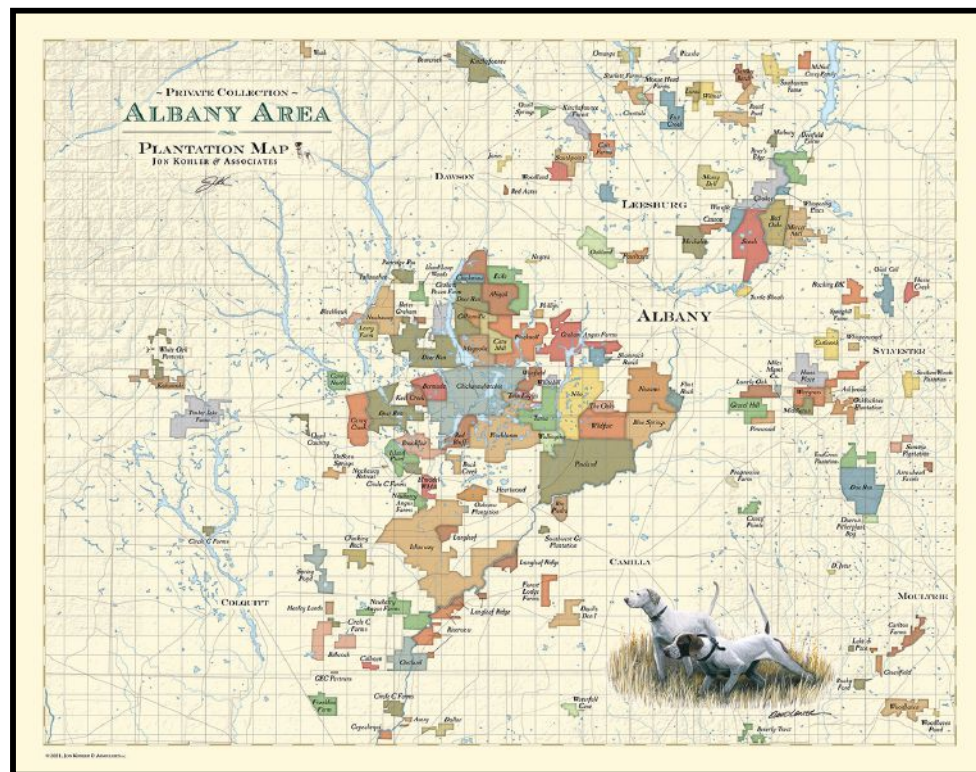
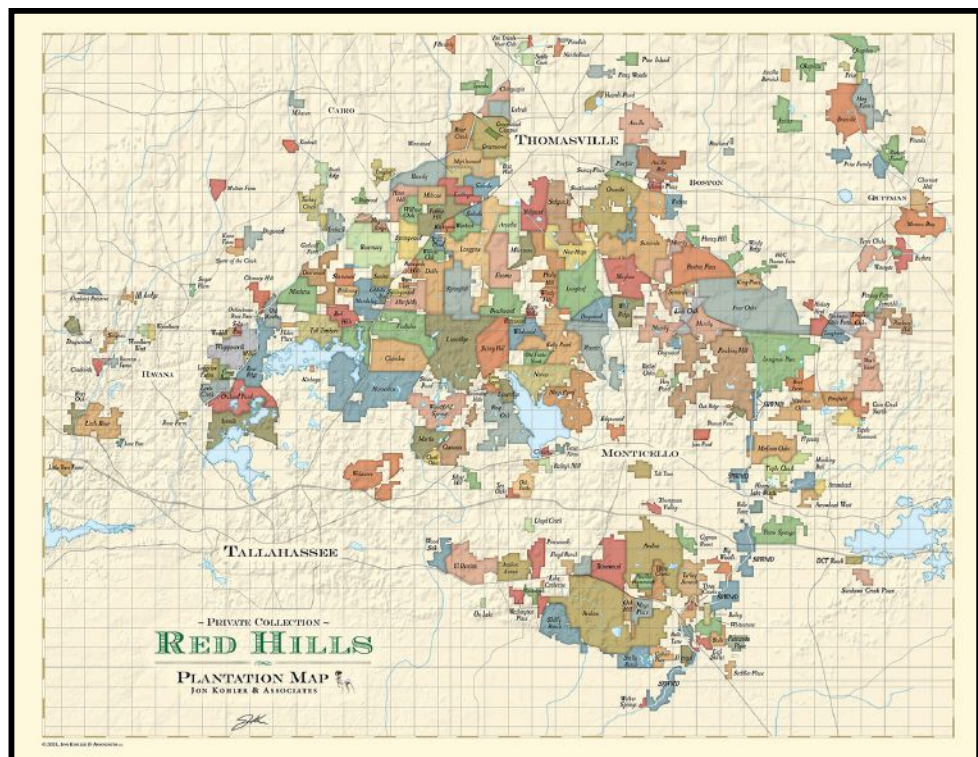
Yankees – began transforming them into quail preserves. The name “plantation” stuck, but the purpose changed.

