

# Greenebriar: *Something of the Divine*

*By Robert Loper, TREASURE Forest Landowner*

**A** native of Tuscaloosa, Alabama, I have spent most of my life here. Although our family did not own forest land, I spent a lot of time in the woods and developed a deep fascination with the forest at a young age. My grandfather was a logger, and my dad, Jack Loper, was a registered forester. He managed land acquisition at Gulf States Paper, and luckily, I had many opportunities to visit different forests across Alabama with him.

After graduating with three degrees from the University of Alabama, I began a career in the chemical industry. My work turned into a technical sales job, which required me to travel extensively. I decided it might be good to purchase some timberland for investment purposes, and also to give me an outlet for the stress of travelling. My brother-in-law's aunt, Mary Morgan, owned some property in Greene County. Since she was an absentee landowner, I inquired about purchasing a portion of the land.

There was interest in selling, so my father helped me evaluate the tract and present a fair offer for it. As my resources were limited, I purchased only the north portion of the property comprising 286 acres. Here the story of 'Greenebriar' began. The name

comes from Greene County, and the amazing number of briars on the land!

In the beginning, the farm was open with about 85 percent old agricultural fields. The other areas were primarily in bottomland hardwoods. I had been attracted to this property because of the approximately three-quarters of a mile frontage on the beautiful Sipsey River on the northern border. Brush Creek, which feeds into the Sipsey, also flows through the tract. My new investment faced several challenges: the fields were beginning to become overgrown, some areas of timber had been high-graded, and the roads were poor or non-existent. Since I had a limited budget, my first purchase was a 1964 John Deere 400 industrial-grade tractor for \$4,500. I used this old tractor to start maintaining the property and establishing roads.

The turning point for what would eventually become a TREASURE Forest came in 1991 when I married Kathryn Hall (Loper). Kathy was a veterinarian and expressed a true love for the land. Her first request after our marriage was to purchase the remaining lands owned by Mary Morgan. This brought the size of Greenebriar to a total of 522 acres. At this time, Kathy became my equal partner in setting the direction for the management of the property.

Kathy's philosophy was that we were stew-



ards of the land. We tried to uphold that responsibility by following forestry best management practices, and making plans to also enhance the wildlife habitat so the farm could be used by all types of non-game and game species. She also wanted this to be done in economical ways that caused the least impact on the environment. We have continued to do most of the work on the farm ourselves, assisted by our friend Jim Jeter (a forester now retired from the Alabama Forestry Commission).

Our primary TREASURE Forest management objective is timber production for income, and to improve the health of the stand as an investment. The secondary emphasis is wildlife habitat enhancement for recreational purposes such as hunting as well as viewing non-game species of wildlife. Utilizing the 'MyLandPlan.org' website, I maintain a running journal of all activities on the property.

### Forest Management Accomplishments for Timber

We converted 85 percent of the land from open, soybean fields to loblolly pine plantation, mixed hardwood and loblolly pine, and solid hardwood. After initial establishment of loblolly, we began harvesting blocks to break up the homogeneous nature of the stands. Over a 30-year span, we've conducted three thinnings. Over the last 15 years or so, we have made 'selective cuts' to create different-age class stands of timber. To preserve natural regeneration, no site prep was used on stands where three species of oaks and loblolly pine are planted. All hardwood bottoms along the Sipsey River and Brush Creek have been retained. We're real proud of the cypress which will probably never be cut.

A prescribed fire regime consists of burning all pines on a three-year rotation to reduce fuel and undesirable species. We burn three to four stands each year, but no more than 100 acres per year.

Cogongrass has been eradicated on three sites, while privet was controlled through a USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) cost-share on two stands totaling 30 acres.

Approximately 8 miles of all interior roads have been 'day-lighted' and sprayed to promote herbaceous understory. Road grades are maintained to ensure water drainage. All boundary lines are well marked and tagged with signs.

### Forest Management Accomplishments for Wildlife

All stands have fire lanes that double as linear food plots and natural forage. Another 20 acres of openings are maintained as food plots. Of that, we typically plant about 12 acres every year, spread among 16 or so food plots. We've actually seen a huge quality increase in the deer population, because there were not many when we first acquired the property. We have even noticed that antler growth is better, and the health of does and fawns has improved.



Although I do not hunt, I enhance established habitat to support wild quail covey population. This is accomplished by implementing a strict prescribed burning regime and thinning operation. Strip disking is utilized in these plots to help partridge pea and other natural seeds reproduce, promoting healthy quail habitat. Selective mowing provides bugging habitat for turkeys and foraging habitat for quail. Young plantations and created edge provide cover and nesting habitat. I also participate in the 'Wildpower' program to plant and maintain transmission lines.

