

## **A Walk in the Woods with County Forester David Falkenham May 2009**

It never fails. Spring is here, Memorial Day is under our belts, we have had some warm weather and some of us are even sporting sunburns, but today it is rainy and cold. Just another reminder of where we live and that summer just isn't quite here yet. I would rather have a cold goose soaking rain that makes me want to make a double pot of coffee and tie a dozen flies and dream of fishing, than a blazing thunderstorm that has me thinking that my house will blow away. This is no doubt the greenest time of year and it is our reward for surviving March and April. There is no other time of year that sees so much activity in the woods, and cool wet days like this one are a perfect opportunity to get out and witness all the wildlife.

Of course, the first thing we notice this time of year is the return of the migratory birds. The early arrivals I notice each year are the ducks and geese, and of course, that silly little woodcock. Anybody who spends time in the evenings around fields, especially fields with wet alder edges, will no doubt hear the constant "peent" of the woodcock doing its mating ritual. Several steady "peents" will be followed by a whistling upward spiraling flight which culminates several hundred feet in the air with a steady fluttering and then a rapid descent back to earth where the process starts all over again. Once you learn to recognize this ritual you will always listen for it as a very early sign of spring. This ritual can go on all night long. I have been camping in May and listened to woodcock singing near my tent well past two o'clock in the morning.

Next will be the ruffed grouse, turkeys, and the dizzying array of migratory song birds. Every morning I sit on my porch in the wee hours and listen to the orchestra. I live in an area where there are lots of fields bordered by thick forest so I get to hear an endless supply of birds that rely on this type of habitat for survival. Drumming ruffed grouse, gobbling turkeys, blue headed vireos, ovenbirds, pileated woodpeckers, veerys, black throated green warblers, cardinals, robins, white throated sparrows, and chestnut sided warblers are just the tip of the iceberg. If you own land, creating and maintaining field openings bordered by dense forest with occasional partial timber harvesting (to maintain a high level of structural diversity) will benefit all of these mentioned species, and that's just the beginning.

A recent walk in the woods on my family Tree Farm was probably one of the most impressive wildlife moments I've had in quite some time. In a one hour walk with my dogs I saw turkeys, a huge porcupine, and a large black bear that was feeding within 50 feet of the porcupine, a big doe (probably pregnant), ruffed grouse, several woodcock, ducks and geese. The bear gave me quite a show by bolting from the clover field where it (and the porcupine) had been feeding. It then stopped on a stump pile and turned to face me from only fifty yards away. It stared at me for quite some time popping his jaws and grunting at me, clearly agitated that I had bothered it during dinner. Maybe there were cubs nearby; it's probably just as well that I left.

This property was devastated by the 2007 wind storm and we clear-cut a lot of acreage to salvage the timber. In the process we used some of the timber sale money to create several clover fields that are wildlife magnets. Now the combination of regenerating clear cuts, dense woods and clover fields provides an incredible diversity of habitat and it is only going to get better with time. This proves what I have always believed, that the best wildlife management is through active forest management that includes timber cutting and the maintenance of permanent grassy openings. Contact a local consulting forester to find out what wildlife potential you can unlock on your property.

My latest walk in the woods was on a Tree Farm in Orford, as part of a wildlife workshop put on by myself and other Cooperative Extension staff. I was there with a great group, including adults, dogs, and toddlers. We were in an old clear-cut bordered by forest and fields and once again I was surrounded by

wildlife (and not just dogs and toddlers). UNH Cooperative Extension Wildlife Specialist Matt Tarr identified several different bird species, including all that I mentioned before plus sharp shinned hawks and cooper's hawks, not to mention signs of deer, moose, snowshoe hare and bear. It is no doubt that dense stands of clear-cut hardwoods mixed with mature forest and some fields are essential habitat for the nesting and brooding of many of our songbird species who only have a couple of months to hatch, fledge and raise their chicks and prepare for the long flight south later this summer and fall. Young clear-cuts such as this will also attract snowshoe hare which, by itself, will attract a whole host of predators including raptors, coyote, bobcat, fisher, and possibly Canada Lynx.

As we go into this summer you may be lucky enough to witness wildlife raising their young. Deer with fawns, moose with calves, bears with cubs, fox with kits, and birds with chicks may provide some of you with early morning and late evening wildlife watching enjoyment. For your safety, and theirs, please watch from a distance and never disturb wildlife that is with its young. I can tell you from vivid experience that an angry mother moose defending her calf from a menacing forester and his dogs will win every time, not to mention an angry mother grouse, but those are other stories for another time....

For more information on how you or your neighbor can manage a woodlot for timber and a diversity of wildlife species feel free to contact me at the Grafton County UNH Cooperative Extension Office at 787-6944 or e-mail me at [dave.falkenham@unh.edu](mailto:dave.falkenham@unh.edu).

Enjoy your summer!