



Charlie Stackhouse shows the girth of his massive white oak tree in the Finger Lakes region of New York.

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Forestry **EVANGELISM**



Charlie and Sarah Stackhouse planned to build a house on a rural parcel of land in the Finger Lakes region of New York. After clearing a house site from a patch of hawthorn, the land directly across the road came up for sale. Unable to purchase a small portion of this land for added privacy, they ended up purchasing an entire farm. That is how they ended up with 311 acres of mixed farm, forest, and abandoned vineyard and pasture.

The new parcel included a much better house site with privacy, southern exposure for passive solar heating, and a great view down the western arm of Keuka Lake. After building a house and shop, attention was turned to the rest of the property. They didn't know anything about forestry or game management, but were about to learn.

A STEWARDSHIP PLAN

A neighbor was having some logging done, and had two very different proposals regarding the intensity of the harvest and dollars of income. Strangely, the lighter harvest would yield twice the dollars with the input of a consulting forester. Walking the woods with the neighbor's forester after the timber harvest, they saw many valuable well-formed trees still in place with another harvest planned in 15 years or so. This was a whole new concept. The scales fell off their eyes, and they looked at their neglected farm as an opportunity. Trees grow.

Stewardship on their own land could take many forms and it started them towards both timber and game-habitat management. First, they contacted their New York State Department of Environmental Conservation Service Forester, Jim Bagley, who drew up a basic stewardship plan, marked some trees for TSI and firewood, and educated them about some options for both timber and habitat management. Then they hired a consulting forester, Corey Figueiredo of Future Forest Consulting, and enrolled their forestland into New York's forestland taxation program, called "480A." The full forest management plan set them off toward new levels of active management. They amassed a bookshelf of material and availed themselves of workshops, woods walks, and expert advice on many levels.

I met Charlie and Sarah at a regional conference for landowner groups, and talked my way into an invitation to hunt on their land. Twelve years of active management has paid off with a pleasant and satisfying home and property. Charlie has a big workshop, including a complete woodworking shop where he makes some furniture, a garage where he stores his 51-hp Kubota tractor and Kawasaki 2510 mule. He also has a D3B dozer. These are the workhorses of the farm. He is working on plans for a pole barn to store his many attachments for the tractor, and most of the lumber will come from his land. He has a winch, backhoe, bucket, forks and other attachments, and makes good use of a large dump trailer he can haul with the tractor or pickup.

When Corey Figueiredo walked the land with Charlie and Sarah, he explained the history and options for the land. Most of the easily accessed land had been high-graded by the previous owner. Oak, hickory, and white pine are the dominant species, but the good ones were gone. The "Big White Oak"—their trademark tree (opening page)—was discovered. This dates from the initial pasture era just over 200 years ago, and is still in good health, considering the decay. Charlie began the process of continual improvement by salvaging

10 cords of firewood each year, taking the dead, dying, and worst trees, and releasing the best. They heat the house and hot water with an outside wood boiler, and there is a woodstove in the parlor. The forest plan has not called for commercial harvesting yet, though he has gotten some project wood for buildings and furniture. Corey and his technician Stan Stek assisted with laying out and constructing forest trails, TSI work, and maintaining their 480A tax status.

RECLAMATION

The abandoned vineyards were a mess. Posts and wire trellises remained, with an impenetrable jungle of buckthorn, multiflora rose, honeysuckle, and scattered tree saplings all tangled in grapevines. Other than wildlife food and cover, Charlie could see that these were not productive, so he set about the laborious task of reclaiming them. This entailed hand pulling and coiling the wire so that it could be hauled to the metal salvage yard, and pulling the posts, which were either wooden or metal. Many of the metal ones had broken off below ground level and would often later heave with frost. After spending \$1,100 repairing and replacing tractor and pickup tires, a sensitive metal detector was purchased to locate all the remaining post fragments so they could be dug up and removed. After the trellis was gone, the vineyards were bush-hogged, the stumps removed with the dozer, and the ground plowed, disked, and fitted for planting into food plots or farm ground.