Today, wealthy outdoorsmen have expanded the legacy, combining world-class quail hunting with trophy deer, timber and family recreation. It's the classic redemption story – land once tied to America's darkest past now standing as its brightest ecological showcase.

These regions aren't just recreational hot spots – they're sanctuaries for some of the healthiest upland ecosystems left in the country. And, they didn't survive by accident. We have their landowners to thank. Unlike many wild places around the globe, these landscapes are growing, not shrinking. Every year, the habitat improves. Every year, more people decide they want to become landowners and join in the covenant of stewardship.

## The Four Pillars of Southern Conservation

Each of the four great regions – Red Hills, Albany Area, Union Springs



and the ACE Basin – is unique. But they all share one vital trait: they've remained largely intact and ecologically sound because they never lost their natural season of fire.

### 1. Red Hills Region

Spanning 300,000-plus acres between Thomasville, Georgia and Tallahassee, Florida, the Red Hills are known for their rolling hills, red clay soils, and incredible biodiversity. The Florida side leads the nation in prescribed burns, treating over 2.1 million acres annually. This is the epicenter of America's fire culture.

### 2. Albany Area, Georgia

Covering another 300,000-plus acres, this belt is Georgia's fire engine. Much of the state's 1.2 million annual prescribed-burned acres come from Southwest Georgia. These are some of the most intensively and effectively managed lands in the country and ranked #2 in prescribed fire.

### 3. Union Springs, Alabama

This area is the heartbeat of Alabama land management. With approximately 1 million acres burned each year, fire is a foundational practice here – restoring longleaf pine, supporting native grasses and reducing wildfire risks across the region.

### 4. ACE Basin, South Carolina

The ACE Basin encompasses roughly 350,000 acres of wetlands and uplands near the Atlantic Coast. It's one of the largest undeveloped estuarine ecosystems on the East Coast, where prescribed fire is used to manage habitat for ducks, turkeys, quail and more. South Carolina burns the equivalent of the entire ACE Basin every year.

### Fire Is the Answer

Collectively, these four regions are managed by roughly 1,000 private landowners, united by a common purpose: to improve land through stewardship and the intentional use of fire. What they've built is a mosaic of ecological abundance

that rivals anything on Earth.

This is the South's last best place.

People travel from all over the world to walk these woods and fish these waters. It's a sportsman's paradise – but more than that, it's living proof that ecological integrity and human purpose can coexist.

So how did these landscapes remain resilient while so many others withered?

The answer, paradoxically, is fire.

Here, smoke on the horizon doesn't signal danger – it signals rebirth. The same way you might watch rain roll across the landscape, we watch fire with reverence. Most people understand the value of rain. Few understand that, in this region, the interval of fire is just as essential.

The National Drought Center defines drought as “a prolonged period of deficient precipitation resulting in damage to crops and a loss of yield.” The same can be said of fire-drought. Without regular fire, our land withers, chokes and ultimately collapses.

