



RIVERWOOD

A Dream Comes True

The Wood family enjoys sharing time together at Riverwood: Andrew and his wife Stephanie, Luke, Suzanne, and Stan, along with faithful companion, Jack.

By Allen Varner, Stewardship Forester, Alabama Forestry Commission

Nestled along the Mulberry River in south Cullman County is Riverwood, the TREASURE Forest of Stan and Suzanne Wood. ‘Riverwood’ began as a dream, as Stan always wanted to own land on the river. Having a dream is good, but it takes time – as do most things worth having – and it takes hard work. Time spent at Riverwood is truly a labor of love for Stan as he has been able to realize his dream and live his passion.

Following his graduation from the University of Alabama in the early 1980s with a business degree, Stan and Suzanne married. They moved to Lake Charles, Louisiana, where he worked as a trucker in the oil field industry, while she finished college and taught school. Returning to Alabama in 1988, he worked for Alabama Proteins in Hanceville and purchased his first tract of land, 83 acres in the Black Bottom area of Cullman County. In 1995, the Woods started a trucking company in the area. Suzanne split her time between teaching preschool and helping Stan with the business. As Stan says, “the timing was pretty good,” so they sold the company in 2006. They then bought the tract along the Mulberry River and have since accumulated timberland in Blount, Cullman, Greene, and Mobile counties. Detailed forest management plans are followed for each of these properties.

The primary tract, Riverwood Outdoors, is managed as a hunting lodge and licensed quail preserve. Hunting operations begin with opening day of dove season in early September and continue through turkey season at the end of April. The rest of the year is busy with farming, logging, prescribed burning, and other activities to promote the hunting operation. All logging, hauling, road building, and construction are done in-house with

company-owned equipment and crews employed by Riverwood. Stan wears lots of hats . . . in addition to holding a commercial driver’s license (CDL) and being a professional logging manager, he is also well-qualified as a certified prescribed burn manager and certified pesticide applicator.

Riverwood’s forests are intensely managed for both wildlife habitat and long-rotation timber production. Most of the property was formerly owned by major timber companies and was managed as loblolly pine plantations. Trees were grown at a very tight spacing to maximize fiber production. This outcome resulted in a completely closed canopy forest with very little wildlife value because minimal sunlight reached the forest floor. These plantations were opened up by thinning crowded stands to more park-like densities which are now thinned early and often. Old logging decks were cleared, expanded, and planted with clovers and small grains. Some fields were left fallow to provide cover and bedding areas. The outcome is an open forest with a lush herbaceous ground cover providing excellent habitat for ground-nesting birds such as quail and turkey, as well as other game and non-game species.

While first developing the property, Stan relied on advice from consulting foresters and wildlife biologists, as well as the Blount and Cullman County offices of the Natural Resources Conservation Service, Soil and Water Conservation District, and the Alabama Forestry Commission. He also enrolled properties in several cost-share programs that helped him get started with developing fire lanes, site prep, tree planting, and controlling invasive species.



In the beginning, Stan's idea of wildlife management was installing a green field. By working with these various professional agencies, he began to realize that wildlife habitat is much more than a green field. It is managing the entire property through thinning, spraying, and burning. Methods include planting or encouraging wildlife-friendly trees to grow (such as Chickasaw plum, southern crabapple, and various oak species), as well as manipulating the habitat to allow sunlight to reach the ground to produce a lush and dense herbaceous layer. Approximately 10 percent or 400 acres of the property are held in some type of food crop, depending on the season. In summer, he plants corn, sunflowers, or soybeans. Crops are left standing throughout the year to feed wildlife. In winter, grass crops such as clover and wheat are planted. Since taking this holistic approach, Stan has noticed an increase in the number of quail. Now, most evenings, when Stan and Suzanne sit on the front porch, it's a common occurrence to hear the bobwhite call.

Realizing the value of working with organizations that share the same conservation ethic, Stan has joined the National Wild Turkey Federation, Quality Deer Management Association, and Quail Unlimited.