Charlie maintains an unrelenting battle with invasive plants. The field edges and younger pasture regrowth forests were also choked with them. He has tried pulling them out, foliar and cut stump spraying, basal bark spraying, hack-and-squirt, doing much of the work himself, and hiring some help from his consulting forester. Cruising through his woodlot, you see the grey skeletons of dead buckthorn standing, or piled along his trails. Though many areas remain infested, you can see the success on much of his land.

One effort has been to construct an impressive trail system. Adding the dozer has made this possible, since the tractor and chain saw were not the best tools. Drainage ditches, waterbars, culverts, and other crossings make them useful during most of the year. Today, he can take his tractor or mule into each area, and most of the way around the boundary. Many areas are accessible by pickup. The trails are used for forest management, invasive plant control, hiking, cross-country skiing, and hunting. Most trees are within a winch-cable length of a good trail. He has learned that there is plenty of firewood and to concentrate on the “easy wood.” Decent trails make the work easier and more enjoyable. And he knows every inch of his land.

Today, they have 87 acres of productive farmland, including corn, soybeans, hay, and active vineyards. There are also 135 acres of forestland ranging from

pole-sized through mature sawtimber. There are oak-hickory stands with scattered white pine, sugar and red maple, beech, ash, poplar, and a few walnut and cherry. There are planted Norway spruce and red pine groves, and some black locust and mixed pasture regrowth stands. Stand ages range from new saplings to mature sawtimber. Then there are 7 acres of food plots with clover, corn, soybeans, winter wheat, turnips. Over 135 wild apple trees have been located, and many have been released and/or trimmed. He has numerous ladder stands and four comfortable box-blinds overlooking food plots and key areas for effective hunting. Other acres include old vineyards, idle fields, and regrowing pasture, where options are considered for deer feed, cover and forest plantings.

EMERALD ASH BORER

About a mile away in Branchport, emerald ash borer (EAB) was discovered last year. I had never seen this firsthand, so we took a drive there. This beetle is an Asian import and very destructive to ash trees. It is spreading around the Northeast at an alarming rate and kills most ash trees it comes into contact with. No one knows how destructive it will be, or how long it will take, but it could eliminate ash trees from their range or reduce the survivors to sapling-sized sprouts. Landscape-wide controls are not available. Once the



Once the EAB beetle larvae infest a tree, woodpeckers start feeding and knock off the outer bark, usually about halfway up the main stem. This exposes the “blonde-colored” bark layer, which is easy to spot from a distance.

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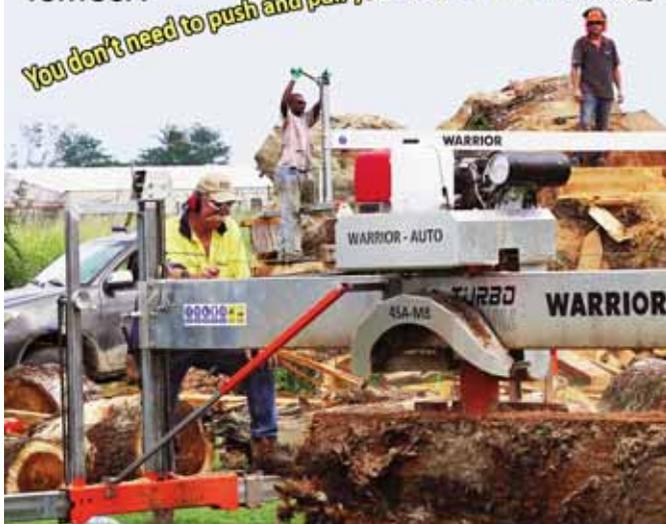
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beetle larvae infest a tree, woodpeckers start feeding and knock off the outer bark, usually about halfway up the main stem. This exposes the “blonde-colored” bark layer, which is easy to spot from a distance. EAB has a distinctive D-shaped exit hole and a zigzag larva track unlike native ash borers. I got to see all this for the first time, up close and personal. Once you know what to look for, this will be easy to find on your own land. I did not want to bring any firewood back to Vermont. The Stackhouse’s have only a scattering of ash trees, mostly saplings to small-sawlog sized. Many of the larger trees suffer from ash dieback or have a few native borers. After careful review, EAB was found in two trees and they expect to lose all their ash within the next 5–10 years. With their trail system and diligent effort, they can hope to slow that process.