The ideal interval? According to the late Lane Green, former CEO of Tall Timbers, “About every 18 months.”

We often say we have a fifth season – prescribed fire season. And, if it would look good on a flag, smoke from a prescribed burn would be on the Great Seal of Florida.

“When I am flying to Florida, I always know when we have crossed the state line, because no matter what time of year or which side of the airplane I am on, one can see numerous smoke plumes,” said Howard Vincent, former CEO of Quail Forever.

These are the good old days.

This isn't sporadic land management – it's a landscape-level movement. In Florida, Georgia and Alabama alone, private landowners and foresters burn over 4.4 million acres annually. Fourth

(Continued on page 20)

# That smoke is a covenant between land and owner

(Continued from page 18)  
place isn't even close. That's the equivalent of two Yellowstone National Parks – every single year.

Combined with modern forestry and wildlife science, this rhythm of fire leads to more wildlife, more biodiversity, more timber and safer communities.

Meanwhile, national news tells a different story: catastrophic wildfires in places like California and Colorado – blazes sparked by lightning, negligence or sheer buildup. Why doesn't that happen here?

Because here, we never stopped burning.

In the 1940s, federal agencies mounted a campaign to demonize fire – turning an ancient ally of the land into a feared enemy. But in places like the Red Hills, the flame never went out. While

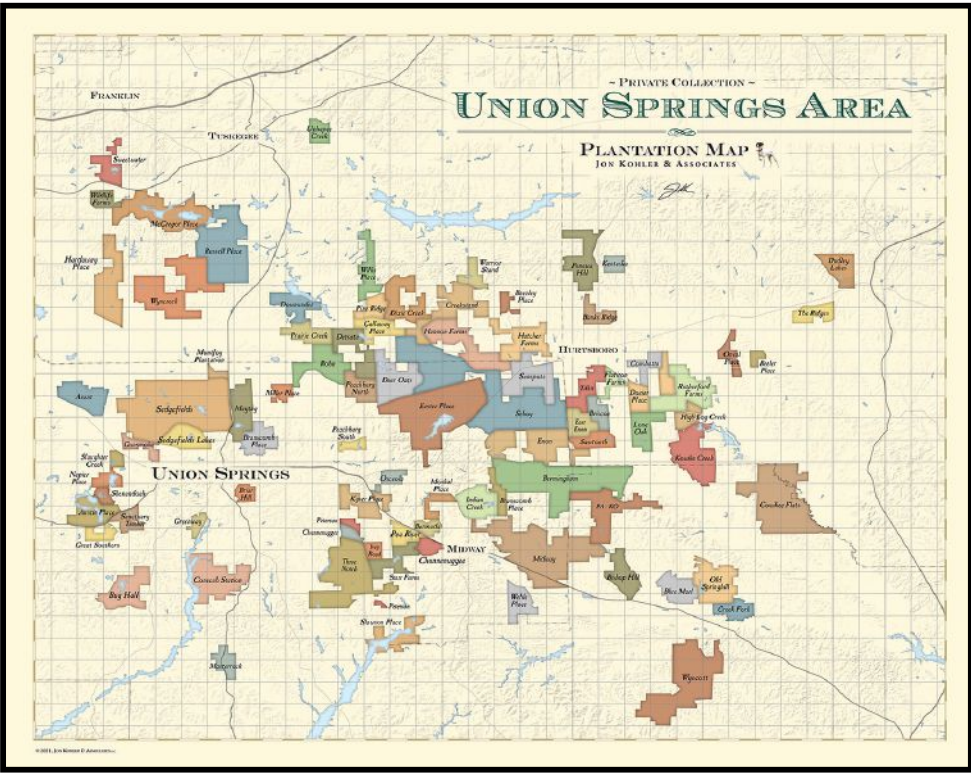
the rest of the country suppressed fire with pride, the South kept its promise.

