



# A Place to Hunt;

by Dr. Ron Haaland

# to Hunt;

*A Place to Live...*

Many of us “old folks” can remember when finding a good place to hunt simply required asking permission from a landowner. Permission was usually granted with a few reasonable rules of land use and often a recommendation for the best opportunity for game. Unfortunately, this once common practice is rare or even obsolete.

Many factors have contributed to this situation. Unlike my home state of Montana that has millions of acres of public land, many states have very little public land available for hunting. Furthermore, the limited amount of public land is usually heavily utilized. I know of one public hunting area in the South that has a few thousand acres, but many thousands of people are using it.

*“I would like to introduce you to one of my projects to stimulate your imagination. It is called Ohoospee River Plantation or ORP for short.”*

As the population has grown, the quantity and quality of private hunting land has declined. When I started writing habitat articles in 1978 the U.S. population was about 289 million. The population in 2009 will come close to 308 million. Look around. Many places that used to be great quail habitat are now factory sites, trailer parks, subdivisions, overgrown pastures or pine tree farms. Land use considerations today are more likely to involve septic field drainage potential than quail habitat.

If you have a family that enjoys hunting, what are your options? You can pay to hunt on hunting preserves that can be great or not so good. You can be lucky and have friends with well-managed land who will allow you to hunt, or you can own your own land and develop it for your family and future generations.

Owning enough land to provide hunting and other outdoor recreation for family and friends can be an expensive endeavor. Adding up initial purchase price, taxes and on-going maintenance expense can be humbling. One alternative to this is fractional ownership; you, along with like-minded folks, own land in common to achieve the common goal of good hunting.

I would like to introduce you to one of my projects to stimulate your imagination. It is called Ohoospee River Plantation or ORP for short.

#### CONCEPT

My friend, Jim Carter from Savannah, called and said, “Let’s put a sporting community together where members of the community can each build their own cabin and enjoy great hunting and the serenity of the great outdoors. Before I had time to think it over, Jim was sending me aerial photos of properties that had potential. One 1,400-acre parcel located on the Ohoospee River was worth a good look. The topo showed over four miles of river frontage with great hardwood bottoms, several natural duck ponds, as well as uplands that implied quail potential. Aerials and Google Earth™ verified most of the topo, but it also showed the uplands to be covered in pine trees. A land use map provided by the owner and a day on the ground convinced us that we had found a “diamond in the rough.” With the diversity of habitat and interesting terrain, we concluded that this could be a great fractional ownership project for people who love to hunt and enjoy the outdoors. We also decided that this would be a premier hunting property and would not include a golf course, tennis courts or a spa.

#### RESOURCES

The Ohoospee River is a relatively small river in south central Georgia. In the summer it is slow moving and rather picturesque with Spanish moss hanging from streamside hardwoods. Bass, bream and redbfin pike are plentiful in several accessible fishing holes along the river frontage. In the winter and spring the river moves a lot of water and floods the hardwood bottoms. This process enhances the productivity and sustainability of the hardwoods. Extensive hardwood bottoms with openings throughout provide excellent natural deer and turkey habitat. It was obvious that these bottoms, which drop a lot of mast in the fall and have annual natural flooding, would be excellent wood duck habitat.

The uplands turned out to be uniquely challenging. The north end of the property was about 20 feet above the bottoms and covered with young pines 10 to 15 feet tall. The south end, covered with 700 to 800 stems per acre of 20-year-old pine, was part of the historic Ohoospee Dunes laid down over 20,000 years ago by a giant windstorm. At over 80 feet above the river valley and overlooking a 30 plus acre natural duck pond, the views were going to be hard to beat once the pines were thinned. In addition to quail habitat, it was obvious this would be a great place for cabins.

#### DEVELOPMENT

ORP was designed for 30 fractional owners who would enjoy hunting quail, duck, turkey, dove and deer. Cutting and polishing this rough diamond took time, money and help from a lot of talented people. The end result was a beautiful and productive property, but several steps were required to get there.