HUNTING

When they bought the property, hunting the land was tough. Deer were plentiful, but the cover was so thick you could not even enter much of the property. Shots were often close range on running deer, with no chance to evaluate the target. And a deer could lie down in dense cover and let you walk right past. Charlie heard about a Quality Deer Management Coop that a distant neighbor, John Hammer, was organizing, and he signed up. A number of books on deer and property management were consulted and Charlie joined the national Quality Deer Management Association whose local chapter put on valuable workshops. There are many aspects to providing high-quality deer habitat, but food and cover are the main elements. Keeping the deer happy and well fed through the year is the goal, and if you can keep them around for the hunting season, you will be duly rewarded. The Finger Lakes region has high deer densities, and allows regulated harvest of does. These are advantages to success.

This year, Charlie identified 21 different bucks on his many game cameras, with eight at 2.5 years or older designated for potential harvest. He also estimated the number of does, and set a goal for their doe harvest. Passing on immature bucks is part of the key to Quality Deer Hunting. On 311 acres, you are not managing a “deer herd,” since deer travel across the boundaries. Of course, there is a bit of disappointment when a trophy buck walks over to be greeted by the neighbors. But you know it is working when your neighbors start passing on immature bucks. Charlie has good relations with his neighbors all around, and most of them will gladly pass up the opportunity to shoot a legal 4-pointer since they know there are big deer around.

When I hunted there midseason, the weather was warm and the deer were not moving in predictable ways, often feeding at night. Charlie said it was slow, and there were times when we saw nothing. But in a



Author Robbo with two of the does harvested: natural, organic, lean meat for the family. Below is a comfortable box blind overlooking a food plot with corn, turnips, clover and wild apples.

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Left: Shown in his workshop, Charlie (and his wife Sarah) often lead woods walks and tours on their own land and others' and spread the "forestry gospel" far and wide. They man the NYFOA booth at fairs and events, participate in local and state meetings, and help people connect around the state.

As my week at their haven drew toward a close, I had harvested several does, and passed on at least six young bucks. Charlie told me that I was welcome to harvest any of the small bucks we saw. Quality Deer Hunting is about having a good time. I told him it was far more satisfying to watch them and let them go. I had seldom watched antlered bucks for any length of time before. I filled my freezer and someone else's and am grateful for this rare opportunity. I watched flocks of turkeys nearly every day, saw a bobcat, a coyote, hawks, doves, grouse, and countless squirrels.

week, I saw more deer than I see in a whole year in Vermont. The hunting guidelines were specific: We hunted from box blinds only, with no walking around the woods to disturb the deer. We did not enter or leave the blind while deer were watching. There was a goal for the number of does to harvest, with special attention to particular does. And we were careful not to harvest bucks younger than 2.5 years. Charlie showed me a video on aging deer by their body shape and other features (NOT antler count – he showed me a 10-point rack from a 1.5-year-old buck), and we looked at yearling deer very carefully to discern immature bucks. There were also “sanctuary areas” into which no one goes.

A better-than-average afternoon hunt would have a doe with two grown fawns come out into a food plot. We would evaluate them carefully with binoculars, and decide if the doe was a suitable target. A 4-point buck might step out of the tree line and meander into the open. We would enjoy watching this show for a half hour, waiting for his “Uncle Jack” to come out. A big buck is more likely to feel “safe” in the open with other deer there. As legal shooting time drew to a close, since “Uncle Jack” had not come out, I would take a careful shot at the doe. The hunting experience was a precise level of stewardship.

