# FARM IT OR HUNT IT?

How do you manage land for farming and deer? That carries many considerations, but the answers aren't that difficult. And you can often do both.

■ by *Matt Harper*

PHOTO BY MATT HARPER

One beautiful fall morning, I hunted a steep hardwood ridge rimmed with huge acorn-laden white oaks. Every old man at the coffee shop said that if the white oaks had produced acorns that year, that was where you needed to be to kill deer — especially big bucks. They were partially right. I could have killed a lot of deer that morning, but apparently the old bucks didn't get the memo from the old coffee drinkers, because they didn't show up. After a few hours, I climbed down, determined to head to the coffee shop for more — and hopefully better — advice.

When I got to the truck, I heard a big diesel motor at the neighbor's property. Upon investigation, I discovered that a D8 dozer was crawling toward a small creek lined with young trees about 10 yards wide on both banks. I immediately deduced that the dozer was going to clear the creek bank of trees to add a few extra feet of crop land for next year's corn. I flew down the hill, slid the truck next to the machine operator and told him he needed to hold off because I was negotiating with the landowner to buy the farm and add it to the 70 acres I already owned. He reluctantly stopped, but I didn't end up buying the property, and the dozer did its work. The result was some great wildlife habitat lost, and within a couple of years and several hard rains, the creek bank had eroded to about the same spot the trees had once stopped.

You might think I'm a bit of a tree hugger, and I guess you'd be right in a sense. As a hunter, avid outdoorsman and lover of wildlife, I find the needless destruction of habitat frustrating and sometimes downright maddening. But I grew up on a cattle and crop farm, and today raise cattle and hay on my farm. I understand the value of productive farmland and the need to be efficient to get the most out of a farm. After all, a farm is a business, and you must manage profit and loss, because if you're actively farming a property, you need the income. No profit eventually results in no farm.

There are two sides of the street for opinions on management focused solely on farming and those who think a farm or property should be converted for strictly wildlife management. I meander around the middle of that street, typically favoring wildlife but always understanding that bills need to be paid. I'm guessing most people reading this would also favor managing for wildlife, but you might be in a situation where the land that you own, lease or have permission to hunt is also an active farm. If you're in that situation and think more about managing deer than producing crops or livestock, what can you do when considering both? The good news is you can accomplish both in most cases in a way that will produce good results for each.

## USING THE 'BAD' GROUND

When managing for farming and wildlife management, the first thing to consider is the quality of land with which you're working. Productive, quality farm ground should be used for farming practices, and lesser-quality ground should be used for non-farming practices — in other words, wildlife. That doesn't mean you can't use quality ground for wildlife, but if you have dual management goals, productive soil will produce the best financial returns, and poorer-quality areas, when properly managed, can greatly improve wildlife habitat. Of course, there are farms where almost every acre is highly productive, and on the other end of the pendulum, some farms are — in the eyes of a farmer — mostly crap. But most farms have some of both, so you must determine the good from the not-as-good and manage accordingly.

Let's say there's an 80-cattle pasture with a mix of open grassland laced with steep, brushy or tree choked ravines. You can conduct pasture improvement practices in the open areas by fertilizing, mowing and spraying to maximize forage production for cattle. These open areas also get full sunlight, which is optimal for most cattle forages, and they do not compete with woody plants for moisture. The ravines, however, cannot be mowed, fertilized or sprayed, and the grass is typically shaded and competes with woody vegetation. The result is that food production per acre for the cattle herd in the ravines is poor at best and does little for the productivity of the cattle operation.

Conversely, those ravines provide many benefits for deer and other wildlife. First, they supply bedding areas, cover and food sources. Cattle are large ruminants and classified as grazers, which means that grasses are a main food supply. Deer, however, are concentrate selectors and browsers, which means they feed on forbs, viny vegetation and woody browse, which are typical plant species growing in ravines. Can cattle get something out of those ravines? Sure, but the efficiency of food supply for cattle in the ravines is far less than in the open pasture land.

Further, deer get more total benefit from the habitat in the ravines than they do the open pasture land. Even if you mechanically cleared the ravines, the result would be poor-quality grass production and prolific soil erosion. If you're aiming for managing for deer and cattle, the best solution is to let the cattle use the open grassland and leave the ravines for wildlife, thus optimizing the microhabitat to match the targeted management species. The best way to accomplish that is to fence off the areas targeted for wildlife.

That can be done via a permanent

## THE FENCE ROW

Fence row is a term used in many applications. I've been told to check the fence row to make sure there are no holes or gaps before striving to keep cattle where they should be. But they're also the places I'd walk for hours as a child with Dad's old shotgun in search of pheasants, quail, rabbits or whatever. Fence rows create strips that cannot be mowed or grazed closely, so they grow up with weeds, tall grass and brush, creating wonderful wildlife habitat.

