

2014 Terrell Habitat Grant Report

Expansion of Prescribed Fire in Middle Georgia

Nathan Klaus
GA DNR
Nongame Conservation Section
116 Rum Creek Drive
Forsyth GA 31029
(478) 994-1438
Nathan.Klaus@dnr.state.ga.us

Introduction: This grant proposal sought to expand prescribed fire use in middle Georgia by hiring a new seasonal fire crew, taking the DNR's fire program from one to two seasonal crews. The original request from GOS was for \$77,082 to help supply fire equipment such as personal protective equipment (PPE), a new vehicle and to fund crew salaries. The GOS committee granted \$30,000 toward the purchase of the new fire crew truck. Our original proposal included some very lofty goals. We are pleased to say that with the help of GOS many of these goals have been achieved!

The project's goals and accomplishments:

- 1) Increase burning in middle Georgia to at least 10,000 acres in 2014.

In 2014 the new west central crew burned 12,394 acres. In 2015 this crew burned 13,388 acres!

- 2) Improve bird habitat for grassland and woodland birds in central Georgia, thereby increasing populations of rare and declining grassland species.

Project areas have undergone great increases in grassland bird habitat, and while it is difficult to measure bird response, we have seen some notable changes. Bachman's Sparrows on Fall Line Sandhills WMA have increased from an estimated 8 pairs in 2006 to over 40 pairs in 2015. Bachman's Sparrow now occurs on Joe Kurz WMA in one of our habitat restoration areas. Prior to 2014 this species was not known from this WMA. Loggerhead Shrike, American Kestrel, Eastern Meadowlark and Henslow's Sparrow have all been documented from our habitat restoration area on Panola Mountain State Park. Prior to 2014 most of these species were not known from this site. There are many other examples of success, but these are some of the most notable.

- 3) Acquire necessary equipment for supporting a second crew in future years.

We had the needed equipment to outfit a second seasonal crew in 2014 and 2015, and are conducting interviews now for our 2016 season.

- 4) Train more young professionals in the importance and proper use of prescribed fire.

Seven crew members have been fire trained; most of them were serving as Americorps/Student Conservation Association interns. Most have gone on to graduate school or taken permanent jobs in our field.

- 5) Increase our efficiency in conducting prescribed fires by reducing crew travel requirements between south, middle and north Georgia.

This is a hard one to measure. However I am aware of at least 8 good burn days last (2015) season when both the south Georgia and the west central Georgia crews were burning simultaneously. Not only does this represent reduced travel, but also more fire on the ground by making the most of good burn weather.

- 6) Improve birdwatching and the quality of outdoors experiences on state lands by:

- a. Providing better habitat for rare and declining species. (See answers to goal #2.)

- b. Conduct litter pickup on key tracts frequented by birders.

Litter removal was conducted by fire crews on five tracts.

- c. Control illegal use of ATVs and other illegal activities on state lands through reinforcement of gates and other structures -- performed by the fire crew -- making for a safer and more pleasant birding experience.

Illegal ATV use was combated on four tracts as of last season by putting up gates, cables and other deterrents as well as placing signage. Furthermore, the 2015 crew created a new campground for paddlers, anglers and anyone else (birders!) on the Flint River. Plans are in the works for the 2016 crew to create a second campground and develop a 'bluewater' canoe trail that would allow for a three-day paddle.

- 7) Introduce fire onto several new properties including Camp Thunder (Flint River Council of the Boy Scouts), Callaway Gardens (held by the state as a conservation easement), Almo Plantation, and the Fort Perry Tract.

All of these tracts were burned by seasonal crew in 2014, and many again in 2015.

- 8) Conduct additional non-fire habitat management activities to improve habitat for declining birds in middle Georgia such as tree planting (longleaf pine and shortleaf pine), native grass planting, exotic species control, bog restoration, and hardwood control.

We planted 250,000 trees in 2014, most of them on Fall Line Sandhills WMA, and planted 55 acres of native grass. We also controlled invasive species on 30 acres, restored bog habitat on 2 acres, and controlled competing hardwoods on 45 acres.

This work could not have been conducted without a crew truck. Purchasing new trucks is always a big obstacle for the state of Georgia. Having most of the purchase price in hand specifically intended for this use made this difficult process much easier. The west central Georgia fire crew is grateful to GOS for the continued support of their work. We would like the GOS committee to know that every piece of equipment that GOS helps us purchase is proudly labeled with a GOS sticker so that crews, cooperators, volunteers and the general public are aware of the role GOS is playing in our activities. Thank you, GOS!

Figure 1. The 2015 fire crew relaxing in the new truck after a hard day. Notice the GOS sticker!



Figure 2. The west central Georgia crew truck at the Joe Kurz WMA.