The season's final tally for all hunters was nine doe and five bucks. Careful records were kept of hours hunted and numbers of deer observed. Harvested deer were weighed, aged by jawbones, and antlers were measured. John Hammer analyzes this data for the co-op, and it is interesting to see year-to-year changes in deer sightings and in the age, weight, and antler growth of the harvested deer.

A LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Charlie and I spread out his maps, aerial photos, and forest management plan after a thorough tour of his woods. I provided some insight toward his management goals, and some practices he might employ. Most of my clients manage for timber, with wildlife habitat as a by-product, and his goals clearly emphasize Quality Deer Management. This was a learning experience for us both. For example, it is a better choice for him to maintain his softwoods as dense cover rather than to thin for optimum lumber growth. I was able to recommend some planting options to increase his cover on abandoned farmland. As his older plantations mature, there is little softwood cover in the whole neighborhood, so additional softwoods will help. We discussed some innovative approaches for some of his forest stands, such as cutting regeneration groups in low-quality locust and ash to encourage new locust sprouts. Besides the “easy firewood,” Charlie's next project will be accumulating posts, beams, and lumber logs for his pole barn from scattered pines and his softwood plantations. Considering the balance of cover types on his land, and the surrounding habitat, I concurred that the remaining 20 acres of abandoned vineyards should be left alone to provide dense cover and feeding areas. Charlie was relieved at that.

SUCCESSES AND FAILURES

I asked him about their successes and failures. The successes were fairly obvious; mostly, he is doing what he enjoys. He loves his trail system, which makes every activity pleasant. The heroic effort to reclaim the old vineyards to productive farmland and the amazing food plots are a main success. Quality Deer Manage-

ment principles have been thoroughly applied, making for a Quality Deer Hunting experience. His greatest successes are the relationships he has with neighbors, foresters, and other landowners around the region. His closest neighbor is a young man named Jason who helps with the efforts to create and maintain food plots and trails. He manages the many game cameras and has a unique knack for identifying bucks from year to year as they grow. Local farmers plant and harvest feed corn, cut hay, and cultivate three vineyards. And Charlie has become the president of the New York Forest Owners Association, Sarah serves on the board of NYFOA and is a former treasurer, and both are Master Forest Owner volunteers.

As to his failures, Charlie points to the remaining buckthorn and other invasive plants. In some forest stands where buckthorn was removed, invasive honeysuckle has moved in. Half-hearted efforts to stop the spread of garlic mustard all failed. Some of his early TSI efforts were not too successful because of lack of confidence and experience, or working in older slow-growing stands. He wishes he had been more proactive in cutting out ash for firewood now that the emerald ash borer has arrived. Several attempts have failed to convert goldenrod-filled old pastures to more wildlife friendly meadows. As with most things in life,

the failures often pave the way for success through the lessons learned.

Charlie and Sarah first heard about land stewardship and forestry through a neighbor and a forester. As NYFOA leaders and volunteer Master Forest Owners, they now lead woods walks and tours on their own land and others' and spread the "forestry gospel" far and wide. They man the NYFOA booth at fairs and events, participate in local and state meetings, and help people connect around the state. I met them at a meeting in Massachusetts, so they get around. They cultivate peoples' interest in their land, be it for wildlife, firewood, income or recreation, and are always recommending that they contact their DEC forester and a competent consulting forester to refine and reach their goals. You have neighbors, colleagues, and friends you have not yet met who will benefit from hearing the "Good News" of forest stewardship. An encouraging word from you might be all it takes to raise up other leaders in land management. ■

Robbo Holleran is a private consulting forester helping landowners meet their goals in Vermont and adjacent areas. His work has him outdoors about 150 days each year, plus play time. He is one of the authors of the 2014 Silvicultural Guide for Northern Hardwoods in the Northeast.

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