

# Good Fires, Bad Fires, and Fire Ants

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Photos by Jason Barrett

**C**ayden, my 4-year-old grandson, got into some fire ants recently and after I brushed them off and dried his tears, we came to the mutual agreement that we don't like those particular bugs. There are a lot of things in nature that we don't care for. Things like horse flies and mosquitoes. Cogongrass and kudzu. Hurricanes and wildfires. The list goes on and on. We can't do much about bugs. We can poison ant mounds and fog mosquitos, but does it really do any good? I've sprayed herbicide on cogongrass and kudzu which knocks them back, but to eradicate them is so expensive. Hurricanes and tornados are forces of nature, so dream on about slowing these down. And wildfires? Well, some wildfires *are* preventable.

Preventable . . . I like that word. 'Prevent' means to keep something bad from happening. And we all know what Smokey

Bear says . . . "Only YOU can prevent wildfires." At the Alabama Forestry Commission, we *do* prevent wildfires. We accomplish this through education, from school programs and forestry tours, to public service announcements. We also prevent wildfires by doing mitigation burns. This is when you conduct a prescribed burn on a piece of property before a wildfire has the chance to destroy it.

One such wildfire mitigation burn was recently performed at the Audubon Bird Sanctuary on Dauphin Island. The bird sanctuary is located in what we call the Wildland/Urban Interface. This is where people's homes and nature converge, or sometimes collide, with each other. With approximately 100 acres of pristine timber, hiking trails, boardwalks, beach, and a beautiful freshwater lake, it is visited by tourists, nature lovers, and bird watchers

from across the country. This birding refuge borders the sugar white dunes of the Gulf of Mexico to the south; an RV campground with hundreds of campsites, most of them full, to the east; and to the north and west are homes of varying values . . . varying from expensive to you've-got-to-be-kidding-me expensive. In other words, you don't want to burn that baby down.

Prescribed burning should never be taken lightly, but prescribed fire lit in close proximity to neighborhoods requires even more detailed planning, preparation, patience, and skillful execution than usual. And when you add in the extremely heavy fuel loading of this tract, well, the intensity goes through the roof. Burn managers who put their name on burn plans and burn permits are responsible not only for the fire they light, but also for the smoke it creates.

Planning included a meeting between all parties with a vested interest in the sanctuary and its surrounding property. The Audubon Bird Sanctuary is owned and maintained by Dauphin Island Park and Beach Board, who requested a visit by the Alabama Forestry Commission to look over the property and discuss ways to limit the potential severity of a future wildfire . . . a wildfire such as the one that occurred in 2011. The standing, dead timber is a reminder of the devastation that this wildfire caused four years ago. Boardwalks that meander through the forest were turned to white ash and the local volunteer fire department lost a firefighting vehicle to the blaze. Luckily, no homes were destroyed and no one was injured. Both the homeowners association and the Dauphin Island Fire and Rescue welcomed the idea of a safer forest. Representatives of the Audubon birding community were also present at the planning meeting to voice their opinion on the burn. We didn't want to ruffle any feathers, so to speak, and none were. The planning is in the details and we had a lot of details.

The heavy fuels on this property include Chinese privet and tallow (both invasive species), smilax vines and saw briars (both considered what we call 'ladder' fuels), gallberry and palmetto, with some highly volatile cogon-grass (also invasive) thrown in for good measure. These fuels are all draped in longleaf pine straw, straw that has been falling and accumulating for decades. And to top it all off, the soil has a component of peat mixed in it. Dry peat will burn and smolder for days. Fuels that are this challenging affect the planning in many ways.

Things to consider include width of the control lines, size of the blocks to be burned, techniques used in the firing operation, and the amount of personnel and equipment on site during the burn. Weather forecasts are studied, long-range and local. Wind speed, direction, fuel moisture,

and days since significant rainfall are all considered. Also, on-site visits are made prior to the day of the burn to confirm actual conditions forecasted.

The morning of the prescribed burn was cold, which was good. The cooler temperatures helped keep the big timber from scorching. According to our test fire, the wind direction would be close to perfect, blowing the smoke out over the Gulf and away from the town, and not allowing the flames to race towards any homes. The firing technique was simple; a backing fire all day. We kept the flames as low and slow as possible. We didn't want the fire gathering steam and freight-training through the tops of trees. The guys patrolling the fire lines stayed vigilant and ate a lot of smoke. The debris being blown around from burning palmettos and vines can be alarmingly heavy, but the humidity was still high enough to prevent ignition when embers floated across our lines. The guys kept hand tools and pumpers at the ready. The local volunteer fire department staged their equipment close to the houses and were used in support. We ate lunch on the fire line. Hard work turns a good snack into a great meal. Sardines taste like grilled grouper and viennas taste like filet mignon. Comradery and teamwork always help to improve the flavor of any meal.

The goal was to burn three small tracts on the property; we finished two. Although we started early, time and weather conditions caught up with us by late in the afternoon. The burn went well. I'm not saying it was flawless, but it went as well as could be expected for the conditions that we were dealing with. We had a few spot-overs. Anyone who says they have never had any jumps on their burn hasn't done much burning. The real test is whether you're prepared for that spot-over, or if you can handle

a wind shift or a piece of equipment breaking down. Thorough preparation, careful planning, and thoughtful execution can and most likely *will* be the difference between success and failure.

I recently went back to the bird sanctuary to see what it looked like after the green-up. It was beautiful. I know we did a good job, and I know the burn was a success. I'm not saying it was a success because of what I saw on my return visit. I'm saying it was a success because when I received payment for our services, I also received praises from the landowner for the job our guys did. They reported the overall approval by guests visiting the sanctuary. The adjacent landowners have also expressed their gratitude for the hazard of a potential wildfire being reduced. And they all are hoping we do more burning for them this upcoming year.

Now, if we could just do something about those fire ants . . . ☹️

