

FARMING AND WILDLIFE IN THE SOUTHEAST

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Abstract. The settlement and clearing of forests in the Southeastern United States resulted in marked changes in the composition and populations of our native wildlife. Some early successional species like the northern bobwhite quail flourished during much of the 19th and 20th centuries as a by-product of agriculture. Diverse farming with rather low levels of chemical inputs and presence of large amounts of untilled land combined to provide excellent habitat. In the latter portion of the 20th century several trends are evident and are correlated to the decline of many of our early successional wildlife species. This period has seen a decline of farm acreage with widespread reversion to forested habitats and/or urbanization. However, the distribution of these losses of farmland has not been even with some regions seeing very little land use changes whereas others have lost almost all farmland. This trend probably represents simple loss of habitat for early

successional species. In addition to losses of habitat we have also seen both intensification, and specialization on remaining farmland. Intensification and specialization represent changes that often negatively impact wildlife living in farmland ecosystems. There appears to be little opportunity for increasing land area devoted to production agriculture in the Southeast, therefore, in order to reverse the wildlife declines that have occurred over the past 50 years, we need to concentrate on improving the quality of remaining farmland for wildlife. We are just beginning to see the implementation of agricultural practices in the Southeast that might help to mitigate impacts of modern production agriculture. We have to enter a new phase of farmland wildlife management where wildlife is no longer just an accidental by-product of farming, but an integral part of our agricultural ecosystem.