

## **Reclamation Successes**

### **New Approach to Surface Mine Reclamation is for the Birds (*and other wildlife*)**

*Jon Lawson & Mike Giles*

*Virginia Division of Mined Land Reclamation*

The Forest Reclamation Approach (FRA) is becoming ever more popular throughout the coalfields to promote forest growth on surface mined lands. FRA's attraction to the mining industry is the reduced grading costs compared to the heavily tracked and compacted backfilled slopes of the past. Faster growth of high quality hardwood tree species make FRA attractive to landowners as well. Reclamation professionals as well as sportsmen groups see the potential of FRA for local wildlife. Along with requiring the planting of commercially valuable hardwoods, the FRA also calls for native shrubs and other early successional plants to be interspersed as nurse trees to the high value hardwood species. Crabapple, dogwood and Washington Hawthorne are common early successional nurse trees which provide soft mass for a variety of forest wildlife.

The FRA prescribes a special seed mix of less competitive grasses as an alternative to the "strip mix" of common agricultural grasses utilized solely for soil stability in the past. This special seed mix produces a slower growing, ground hugging cover that will not interfere with tree growth. The ground cover seed mix also allows for volunteer species to take root, many of which are excellent forage for our favorite wildlife. Upland birds can use the ground cover for forage, nesting, and cover. Prized game species like turkey and whitetail deer will browse the various fruit and mast producing species. Hunting on reclaimed mines can be very successful, as many hunters and hunting clubs are fully aware. Early successional habitat benefits all species of wildlife and allows them to thrive as new plant growth and shelter abounds. Songbirds and many non-game animals will greatly benefit as well. Wildlife enthusiasts, hunters and wildlife watchers alike, will enjoy the benefits of this approach and the value of our restored native forests for generations.

Currently, Alpha Natural Resources representatives and officials from the Department Game and Inland Fisheries (VDGIF) and the Department of Mines, Minerals, and Energy (DMME) are partnering to incorporate Bobwhite Quail Habitat into a forest post-mining land use on a proposed surface coal mine in Dickenson County. The initial area is located within a Public Access Lands for Sportsmen (PALS) permit area that is actively managed by the VDGIF for public hunting, fishing, and trapping. Restoration of the bobwhite quail and quail habitat is the ultimate goals of this cooperative venture, however, numerous other wildlife species will benefit from the special plantings and management.



*Reducing compaction and planting native hardwoods can provide excellent habitat.*

The VDGIF Board of Directors have placed added emphasis to the Quail Action Plan (QAP) for the upcoming year. Charlie Yates, a board member from the coalfield region of Southwest Virginia has recognized the vast opportunities available for the QAP on surface mined lands. Quail populations throughout the state have been on the decline for the past three decades. Mr. Yates believes that quality quail habitat on mined land will give the Virginia quail population a good chance to rebound.

A little extra on-the-ground effort the Forestry Reclamation Approach can fit wildlife's needs. Many of the plant species that work best for reclamation also benefit quail and ruffed grouse. For example, upland birds are primarily seedeaters and prefer legume seeds and soft fruits such as blackberries. While tall fescue reduces necessary cover and is a poor food source. Under the FRA, seeding with species like tall fescue is discouraged, benefiting wildlife while promoting tree growth. Sportsman groups such as Quail Forever and the Ruffed Grouse Society are interested in working with state agencies and resource extraction industries to promote wildlife habitat. Working together, for wildlife will produce positive results for Virginians.