Although wildlife management is Riverwood's primary objective, Stan does not neglect his timber management. Inferior trees that are crooked, forked, or damaged are removed from the forest, leaving the best trees to grow into saw logs. When harvesting operations are performed, the pulpwood is hauled to Louisiana Pacific in Hanceville and saw logs are hauled to Jasper Lumber. Clear cutting is used as needed when trees reach maturity, in excessive wind-damaged areas, and in pine beetle-damaged areas. After a clear cut, the site is chemically treated and either replanted with genetically-improved loblolly seedlings or converted to longleaf pine. Since 2010, about 200 acres have been converted from loblolly to longleaf.

During thinning operations, quality hard- and soft-mast producing trees are marked and left as a wildlife food source. Openings are created to provide food plots and fallow openings are left throughout the forest. Fruit trees have been planted along roadsides to provide additional food and establish wildlife viewing opportunities. Nesting boxes are installed for blue birds, martins, woodpeckers, and wood ducks. Bushes are selected based on their wildlife benefits and are protected during logging operations.

After thinning, stands are treated with herbicide to control woody competition. A regular prescribed burning program is used to provide additional control of mid-story hardwoods. An aggressive herbicide treatment program is used to control non-native invasive species such as Chinese privet, kudzu, and mimosa.

Another priority at Riverwood is providing good access throughout the property. Daylighting roads, then planting road edges with clovers and wildflowers not only helps with road maintenance but also doubles as linear wildlife openings. Where necessary, roads are graveled and culvert pipes installed to help control erosion.

In total, pine stands are separated by about 50 miles of graveled roads. The roads serve a dual purpose, not only offering

(Continued on page 6)

RIVERWOOD

(Continued from page 5)



access, but also acting as a fire break for an intensive prescribed burn program and to keep fire out of hardwood areas. Much like a checker board, the roads divide tracts into approximately 40-acre blocks that are burned on a rotating basis. Using this checker board analogy, one year Stan burns the red squares and the next year he burns the black squares, so that every two years the entire property is burned.

Riverwood is truly an interesting place. To help record its colorful history – which includes bootlegging operations, grist mills next to the river, and a Methodist Church that had to go underground during the Civil War – local residents have been interviewed and their conversations documented. Another historical and educational item of interest on the property is old Shiloh Cemetery, which has been restored and contains about 87 markers. The names, along with birth and death dates have been documented.

The Woods have hosted several agencies' educational events at Riverwood over the past few years. The Cullman County Forestry Planning Committee held a TREASURE Forest Landowner tour here in 2010. The Natural Resources Conservation Service held tree identification, as well as wildlife and timber stand improvement classes in 2010 and 2011. In 2013, the Alabama Forestry Commission held a two-day training session on tree identification on the property. The Cullman County Future Farmers of America 'Forestry Judging' contest, sponsored by the Cullman County Soil and Water Conservation District, was held at Riverwood in October 2013. The local Boy Scouts conducted their 'Camporees' in 2013 with over 100 scouts attending, and have also held two campouts this past year. Finally, the Alabama Natural Resources Council's 2015 Forestry Field Day Event for the North Region was hosted here.

Stan's time and labor have been rewarding, with Riverwood receiving certification as a Stewardship Forest, a TREASURE Forest, and a Certified Family Tree Farm. Additionally, it was also the first privately-owned property in North Alabama to be certified FSC compliant. There has been other recognition. Because of his dedication to conservation, Stan was named Wildlife Conservationist of the Year by the Cullman County Soil & Water Conservation District in 2012. Because of their commitment to good land stewardship and education, Stan and Suzanne were winners of the Helene Mosley Memorial TREASURE Forest Award in 2014.

Riverwood Outdoors, while certainly a dream come true, is also an excellent example of a TREASURE Forest. The goal of the Wood family is to continue to enhance the property for multiple uses, providing opportunities for both present and future generations to enjoy. Stan says it very well, "As a steward of the land, as a Christian and responsible owner, it is our right and a great honor to be able to do what we do!"[®]