#### ACCESS

Successful access can result in successful hunting. ORP had some perimeter roads and a few logging roads from previous timberwork. Some trails were evident from old aerial photos, but had overgrown with hardwoods and brush. Some areas that needed access didn’t have any. The project needed an upgrade of existing roads, reestablishment of previous trails and development of new roads and trails. Function and appearance are important considerations when designing and constructing an access network.

Since soils on ORP were mostly sand with some underlying clay, roads and trails were made with a mixture of sand and clay that resulted in a quiet, attractive access system. Gravel was only used in a few low areas. Sand-clay roads and trails are less expensive and much easier to maintain than either gravel or paved roads. All roads and trails were planted to bahia grass to stabilize them, as well as add cover and some food value habitat wise. As you are aware, turkey love to strip seed from mature bahia grass throughout the summer and fall.

Most roads and trails were designed to be curved; this adds visual interest to the property as it is being traversed, and it slows drivers down, which lessens wear and tear on the roads, and a curved trail adds more linear edge to the habitat.



Most of the internal trails were made wide enough to get equipment around the property for management of habitat. This width also lets enough sun reach the trails, allowing them to remain in grass and forbs that can be mowed from time to time.

#### HABITAT IMPROVEMENT

ORP had ready-made turkey, deer and duck habitat due to the great hardwood bottoms along the river. Quail habitat was mediocre to poor because most of the uplands were in heavy pine stands. Developing dove fields and quail habitat were high priorities, but that meant several management activities had to happen at once.

#### TREE THINNING

Loblolly pine plantations with trees over six feet tall cannot be considered good quail habitat. Populations of 700 to 800 trees per acre quickly shade the ground, and if prescribed burning has been done, the only thing on the ground are pine needles. This was the condition of the south end of ORP. Trees were big enough for commercial harvest, so the area was thinned to 20 to 40 trees per acre or what we call a "plantation cut" referring to the visual concept of a southern "quail plantation."

Accumulated slash piles, where truck loading was staged, were burned. These loading decks were used to plant various habitat species. The harvesting process disturbed the soil, stimulating an abundance of natural forbs to germinate, producing food and cover for quail.

#### ROLLER CHOPPING

Naturally regenerated loblolly pines on the north end of ORP were not only poor quail habitat, but too young for commercial harvest. One option would have been to wait another 20 years and harvest. This did not make sense for this project. Instead, the area was chopped with a Lawson roller-chopper leaving islands of standing pine for cover. The islands varied in size from a quarter acre to one acre. Chopping was done in two directions to ensure thorough disintegration of the pine and associated brush. This process incorporated a lot of wood into the soil that needed a year to rot. Decomposition of the chopped wood released nutrients that could be utilized by the native vegetation that regrew after the chopping.

Plantings of sorghum, millet, bicolor lespedeza and partridge peas were made following the roller chopping. Soil was limed and fertilized because the pH and fertility were both extremely low. Results were mediocre due to drought and the fact that a lot of chopping residue was still in the decomposition process. Results in the second season were excellent. Both quail and turkey immediately utilized this area. Seeing young quail during



the second summer indicates that this will be a productive area. Historically, this sandy area of Georgia was excellent quail country before it was converted to pine plantations. With proper habitat and predator management, ORP will prove that quail can thrive in this area again.

#### DOVE FIELDS

Before the pine thinning and chopping began, dove fields were cleared with a bulldozer and planted to corn, sorghum and millet. Sunflowers were planted in some areas, but wiped out by the high deer population. A traveling gun irrigation system was set up to save the fields from drought. Going the extra mile resulted in several excellent dove flights the first fall on ORP. The shape of the fields and edge around the fields resulted in both quail and turkey using the areas for bugging and seed.

#### TURKEY HABITAT

We learned from working with the property that ORP has one of the best turkey populations in Georgia. Extensive hardwood bottoms with natural openings in addition to excellent roosting areas produced great turkey habitat. Chufas were planted on some of the loading decks and in accessible open areas to further enhance the habitat. Since the ORP turkeys were not used to chufas, a couple of strips were disced through the middle of the chufa patches in late fall to expose the underground chufa. It did not take



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the turkey long to figure out what to do. They aggressively ate the chufa as did the deer. Quail probably ate some of the smaller "nuts."

