

Refuge Manager's Corner

By Steve Miller

It's now December and still no rain to speak of. This is the first year since I came to Alabama in 2003 that the Cahaba River has not risen out of its banks. This made it easy to keep the canoe launch free of debris (there wasn't any) but has led to extremely low flows on the Cahaba River. This is also the first year that anyone has found alligatorweed (*Alternanthera philoxeroides*) in the Cahaba River within Bibb County. We are not sure if these two events (low flows and exotic species) are related or if this is just a coincidence.

For those of you unfamiliar with alligatorweed it is a very invasive plant that if not controlled has the possibility of displacing native aquatic plant species over large areas. One native species that is potentially affected is the 'Cahaba lily'. I would encourage those of you interested in this alarming development to read up on exotic invasive species in general and alligatorweed in particular.

During 2007, we elected to monitor alligatorweed populations on the Refuge rather than attempt to remove the populations that we found. This is due to 4 primary reasons. 1) Chemical control using herbicide is the recommended treatment method but this is not currently an option due to presence of threatened and endangered mussel and snail species in close proximity to the occurrences of alligatorweed; 2) We are not sure if these populations are new or if they have been kept below a detectable level through scouring of the river during normal high flows; 3) Hand removal through pulling would likely have led to further spread of the species as it breaks and spreads easily; and 4) We do not believe that the populations of alligatorweed on the Refuge are the only populations on the river and we would like to monitor the Refuge populations as an indicator to determine what is happening elsewhere. In 2008, we will determine if treatment is necessary, what the treatment should be and then seek to control the known populations of alligatorweed on the Refuge and elsewhere as needed.

Many of you also noticed the presence of an additional exotic invasive plant known by many different names including taro, elephant ear, and coco yam (*Colocasia esculenta*) in and adjacent to the Cahaba River on the refuge this year. We knew of two populations on the Refuge prior to this year. Those populations had not spread and appeared to be stable. In 2007, those populations more than doubled in size and number, we believe primarily, due to low flows and excellent growing conditions for this plant. A third population has now been detected. Removal of these populations should occur in 2008. Removal and further control should be possible through hand removal.

Refuge staff continue to work on multiple projects on the Refuge and I will attempt to give a brief summary of those activities. I will be free with my use of the word "we" when describing refuge activities since I live vicariously through their work when I am in the office for days on end and may not have done much (any) physical labor on the project as the use of the word "we" might otherwise indicate.

Piper Trail

We are continuing to plan and prepare for further work on the Piper Trail. After an initial few days of placing a gravel surface on the trail during late June and early July it was obvious that we needed to shorten the trip that the skidsteer made with a bucketful of gravel and we also needed to work when the weather was cooler. Now, five months later, we have finally succeeded in stockpiling stone at two

locations along the trail and should start work on the trail again after the holidays. Our goal is to have the railbed portion of the trail graveled by the time of Lily Festival in 2008.

River Road Restoration

Several projects are in the works or have been partially completed along River Road within the Refuge. The culvert located prior to the large gravel parking area will be replaced and the road widened at this location. The contractor should commence work on this project sometime in January. This will require closure of the portion of River Road beyond the culvert for approximately 10 days.

Once the culvert is in place we will begin to haul chert material to fill the holes in the road beyond the freshly graveled portion of the road. Limestone gravel will not be extended any further down the River Road at this time but the holes and low spots will be filled with chert as long as the quantities on our contract hold out.

Large rocks have been placed at several areas along River Road where the river bank is being eroded by excessive vehicle use. We are not attempting to stop use at these areas but would like to restrict use to pedestrian only access. Adequate parking will be provided at each area before visitation picks up in the spring and gravel added at each parking area that has been restricted by the placement of the large rocks. The current configuration of stone may change slightly as we work to protect the river while allowing legitimate uses to continue. A few hundred seedlings have been ordered that will be used to revegetate areas along the riverbank bordering River Road impacted by vehicles and other uses.

Prescribed Fire

We hope to accomplish the first prescribed burn at the Refuge this winter. Staff from Noxubee National Wildlife Refuge in Mississippi developed the burning plan and will coordinate this effort. We hope to partner with The Nature Conservancy to accomplish burning nearly 1,000 acres in the southern portion of the refuge east of the Cahaba River this year. The goals of the burn are to reduce dead and downed fuels and decrease hardwood competition within the longleaf pine community of the refuge. If we are going to accomplish our goals this year we will need some substantial rains between now and then.

Strip Mine Reclamation

It is unknown whether the reclamation of the strip mine highwall (cliff) will commence in 2008. There has been a delay in funding the AML Program this year and they have not received their funding to date. If funding is provided to the Abandoned Mine Lands Program at levels similar to previous years', the Refuge highwall reclamation is slated to begin in fall 2008. I will try to keep you informed on this as we will need your help in educating the public on the need for the temporary disturbance to alleviate safety concerns and restore natural hydrology and forest communities.

We still do not know what the budget for the refuges here in central Alabama will be for 2008. Regardless of the amount of funding we receive, we will continue to work with and through the Friends of the Cahaba River National Wildlife Refuge and other partners both on and off the Refuge to accomplish as much as we can during the coming year.

I hope you all will have safe and happy Christmas and New Years.