



Photo courtesy of John Breerwood

# Strong Storms Harder Hunts

Story by  
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When hunting, the undergrowth in many areas of Honey Island Swamp has grown rampant, almost to the point of being impassible.

**W**hile growing up, I never thought hunting was easy, and maybe that's why I enjoyed it so much. There was always some challenge that made it exciting, whether it be the 87 degree unseasonable heat, angry deerflies or briar thorns relentlessly clinging to every fabric of my clothing. But today, those small chal-

lenges while hunting areas have changed beyond such mere inconveniences.

The Pearl River Wildlife Management Area (WMA), or Honey Island Swamp, was a retreat for me and my father. It was a place that we ventured to ever since I was old enough to

shoot a 4-10 shotgun. We started with squirrels and rabbits. And, naturally, as I became older, the gauges also grew. I began bagging wood ducks with an old, single shot 20-gauge and eventually graduated to big game and buckshot with a 12-gauge. As time passed, Honey Island Swamp remained the same. At least, that's how I remember it anyway.

Today, besides being difficult to reach, it is now impossible to enter portions of the Pearl River WMA. The eye of Hurricane Katrina passed directly over the entire Pearl River WMA in 2005, greatly affecting its ecology. Undergrowth was there before the storm, but at least the hardwood canopy kept it at bay. I remember once, we walked so far through the swamp that we came to the opposite parallel road. Now, the only possible straight line to reach either road may be via helicopter.

The lower part literally took the brunt of the storm and braced a 15-foot tidal surge, yet was not drastically altered. Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) biologist Jimmy Stafford says of the lower section,



Photo courtesy of John Breerwood

"Like roaches after a nuclear blast, we saw hog tracks just days after the storm surge receded." Some species didn't just survive but were bolstered by this sudden change. "Dozens of new ponds were gouged into the marsh actually improving waterfowl habitat," Stafford says. The midsection of the WMA remains almost unchanged as a result of the prevalent cypress and tupelo trees' ability to survive long floods and strong winds due to their strong base and aquatic root system.

However, the upper section wasn't so fortunate. Stafford says, "Some oak ridges were completely wiped out in wet areas, and drier areas saw 70 percent losses of hardwoods. Many small

Above:  
Fresh hog scat is a common sight among food plots.



*When hunting food plots, position yourself near or along the access trails. Not only will you see approaching game, but also other hunters from a safe distance.*

Photo courtesy of John Breerwood



Photo courtesy of John Breenwood



LDWF File Photo

Not all species are flourishing in this new habitat though. The scarcity of hardwoods hurts the squirrel population, and the dense undergrowth is not conducive for wild turkeys that typically dwell in expansive, climax forests. Turkey season remains closed until the population rebounds.

You may be asking yourself, "But hurricane devastation to habitat isn't anything new, so shouldn't everything be back to normal one day?" Well, maybe. It depends on the invasive species that are taking full advantage by furthering their conquest in this swamp's volatile state. Salvinia and water hyacinth have proliferated since the storm, depleting the oxygen for the aquatic wildlife and obstructing boaters. The Chinese tallow tree, introduced from Asia for its decorative seasonal leaves, has been a major nuisance in the regeneration of the hardwood habitat. Its sap, leaves and seeds, are allegedly toxic, and most wildlife have the tendency to avoid it, which probably contributes to its proliferation. Stafford says, "The fast growing Chinese tallow has taken over many sites where a rich diversity of hardwoods once grew. Biologists expected the wildlife population responses that are now occurring, but many fear that short-term improvements in habitat will evolve into a long-term tree species composition shift toward more invasive plants less beneficial to wildlife."

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streams and sloughs were blocked with trees altering the hydrology of certain sites."

When the hardwoods came down, the undergrowth came up with a vengeance. Once my dad and I tried to brave through the briars, but stopped after we only circled a 10-yard radius in over 30 minutes. That's part of the reason that the population of some game has boomed. Over the last two seasons, I came close to killing more rabbits, hogs and deer since I've been hunting there, but that's because I swerved my truck to miss them as they crossed the road. I have seen rabbits, hogs and deer cross the road, or strut along it as if they had no fear of predators. And as long as the thicket protects them, they'll have very few. Stafford says, "Experience has taught us that over-hunting is seldom an issue in thick post-hurricane habitat."

Below:  
White-tailed deer, rabbits, hogs and wood ducks seem to have flourished in this environment.



LDWF File Photo



LDWF File Photo



LDWF File Photo



Photo courtesy of USFWS

Nevertheless, hunting in Honey Island Swamp will never be the same, for us anyway. Pearl River WMA supervisor Mark Bible says, "We'll never see it the same way in our lifetime. Some oak trees were 75 years old or more. Hunters will have to adapt." And, that's exactly what we have to do. You may have to forego your wood duck secret spot since your flagging is lost underneath the briars. Stafford says, "The extent of Katrina's devastation is so widespread that man cannot undo what nature has done. But, LDWF did salvage some 1,000 acres of downed timber, cleared miles of trails and food plots and herbicide-treated thousands of invasive species to assist the growth of native hardwoods."

So, now we must relearn how to hunt Honey Island Swamp. Other than walking the access trails, I have a few suggestions.

Hunt the sloughs. If you come across a slough that crosses the trail, jump off the trail and follow it. You may find mobility and visibility in parts of the unnavigable swamp even when it is bone-dry.

If there's water, then you've found a water source for big game and a possible landing area for wood ducks. If there's just sloppy mud, what better place to sit and wait for a hog? And believe me, it would be easier strapping on the waders and walking through water than fighting those vicious thorns.

Take advantage of food plots. Along certain trails, you'll come across open areas designated for sowing winter grass. If the grass hasn't grown, study it to see if the seedlings are just beginning to sprout. Fresh tire tracks suggest that the seeds need a little time to grow, so plan to return when the time is right. The grass provides an excellent food source for rabbits, hogs and deer. Rusty Vatty from the LSU AgCenter says, "The food plots initially are visited by big game, are more beneficial as they have ever been." In some areas, rabbit droppings are so widespread that you wonder if they've ever been hunted. I've fre-

quently seen fresh hog mess all over these plots as well. But still wear your orange when hunting these plots. Since many of these plots are near the access trails, be very cautious of approaching hunters. If possible, position yourself where the trail meets the plot, so other hunters can see you at a distance.

Find any nut-bearing tree that survived the storm. Finding the ground covered with acorns has never been more important. Rest assured that the hogs and deer have found these trees. I typically hunt at season's start and at season's end. I first came across a tree along the access trails, and its hickory-like nuts hadn't yet fallen. Later in the season, I returned to countless shells and caps amidst hog tracks and ruts. I have yet to hit this sweet spot when the hogs "pig out" (for lack of better words).

However, according to Bible, hunting in the Pearl River WMA has picked up. At the time of writing this article in late January, 69 deer had been harvested. "We are seeing an increase in hunters. There are lots of permits and overall use of the area. So people have adapted."

For anyone who has hunted there before Katrina, other hunters aren't anything new. Honey Island Swamp has always been heavily hunted due to its close proximity to urban areas like Slidell and New Orleans. Bible says, "It is a unique area with much diversity in salt and fresh water habitat. This is the place to go, especially if you live anywhere near the area."

So every season that passes, the game (specifically rabbits, hogs and deer) become more plentiful. Getting to them is the challenge. But as I said before, I appreciate a challenge. So, I only see the hunting getting better. ♪

*John Breerwood is an avid outdoorsman and enjoys outdoor writing. This is his first contribution to the Louisiana Conservationist.*

