A photograph of Paul Hinlicky, an older man with a white beard and a baseball cap, wearing a red and black plaid shirt and blue jeans. He is standing on a dirt path in a field of tall, green switchgrass. In the background, there are trees and a grassy hillside. A dark green text box in the upper right corner of the photo contains the text: "Paul Hinlicky looks over a stand of switchgrass that he has established on his Roanoke County land."

Paul Hinlicky looks over a stand of switchgrass that he has established on his Roanoke County land.

From Run-down Farm to **BIG BUCK SANCTUARY**

ARTICLE AND PHOTOS BY BRUCE INGRAM

Managing your own property for wildlife can be very rewarding. Your hard work will set the stage for a more productive hunting experience and quality whitetails!

When Paul Hinlicky bought a 55-acre Roanoke County farm in 2002, perhaps the last thing on his mind was that one day he would turn the parcel into a big buck sanctuary, but life's events sometimes conspire to make improbable events happen.

Paul's wife Ellen was diagnosed with breast cancer shortly afterwards and after she recovered, the couple decided that they desired a different lifestyle than living in the suburbs of Salem where Hinlicky was a professor at Roanoke College. They built a home on the Catawba-area property in 2005 and gradually began adding adjacent parcels to the place until they owned 100 acres. In the process, Hinlicky took a hard look at the mountaintop land.

"The land had been settled and worked for generations by people who were subsistence farmers," says the VDHA member. "It was a tough existence, and the soil was just worn out. The property is steep, too, and the overgrazing had also caused erosion

to happen in places. What's more, the various owners had never made any attempt to conduct practices such as rotational grazing or to try to eliminate invasive plants. The multi-flora rose, for example, was particularly widespread.

"So I gradually started to educate myself on what could be done to improve the place. I developed an interest in regenerative agriculture, and one of things that I learned is that not only can loss of wildlife habitat occur from development but it also can happen because of poor agricultural practices – as was the case on my land. I also learned that good land managers take a mosaic approach to creating habitat...meaning, for example, that a parcel should have a variety of forested sections in different ages from older growth, to medium aged stands, to regenerating sections."

Another step that the college professor took was to take advantage of the services that the Virginia Department of Forestry and USDA offers. He especially cites the help that VDOF staff like Denny McCarthy and Bob Boeren [now

a private forester] offered, including how to conduct a variety of timber stand improvement (TSI) projects such as girdling, thinning, cutting and spraying, and hinge cutting. The Hinlicky's also leveraged the purchase of the additional parcels by placing the land in a conservation easement through the Virginia Outdoors Foundation. The income from the timber cutting was used in conjunction with USDA clean water and conservation grants to build the infrastructure for the grass raised beef farming.

I first met Paul at the beginning of his habitat improvement odyssey and one of the first things he said to me was "Let's talk switchgrass." Through his studies, he has become a major advocate of native warm season grasses such as switchgrass, indiagrass, and big and little bluestem, and he estimates that he has between eight and ten acres of switchgrass alone on his land.

The land manager emphasizes that switchgrass is not only beneficial to quail and various songbirds, but also creates

excellent habitat for fawns to hide within and for turkeys to nest inside. Likewise, this native grass also provides superb thermal cover for a wide variety of game and nongame wildlife come winter. But, as great as warm season grasses are, they also require managing and Paul does a marvelous job of that as well.

"Part of my rotational grazing plan with my beef cattle is to periodically turn them out into my switchgrass

"The land had been settled and worked for generations by people who were subsistence farmers," says the VDHA member. "It was a tough existence, and the soil was just worn out."

stand," he says. "Their manure and urine serve to fertilize the stand, and grazing switchgrass can serve to revitalize a plot. Put cattle in a spot, let them graze there for a while, then move them to another place and let the original section revitalize itself. Again, the key is not to leave cattle in any one spot too long. If you do that, the plants and the soil will be damaged, and invasive plants will also have a better chance of appearing."

Another step toward Hinlicky becoming an outstanding land manager was his practicing the principles of quality deer management as espoused by the National Deer Association.