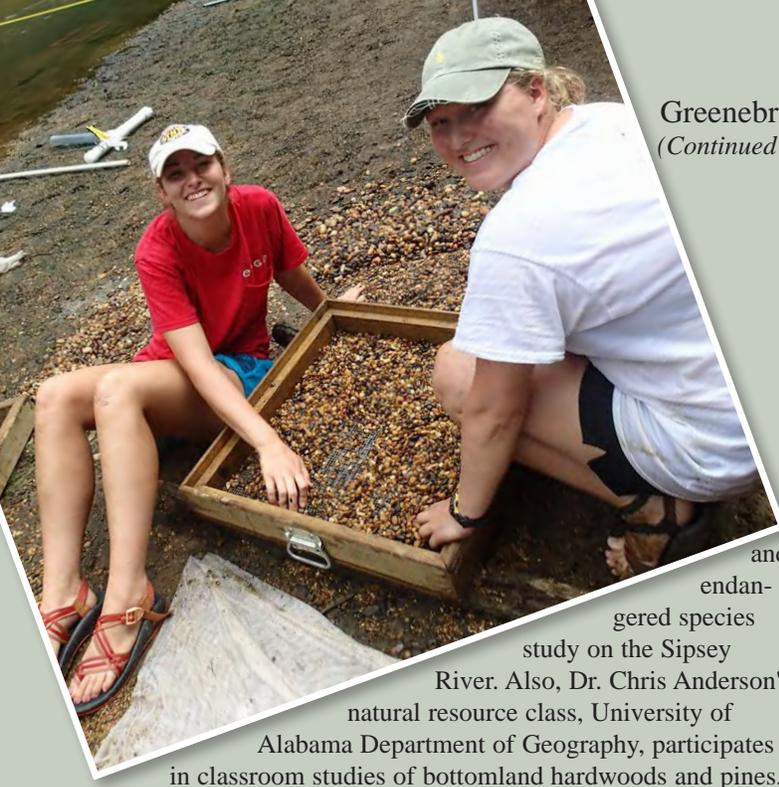
### Education

We eventually built a home and workshop on the farm. Kathy and I encouraged people to visit Greenbriar and see the types of things we were doing as stewards of the land. Annually, we hosted several groups for various educational or recreational purposes. The Tuscaloosa Natural Resources Planning Committee hosted a field day in 2009 to demonstrate forest management techniques. We've also held wildlife management seminars and controlled burning demonstrations. Most recently, I became involved with forest technology, and have conducted GPS (global positioning systems) workshops for landowners and loggers to use in the forest.

Other groups that have utilized the farm include the Audubon Society, which has hosted a number of events for bird watchers. Over the past several years, Dr. Carla Atkinson, University of Alabama Department of Biology, has participated in a threatened

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## Greenebriar: Something of the Divine

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Sadly, Kathy lost a brief battle with cancer on May 15, 2014. She had encouraged me to continue with the implementation of our plans at Greenebriar. Honoring her request, Kathy was cremated and her remains are scattered under an ancient huge pecan tree at the farm.

During her memorial service at First Presbyterian Church, Dr. Charlie Durham said something that was so true about Kathy: “She added her touch to everything . . . Greenebriar, the Loper retreat in Greene County, was where Kathy could go to take it all in: the sound of birdsong, the call of turkeys, deer running through the field behind their home there. It was a thin space for her and for their family. It was one of many places where God’s touch was evident. And Kathy didn’t want to keep that to herself. Our campus ministry was invited every fall to Greenebriar, and the youth spent time there, too, so that we could all experience something of the Divine.”

That pretty much sums up our forest stewardship philosophy. I am continuing in Kathy’s work with the farm and trying to use her vision and guidance in my planning. Our children have always been very involved in the property and understand its value. It was Kathy’s wish and mine that they continue this legacy in the future. ☮

*Congratulations to Robert Loper and Greenbriar on receiving the Helene Mosley Memorial TREASURE Forest Award in 2017!*

and endangered species study on the Sipsey River. Also, Dr. Chris Anderson’s natural resource class, University of Alabama Department of Geography, participates in classroom studies of bottomland hardwoods and pines, using the Sipsey Watershed as a demonstration forest.

‘UKirk’ students from the Presbyterian ministry at the University of Alabama, as well as high school students from the ‘Deutch’ youth group of First Presbyterian Church in Tuscaloosa, enjoy the property as a youth retreat to hike, shoot clay pigeons, and have games.

Kathy and I also endeavored to join several professional organizations including Tree Farm, Alabama Forest Owners Association (AFOA), Deer Management Assistance Program (DMAP), and the National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTf).