These are not big areas — at most 5 yards wide. But to the wildlife that use them, they are priceless. Fence rows used to be a common part of all farms, but through the years, they have been disappearing to create more crop ground and clean up fields to make them easier for field work. A half-mile fence line is likely no more than 1 or 2 acres but can support an incredible amount of wildlife. I've witnessed the dramatic decrease in wildlife as fence rows disappear. Everyone has to make decisions about how they manage the land, but I think it's important to understand it doesn't take much to cause a major effect, good or bad. Something as small as an old fence row can affect more than you would expect.

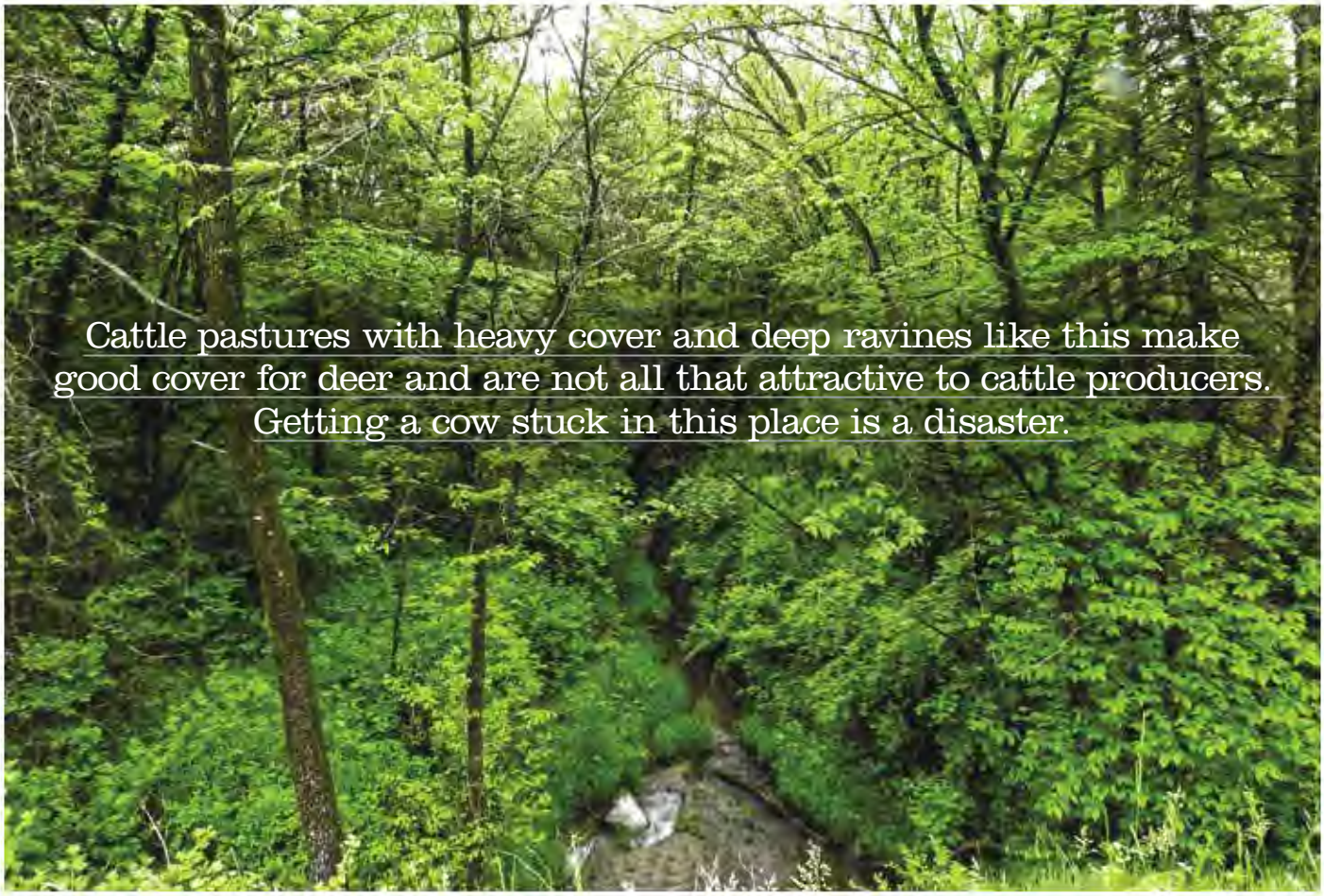
fence or electric fence. Permanent fencing is more expensive but typically lasts for many years. Plus, the maintenance for electric fencing is greater. Deer can knock down electric fences (this has happened to me a lot), requiring constant vigilance and repair expenses. Don't think you will have to put in miles of fencing to show results, as even smaller areas that are fenced off can show dramatic results. An area 200 yards long by 80 yards wide will give you more than 3 acres of deer and wildlife cover and feeding habitat. That might not sound like much, but that area can help to support more deer than you might expect. As a cattle owner, I would rather keep the cattle out of those steep ravines anyway. Cattle — especially calves — can get stuck in the bottom of a nasty, deep gully and cannot free themselves. Through the years, I have lost several calves and a few cows to that. It doesn't take many of those incidents to figure out that, comparatively, the cost of fencing isn't that bad.

