



# A Call to Stewardship: McRae's Pond Grows More than Trees

*By Allen Varner, Stewardship Forester,  
Alabama Forestry Commission*

**J**ust outside of Eutaw is a TREASURE Forest that promotes family, wildlife, aesthetics and education. Known as McRae's Pond, this property certainly exemplifies multiple use management as on-the-ground activities range from managed stands of loblolly pine to garden beds of cultivated blackberries. Such a diverse range of activities keeps Dr. Finley McRae and his wife, Bette, very busy. They retired to life on the farm in 2005 and like many retirees, look back and muse, "I'm busier now than when I was working full time!"

The farm has been a family gathering place for nearly 30 years. During that time the family has grown from 10 to 27 members. Everyone still gathers for Thanksgiving festivities each year, which includes square dancing in the barn and a traditional Brunswick stew cooked over an open fire. And speaking of gathering, the five boys and one girl live all over the United States, so making it back to the farm is always a homecoming event!

The McRaes' youngest son, Colin, resides on the property with his family. Colin attended Mississippi State University and uses the knowledge he acquired at school to manage the property. The family also has an on-site steward who assists with all facets of managing the farm. They work as a team to make the property productive, and when they come across something new, they are quick to seek out assistance. In fact, Dr. McRae says he adheres to the scripture, "There is wisdom in many counselors."

(Proverbs 15:22) He noted that the McRae family owes a special debt of gratitude for the contributions of Harold Tucker, the contractor; Kenneth White, the carpenter; Dr. Richard Kaminski, "Pappa Duck;" Steve Brown, Southern Aquatech; Tim Washburne, former county forester with the Alabama Forestry Commission; and the late David Nelson, wildlife biologist with the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries District III.

## **Wildlife Management**

At just a little over 800 acres, the property had two small lakes when it was acquired. However, the lake dams were breached and in need of repair. One of the first decisions made was to construct a 9-acre pond. After much family deliberation, this pond construction project inspired the name of the property, "McRae's Pond."

One of the more interesting features of McRae's Pond is a 75-acre marsh. Named Senior



Marsh, it is managed to induce the growth of early succession plants. A water control structure was installed, and mid-succession willows were windrowed and burned to allow early succession plants such as wild millet and smart weed to grow for waterfowl consumption. Senior Marsh now fulfills the feeding, loafing, and resting needs of migratory waterfowl during fall, winter, and spring.

To further enhance wildlife habitat, three moist soil impoundments were developed to provide winter foraging and roosting for migrating waterfowl. Wild millet is propagated within the impoundments to provide waterfowl forage. Over 22 individually numbered wood duck boxes have been erected and are used to collect nesting and site-utilization data of the impoundment areas.

The McRaes have an active deer management program. Does are selectively taken annually and young bucks are allowed to walk. The buck policy is to take only mature bucks that are 8-points or better with antlers outside the ears, and the hunter must mount the buck if they decide to harvest it. Supporting the deer management program are 12 food plots ranging in size from a half acre to five acres. Depending on the time of the year, the food plots are planted in either cool or warm season forage for deer and turkey.



Feeding stations and mineral blocks have been established for supplemental feeding. Hard and soft mast trees and shrubs have been planted around the food plots including saw-toothed oak, gobbler oak, southern crabapple, Russian olive, Chickasaw plum, and persimmon. Additional plantings include blueberries, blackberries, and apple trees.

Of course, the key to wildlife management is sound timber management. An unproductive hay field was planted in loblolly pine to create a barrier, provide early cover, and enhance productivity. Not long ago, a 43-acre stand was harvested and site prepared leaving windrows to provide cover and travel corridors. To increase habitat diversity, a 10-acre portion of the harvest area was left fallow to promote more diverse wildlife cover. And because of the substantial amount of bottomland, best management practices (BMPs) for forestry are strictly followed. Recently, 41 acres of loblolly was commercially thinned to open the canopy and stimulate native vegetation. A three-year prescribed burning regiment has created the desired understory structure promoting native plants while controlling competing vegetation.

## Aesthetics

As with any TREASURE Forest and especially with one that has received the Helene

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*TREASURE Forest landowners Finley and Bette McRae survey the vineyard with their youngest son, Colin.*

Mosley Memorial TREASURE Forest award, multiple use management is fundamental and almost becomes second nature. While McRae's Pond lists wildlife management and aesthetics as their two primary objectives, timber management, recreation, and education are all objectives of the landowners at one time or another. Because the McRaes live on the property, they take a very special interest in aesthetics.

Butterfly bush and other flowering plants such as "yes-terday-today-tomorrow," Burr oak, camellia, hydrangea, azaleas, English hawthorne, and contorted Filbert have been planted around the homes and cabins to attract several species of butterflies. River birch trees have been planted around both of the small ponds.

When needed, lower limbs are pruned; dead trees are removed and open areas around the facilities are mowed. Areas around the buildings are landscaped with shrubs and trees and mulched. October red and sunset maples greet visitors along the entrance drive.



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## Education

The educational activities on McRae's Pond are numerous. Events have included leadership workshops, "Outback America," and university ornithology and limnology class field trips.

The McRaes have a strong civic responsibility. They have hosted the "Citizens for a Better Greene County" conference and picnic. "Leadership Greene County" has held several workshops exploring future industrial and business opportunities in Greene County.

They also support and make their property available to "Promise Keepers" retreats. The McRaes believe in Promise Keepers' mission which is to ignite and unite men to become passionate followers of Jesus Christ through the effective communication of seven promises to God, their fellowmen, family, church, and the world. Promise Keepers' vision is simply put in three words: "Men Transformed Worldwide."

Findley and Bette established the "True Vine Foundation" by setting aside 70 acres for the purpose of providing facilities for Christian-based ministries and activities. A really unique complement to the Foundation is the Odyssey III High Ropes Adventure Course. In addition to the high ropes, the True Vine staff constructed 10 low ropes elements (3 Trust Falls, 3 Ship to Shore, Spider Web, Log Jam, Great Wall, Amazon, Zig Zag, Mohawk

Walk, Whale Watch, and King's Finger). The high and low ropes adventure courses were built to instill trust, communication, leadership, and team-building skills. The "Challenge by Choice" principle is used with participants on the courses to encourage pushing their limits, but not overstepping them.

Lastly, Colin McRae has hosted the Ducks Unlimited youth hunting event with the Eutaw Chapter for the past several years with the support of the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries, DCNR Marine Police, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Gun safety, waterfowl identification, and use of working hunting dogs are a few examples of the activities that are held at the annual event. Another of Dr. McRae's sons, Hunter, is a certified instructor for the National Sporting Clays Association and comes out to the hunt to teach proper techniques of firearm shooting.

Yes, McRae's Pond is a busy place where the family gathers to fellowship. Wildlife management is the key component to the family's multiple use philosophy. The beauty of nature is displayed throughout the activities on the farm, and education about the property and for the property is done with a thankful heart. According to Dr. McRae, "McRae's Pond exists only because of the grace of God. The desires and fervent prayers of the family are that all that exists here and all that is done here be a blessing to Almighty God."

Dr. Finley and Bette McRae are true stewards of the land and McRae's Pond is very deserving of the Helene Mosley Memorial TREASURE Forest Award. ♣

