



Northern bobwhite require open landscapes and frequent disturbance. Photo: Ben Robinson

SOUTHERN BLUE RIDGE HABITAT IMPROVEMENT

2020 Grant Report

REPORT PREPARED FOR
The Georgia Ornithological Society

BY

The Nature
Conservancy 
Georgia

With generous support from the Georgia Ornithological Society in 2020, and despite the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, The Nature Conservancy in Georgia continued critical stewardship work to improve the habitat quality in the Chattahoochee National Forest for declining species such as the Golden-winged Warbler, Cerulean Warbler, Ruffed Grouse and Dark-eyed Junco. Located within the Southern Blue Ridge region, the Chattahoochee National Forest is part of a resilient corridor through which species migrate to escape the effects of climate change, underscoring the importance of a well-managed landscape for the benefit of all species.

Over a century of fire suppression in the Southern Blue Ridge has impacted the quality of habitat that many neotropical migratory breeding birds and resident bird populations rely upon for survival. A major obstacle in mitigating adverse impacts is a lack of capacity for prescribed fire application within the United States Forest Service (USFS).

TNC's Southern Blue Ridge Program supports partners and state agencies within the region to return fire to the mountains. Impact on a large scale requires long-term partnerships that contribute skilled technicians and equipment to achieve desired outcomes. A leader in restoring habitat through the prescribed fire, TNC burns more acres than any other private organization. We are proud to partner with the USFS within the Chattahoochee-Oconee and Sumter National Forests and expand capacity.

Funding from the Georgia Ornithological Society supported the cost of a seasonal burn crew, providing critical match dollars to leverage additional grant funding from the US Department of Agriculture.

Project Objectives

- 1. Apply prescribed fire on 7,500 acres of lands owned and managed by federal and state partners, as well as TNC preserves. Research indicates that habitat types in the Southern Blue Ridge need a three-year fire return interval until they reach the "maintenance" phase, then this interval will extend to 5-7 years. Maintaining in-roads on previously burned units will be a priority as well as first entry burns in strategically located units.*

During the January – February 2020 fire season, the team was challenged by heavy rains in the early months with near record level rainfall with over 22" of rain and never more than 4 days between rain events. The COVID-19 pandemic began to heavily impact our work in March. As the situation developed, we prioritized the health and safety of our burn crews and complied with state and TNC-mandated quarantine policies by limiting travel distances and the number interactions with people. To add to the complexities, The U.S. Forest Service, the primary partner and land owner with whom this team provides work, mandated a cessation of all prescribed fire operations across the entire southern region out of concerns related to impacts to air quality and asked that any field work operations be done using tools with limited to no ability to cause unintended injuries with the intent to lessen the burden on the local healthcare system (i.e. chainsaw use was prohibited). TNC likewise mandated similar restrictions but allowed for a few small targeted prescribed fire operations with minimal chances of impacts to the public, such as at Reed Branch Wet Meadow. Despite these weighty challenges, our teams were able to burn 6,782 acres, or ~90% of our acreage goal. We installed and maintained over 15 miles of fire line, reduced four acres of hazardous fuels, improved 18 acres of woodland and five acres of mountain bog habitat, and treated approximately 1 acre of kudzu and other non-native invasive plant species. Where prescribed fire was not logistically feasible, mechanical controls with hand tools were deployed to reduce the midstory and co-dominant woody species to improve the overall grass and forest composition.

The southern blue ridge team participated on three burns led by TNC on the Gambrell tract, Heggies Rock Preserve, and Reed Branch Wet Meadow preserve for over 380 acres and assisted on an additional 13 burns with the US Forest Service and GA Dept. of Natural Resources for over 6,400 acres for the combined total noted below.

Unit/Preserve	Partner Acreage	
Blackwell Bridge	USFS	250
Lake Cherokee	USFS	120
Gambrell exp 2	DNR	250
Long Nose	USFS	25
Pine Mountain	USFS	50
Grapevine	USFS	150
Pine Mountain	USFS	215
Ga Mountain Orchard	USFS	353
Chambers Branch Hickory Flat Grapevine	USFS	3096
Garland North	USFS	120
Double Knob	USFS	327
Jones Creek West	USFS	515
Flint Creek	USFS	1000
Heggies Rock Preserve	TNC	123
Buck Shoals	DNR	180
Reed Branch Wet Meadows	TNC	8
Total		6782

2. *Evaluate the success of the land management approach by collecting data from established monitoring plots within the restoration area. Data from multiple years will determine trends that will further the partnership's ability to adapt its management approach where applicable.*

This team was able to perform Browns Transects monitoring on no less than 10 transects collecting data on impacts of fuels that characterizes the amount of dead fuels within burn units documenting the quantity of dead fuels in the size ranges of 0-0.25", 0.25"-1"; 1"-3", and over 3". Habitat and vegetation data was collected from 6 rare prairies and 120 half-meter plots at Coosa Valley Prairies documenting the percent cover of vegetation classes and presence/absence of certain rare indicator species . The larger burns that were completed early in the season by the USFS were stated as targets for bobwhite quail and general songbird habitat. The habitat on Reed Branch Wet Meadow (RBWM) is known to be used by species that can utilize relatively small isolated grasslands, like eastern meadowlarks. During the prescribed fire at RBWM a pair of both bald eagles and ospreys were noted flying over the preserve and Lake Chatuge.

Conclusion

Thank you for the Georgia Ornithological Society's support of the important work that TNC is leading in the Southern Blue Ridge. With your help, we are continuing to improve critical habitat for plants, birds and other wildlife to thrive. Partners like you make an incredible difference in our efforts and help ensure a lasting natural legacy for future generations.