Ravines and gullies are not the only examples of poor ground that can be used for wildlife management. Another good example is swampy land that tends to stay wet and hold moisture. These areas, when left ungrazed by cattle, will normally produce excellent bedding and escape cover, as well as natural browse and a water supply. As mentioned, swampy land can often be more of a headache to cattle management and provide subpar grazing.

One additional thought pertaining to cattle/livestock grazing and deer habitat management is whether the species cohabitate well together. I have heard many times that, "Deer don't mind cattle at all." I have found that's true to an extent. Deer will not necessarily be absent from areas with cattle, but I often see that deer will avoid close proximity to the bovines. Several times, I've set up trail cameras in various pastures, and I usually find that deer move to a pasture with no cows or at least spend most of their time in those spots. When I move cows to where I was getting pictures of deer, the deer soon switch to the pasture the cows have vacated. I'm not sure why that happens, but my best guess is deer want to avoid the alarm sounds of crashes in the brush or the cracking of branches as cows noisily tromp through bedding and escape cover. I think it has far less to do with feeding areas and more to do with feeling comfortable in their core area. Deer might not be scared of the cows, but they don't like the intrusion into their safe zone. So if you create areas within a pasture where cattle and other livestock cannot trespass, deer will be less likely to vacate an area.

## USING THE 'GOOD' LAND

Is there a situation that would justify taking good ground out of production and using it for wildlife? Likely, your answer will be determined by where you stand on the wildlife versus farming scale. The more you value deer management and hunting, the easier it is to justify converting productive land from livestock and crops to using it for deer and other wildlife management. Notice that I used the word value. That can be defined in many ways, but let's look at it from a monetary perspective. If you took an acre of crop ground and converted it to a food



Cattle pastures with heavy cover and deep ravines like this make good cover for deer and are not all that attractive to cattle producers. Getting a cow stuck in this place is a disaster.

PHOTO BY MATT HARPER

plot for deer, what would you give up in terms of profit? The number varies based on input costs, yield and the crop's market price, but we can talk in generalities.

Market prices and yields for crops can fluctuate, but a soil's ability to grow crops is a bit more consistent. Obviously, weather plays a major role, but some soils simply produce less yield than others even within a crop field. Modern combines provide a real-time yield as they harvest a field, and it's not uncommon to have varying yields in various parts of a field. Sometimes, those yield numbers can be fairly dramatic. If there's a specific part of a field that consistently produces less yield, that's a good places to look at converting it to a food plot.

It actually doesn't cost as much as you might think to pull ground out of production — and perhaps spend far less — if you pick specific parts of a field. Is it worth paying a farmer $300 or, if you farm yourself, have a potential loss of $300 to get a really good food plot for hunting? With everything else you spend on hunting, that's really not that much.

The outside rows are another example where I've seen good results in converting crop ground to food plots. When those rows constitute the border between a crop field and woodlands, brush or tall grasses, it creates an edge. Whitetails and other critters love edges, as they provide food near escape and bedding cover. In those areas, crop yields are typically lower because of heavy consumption by deer and other wildlife. If you plant a food plot — especially an attractive perennial such as Imperial Whitetail Clover — where end rows would typically go, you can sometimes decrease the total amount of crop degradation because deer feed in the plots before moving to the crop — if they move there at all. Additionally, when the cover-to-feed edge habitat is a food plot, deer tend to linger longer in the food plot than in the crops.

## GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS

I would be remiss if I didn't mention there are many government programs that help financially support wildlife conservation programs. One is the Conservation Reserve Program, which consists of federal payments for taking cropland out of production and seeding it with specific plants to create wildlife habitat. The subject of using government programs is large enough for several articles, but it's important to mention the availability, as most land-use conversion from ag to wildlife involves monetary choices.

## CONCLUSION

Life is full of choices, and it seems that most take us down different paths. But sometimes, you have the opportunity to widen the path and enjoy more of the journey. Whether you farm, lease hunting ground or simply have permission to hunt a farm, there's one resource that cannot be multiplied — the land. I believe God's design of the land was purposeful to support people and the wild things that He created. But you must also understand the perspective of others. If you can do both, you'll typically find that the land can easily meet the needs and desires of all.