



SUSTAINABLE RESOURCE MANAGERS, LLC

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THE GREAT FLOOD OF 2011 – A TARA WILDLIFE PERSPECTIVE

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There is no doubt that the great flood of 2011 was an historic event and certainly one which inflicted untold pain and misery on people, property, pets and wildlife. To say it could have been worse seems somewhat of a cliché but.....well, it could have been worse. The flood fight was intense and the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers and affiliated organizations are to be commended for waging an intense and successful campaign against such a capable and unpredictable adversary as the Mighty Mississippi and its Tributaries.

Prior to and leading up to the floods crest, people were busy moving households, families, cattle, horses; basically any tangible objects of worth, out of harm's way. Not all efforts were successful and stories of heroes and villains abound.

During the peak of the flood and no matter the topic, the conversation would eventually turn to questions about wildlife; in particular deer, turkeys, rabbits, raccoons, armadillos, and wild hogs. No past flood is comparable to 2011; not 1927, 1937, 1973 or 2008. There were few deer or turkeys in Mississippi in 1927 or 1937. By 1973, deer populations were booming in the Lower Mississippi Delta. The '73 Flood took its toll on wildlife in general. Deer populations were dramatically affected. The '73 Flood was measured at 51.6 feet on the Vicksburg Gage or 8.6 feet above flood stage.



Figure 1 - Armadillos do not fare well in extended flood events

Turn the clock forward to 2008 when the Mississippi River at Vicksburg was measured at 51 feet.....just 7 inches lower than in 1973 but still 8 feet above flood stage. While some areas were more negatively affected than others, the major impact to the deer herd in 2008 appeared to be related to fawn recruitment and survival. Paradoxically, the 2008-2009 deer season saw little impact from the flood event and fall/winter harvest was minimally affected, if at all.

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In comparison to 1973 and 2008, the Great Flood of 2011 was 5.5 feet and 6.1 feet higher, respectively and a whopping 14.1 feet above flood stage. Habitat that formed safe havens for deer and associated terrestrial wildlife in 1973 and 2008 would subsequently be covered by an additional 5.5 to 6 feet of water. So what happened to the deer in 2011 and specifically, how did the deer on Tara managed properties survive in the face of this most historical flood event.

While not all properties in the mid to lower Delta escaped devastating losses, Tara Managed Properties appear to have sustained no perceptible losses relative to numbers and/or animal health. The fact that the Backwater Levee System did not overtop and the Steel Bayou “sump” stayed dry was a tremendous positive for deer in our area, as were abandoned/reforested fields and agricultural areas that have recently begun to grow corn instead of cotton. Additionally, the evacuation of most of the residents of Eagle Lake and the closing of Highway 465 and much of the Mainline and Backwater Levee Systems created a safe haven for wildlife; events which led to an environment which was both quiet and protected.

When the floodwaters began to recede, deer tracks were common at the waterline, as deer would daily check the status of the water level; they really wanted to be back home. Does were heavy with fawn and bucks were restless. When it was evident that selected ridges were out of water, deer would swim across the water filled depressions that separated the dryer ridges and the deer from their home. Steadily retreating waters saw deer populations quickly return to re-populate vacated habitats.



The first fawns hit the ground at Tara around the Fourth of July.....right on schedule! By the end of July, Graduate Students from Mississippi State University working on a habitat diversity and old growth research project at Tara reported numerous fawn sightings each morning as they traversed their study areas. While the fawning period will continue into September and October, one common observation is that twin fawns are the exception and single fawns are the rule; a probable result of the stress related to displacement by the flood.

Because the water stayed around for so long, vegetative development at the ground level has been somewhat inhibited and we are basically experiencing spring green-up in July, August and September instead of April, May and June. Quality browse is abundant and deer have wasted no time finding the most succulent and preferred foods available. Mineral licks have been refurbished once already this summer, with a second application scheduled for late September.



Figure 2 - Refurbished mineral lick; a small car will fit in this one.

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As opposed to last year, when hard mast was short, this year native pecan trees are heavy with nuts and the oaks are loaded with acorns. Persimmons have produced well and honey locust pods are developing nicely. In response to maturing soft and hard mast production and seasonal availability, deer have already begun to develop predictable “patterns”. The Tara Guides are busy deciphering these patterns and adjusting stand placement to insure optimum hunter success.



Figure 3 - Persimmons are plentiful

To assist with browse and cover development in selected areas, timber harvest operations have been implemented within a couple of parcels at the Northwest portion of the Jewett Tract. Barring inclement weather, those operations should be complete by mid-September. Additional areas were selected for timber harvest treatment and habitat enhancement during 2011, but the flood offered only a very narrow window of opportunity for beginning and completing harvest operations. All timber harvest operations are scheduled for completion on or before September 20, so as to allow a period of quiet prior to the onset of hunting operations. In making final preparations for the fall/winter hunting season, Tara Guides are busy getting food plots ready to plant.



Figure 4 - August/September timber harvest @ Tara

Ground has been broken and the first plantings will take place during the first week in September. The initial plantings will consist of a fall brassica blend to which chicory and plantain have been added. This early season food plot mix is relatively resistant to army worms and has the best chance for success. It grows well in heavy ground and germinates quickly. Deer hit it almost immediately when it begins its vegetative development stage. It is at these planted brassica locations, loaded persimmon trees and selected honey locust, that our early season bowhunters will be skillfully located.



Figure 5 - Hard to believe you would need a rain after an epic flood event...go figure.

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The remaining food plots and permanent wildlife openings will be planted in late September/Early October when the weather has cooled a bit and the threat of army worm attack diminished.

Excitement is high amongst Managers and Guides at Tara and considerable time has been spent with boots-on-the-ground and experienced eyes assessing the prospects for the upcoming hunting season, as such prospects relate to the hunter success that is so

important to us all. Gross visual observation, remote camera detail and current deer pressure on native browse all combine to indicate that the deer herd on Tara Managed Properties is healthy, plentiful and well dispersed. Buck quality appears to be consistent with previous years and with numbers sufficient to provide heart palpitations for even the most experienced hunter. Please take time to visit the Tara Website and click on "Images of Deer From Our Trail Cameras '11". I think you will agree that the 2011-12 hunting season will be a year full of excitement, opportunity and anticipation. I look forward to seeing you at Tara during the coming months. Good Hunting.

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