

Forever Wild Helps Freedom Hills

The acreage of many of Alabama's Wildlife Management Areas changes over time when leases are not renewed for a variety of reasons. Freedom Hills in northwest Alabama is no exception. Thanks to Forever Wild, Alabama's land trust program, additional land has been purchased and added to Freedom Hills, thus securing it for future use.

By Mitchell Marks, Wildlife Biologist, Freedom Hills Wildlife Management Area

Forever Wild has acquired more than 144,234 acres during its tenure, supporting additions to wildlife management areas, state parks, nature preserves and recreational areas. Because the majority of hunting opportunities in Alabama exist on private property, the acquisition of land for WMAs is important to provide public hunting.

Forever Wild Steps In

During the summer of 2001 the Freedom Hills Wildlife Management Area (WMA) had decreased in size to about 8,000 acres of state owned lands and one or two small leases, a mere shadow of the 30,000 plus acres it had been in the 1970s and 80s. However, in 2001 the Forever Wild Program helped breathe new life into the WMA with a purchase of 26,300 acres in Colbert County. It's been six years since that first hunting season opened on these new lands, and many changes have taken place.

When the Forever Wild land was added, some of the property immediately joined the existing WMA, but two tracts lay several miles north of U.S. Hwy. 72, and isolated from the majority of the area. As a result, the approach of making two separate zones was employed with the lands south of U.S. Hwy. 72 being the South Zone and all lands north of U.S. Hwy. 72 being the North Zone.

From 2003 through 2006, the Division of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries (WFF) and the Forever Wild Land Trust made additional land purchases. In all, nearly 4,300 more acres were added to the area. However, more change was about to take place.

Just south of Cherokee, a block of 240 acres stood by itself. A suggestion was made to turn it into a physically disabled

hunting area. With the help of an Eagle Scout project, a handicap accessible shooting house was constructed and installed next to a wildlife opening. This area was then reopened as the Cherokee Physically Disabled Hunting Area (CPDHA) during the 2005-06 hunting season. It is open to qualifying individuals for deer hunting only as a part of the Alabama Hunting and Fishing Trail for People with Physical Disabilities.

In order to reduce some of the confusion with the public using the North Zone of the Freedom Hills WMA a decision was made in 2006-07 to change the North Zone into a standalone Community Hunting Area. The 6,626 acres all laying northwest of Cherokee and U.S. Hwy. 72 became the Riverton Community Hunting Area (CHA). The quality deer management restrictions remained in place but the hunting season dates were modified to allow for Wednesday and Saturday hunting throughout the standard county deer season along with some additional multiday hunts in December and January.

Improved Hunting

Freedom Hills WMA is now south of U.S. Hwy. 72, except for the CPDHA. The area covers approximately 31,559 acres. During the last couple of hunting seasons, deer measuring in the 130- and 140-inch Boone and Crockett scoring range have been harvested on the area. Prior to the addition of these lands and the implementation of quality deer harvest restrictions, 90 percent of all bucks harvested on Freedom Hills were 1.5-year-old and typically spikes or small fork horns.


Nearly 60 percent of the bucks harvested during the last two seasons were 3.5 years or older and averaged more than seven



MITCHELL MARKS

Larger bucks have been harvested since rezoning and acreage additions to sections of the Freedom Hills WMA.

points each. During the same time, the buck harvest has exceeded the doe harvest. With the improvement in the buck age structure and buck-to-doe ratio, January has become an excellent time to hunt deer in the rut. The rut has become more compact and intense with the classic rut signs and activities that interest most deer hunters—bucks chasing does, bucks chasing or sparring with other bucks, along with increased numbers of rubs and scrapes.

On the Forever Wild properties just over 2,700 acres on previously harvested sites have been site prepared and approximately 732 acres planted with shortleaf pine. In these areas, rabbit hunters enjoy opportunities to take their dogs for a good race. As habitat work including prescribed burning, thinning and other enhancements of early successional herbaceous habitats continues in these areas, it is expected that bobwhite quail and wild turkeys will also benefit more from these projects. 

For More Information

For more information on the Freedom Hills WMA or the Alabama Hunting and Fishing Trail for People with Physical Disabilities, visit www.outdooralabama.com.