#### DEER HABITAT

The same reason the turkey habitat was productive holds true for deer. Hardwood bottoms, openings and uplands make good natural habitat. The habitat was enhanced with several green field plantings. The challenge on ORP is not too few deer, but too many. Like much of the south, the deer population is out of balance. There are too many does, and everybody wants to kill a buck.

Several two-person deer stands have been placed in the bottoms, plus ample opportunity exists for tree stands, ground blinds, etc. on ORP. Cameras are used to get an idea of the overall population size and health. A doe harvesting program has been implemented which will result in better quality deer in the long-run. In the meantime, there are several "big boys" on the property, but they know the woods better than any of the hunters. They will continue to contribute to the gene pool for now.

#### DUCK HABITAT

Over four miles of the Ohoopsee River and massive bottomland that has seasonal flooding, along with several natural ponds, make ORP close to wood duck heaven. It is not unusual to see 300 to 400 ducks come into roost in the evening in the main duck pond. A hike along the river any time of year will roust up some woodies. Since the ducks are on the property year-around, they are nesting, brooding and feeding on the mast production.

A 100 wood duck nesting boxes from the Duck Conservation Society in Lyons, Georgia, were placed near ponds and streams throughout the property. In addition to enhancing nesting opportunities, two of the ponds have water control gates that allow flooding of Japanese millet and rice.

Some folks like shooting in the woods and others across the water. Blinds are strategically placed for various shooting opportunities. For those familiar with wood ducks, they are like "Star War Fighters." They can fly through a stand of trees that would take you a lot of concentration to walk through.

#### QUAIL HABITAT

Native plants on ORP include some quail habitat classics like wiregrass, broom sedge, several species of lespedeza and croton, partridge peas and many other native forbs. Fortunately, there are very few weed

species that are typically associated with old farm ground. Because there is so much natural bounty, routine management techniques such as prescribed burning, strip discing, etc. will be the norm. In addition, bicolor lespedeza and partridge pea patches have been established that will provide additional seed and cover. Huckleberry and wax myrtle on the property will also provide cover and food. All of these species work well with a two- to three-year burn rotation. Fire lanes are in place throughout the property to facilitate the early spring burning rotation.

Several shooting courses have been established throughout the uplands. This allows areas to be rested between hunts and provides additional challenges to man and dog. While the habitat is in the process of becoming more productive, I am recommending that hunters take the covey rise shot and move along. A good rule of thumb; don't push the singles. Allow them to regroup so they will have a better chance at survival.

#### PEOPLE HABITAT

ORP was designed as a hunting property that can be lived on. Approximately 100 acres out of the 1,400 was set aside for a village of cabins. The design allows for views as well as privacy. Out your front door you may overlook the big duck pond or excellent quail ground, depending on site location. Out the back door you are likely to see deer, turkey and quail. Regardless of which way you look, you will see functional wildlife habitat. A couple of small ponds have been established in the village that can be used to practice fly casting or for kids to learn how to catch bream or bass.

Historically, Native Americans used this area, probably because of nature's bounty. While hunting it is not unusual to find arrowheads or other artifacts. Look up on a clear night and the full glory of the Milky Way should provoke some interesting thoughts.

These days, human habitat typically includes paved streets, cell phones, Internet, HDTV and video games. On ORP you can have all of that except the paved streets, but your focus will be different. The miles of trails that can be traversed by ATV, horseback or walking will provide several hunting opportunities as well as a striking view of nature's subtleties. For example, ORP has an excellent population of gopher tortoises that are rare in some areas of the south. Quail will head for a gopher den if they can't find immediate cover. We have found one eastern indigo snake on the property. They are big beautiful snakes that like to eat rattlesnakes. They also like to live in the dens that gopher tortoises make. The native vegetation is strikingly diverse leading to color variations throughout the year. Sharing the wonders of Mother Nature with family, friends and youngsters in particular will ensure a future for all things natural including hunting.

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