But nature doesn't forget. Suppress it long enough, and the result isn't no fire – it's uncontrollable fire.

Whether it's rainfall from a cloud, fire from a forest or, yes, even a bowel movement, living systems demand release. Delay the natural rhythm too long, and the consequences will always be worse than the original.

Today, thanks to organizations like Tall Timbers and Quail Forever, the South is leading the nation. Florida has trained an army of mostly landowner-funded fire managers who balance ecology with safety. The result? Lower insurance rates. Healthier forests. More wildlife. Safer towns. A land that looks and lives the way God intended.

While the communities adjoining



these “belts” are safe from catastrophic fire, they are the exception. The “fire drought” continues on. More needs to be done.

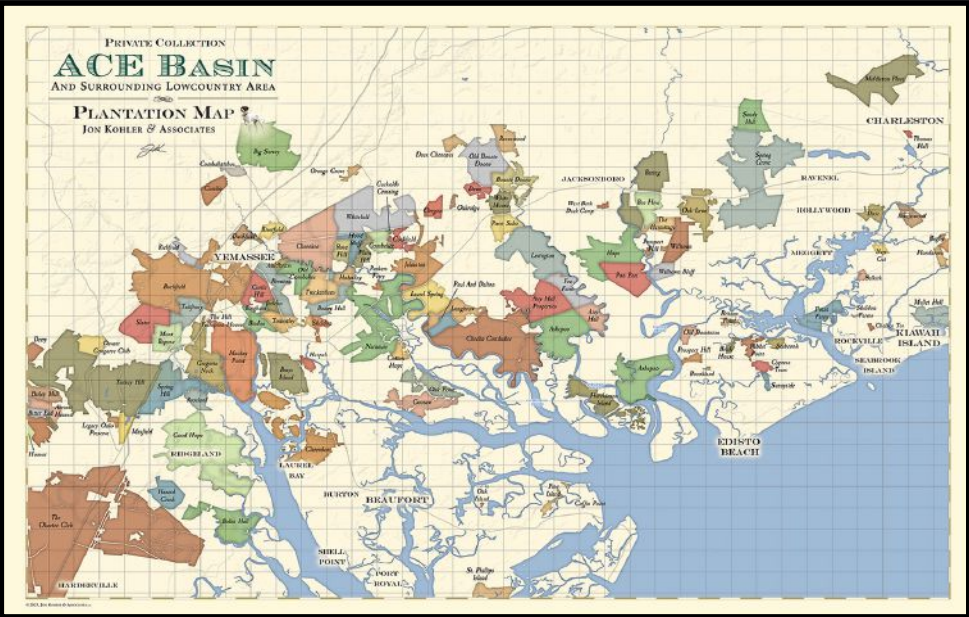
So, the next time you're driving down a Southern highway and see a haze of smoke drifting across a blue-skied afternoon, don't flinch. Don't worry. Don't complain for the inconvenience. It's short lived and as natural as a wet

road after a refreshing spring rain.

That smoke isn't just a burn. It's a covenant – a promise between landowner and land. A symbol of redemption. A signal that we're doing something right.

The wildlife, beauty and outdoor recreation found in these four “plantation belts” is just as God intended.

The stewards of these lands are America's true conservation heroes.



HERE, SMOKE ON THE HORIZON DOESN'T SIGNAL DANGER – IT SIGNALS REBIRTH. “The same way you might watch rain roll across the landscape, we watch fire with reverence,” says Jon Kohler. “Most people understand the value of rain. Few understand that, in this region, the interval of fire is just as essential.”



1103 W. Hampton Springs Ave.

**I&M**

Perry, FL

850-223-3061

**FARM~n~FEED**

Est. 2004

**Dog Collars with Name Tags**

**Hay Rolls & Bales**

• **Deer Attractants**

• **Animal Health Products**

**SHOWTIME**

**MID-SOUTH FEEDS**

**SOYBEANS 3 & 6 CORN WAY MIX**

**DOG FOOD**

**ALMA, GA**