"QDM surely has worked for me," he says. "I've hunted my property for almost 20 years now; in the beginning it was 'if it's brown, it's down', so I was shooting a lot of young bucks because I was hunting for meat, which is fine, but it should be the does that you are hunting for meat and to improve the health of your overall herd."

"After I got into QDM, it took a while to make the habitat changes, like the clear cuts and the TSI, plus deemphasizing food plots but locating them more strategically, and cordoning off sanctuary areas. As a result, in the last five years I've taken three trophy bucks worthy of being mounted. And I've seen pictures of some real monsters on my property."

Hinlicky's point about deemphasizing food plots is worth further examination. By no means, is he criticizing their creation, but he feels strongly that these openings should not be the main part of a habitat improvement plan, but they can certainly serve an important secondary role. After all, study after study has shown that the amount of wildlife food coming from clear cuts and young forests can be substantially more than that which is produced in a plot.

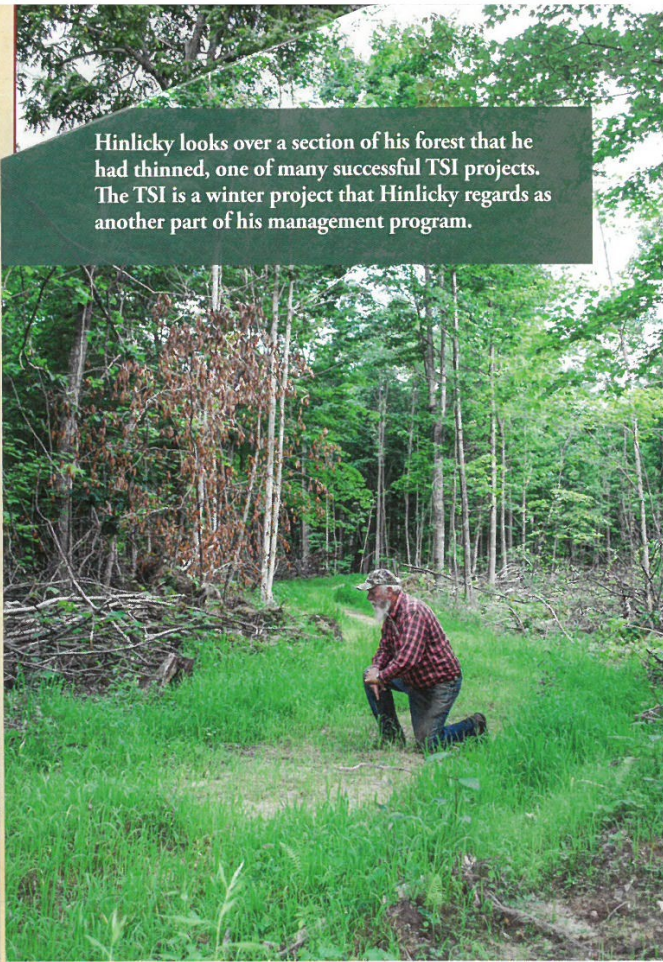
Currently, the land manager's 100 acres has the following makeup: 30 acres of young forest, 30 acres of pastureland or what Hinlicky calls his meadow, and 40 acres that have been thinned or have

benefitted from various treatments. Indeed, the Virginia Association of Foresters Soil and Water Conservation District has given him its annual Forest Stewardship Award, "in recognition of outstanding achievements in forestry management and stewardship." As Paul states: "My land is a beautiful mix of young, old, and medium aged woods – in short, ideal deer habitat."

I confess that I have taken advantage of Paul's expertise. Many times I've sought him out for advice on how to make my 38 acres in Botetourt County better for wildlife. Several times, he has asked me to come over and help him manage his burgeoning deer herd by

Roanoke County's Paul Hinlicky revitalized this worn out pasture by using rotational grazing and creative plantings.





Hinlicky looks over a section of his forest that he had thinned, one of many successful TSI projects. The TSI is a winter project that Hinlicky regards as another part of his management program.

taking does. Last September, for example, I arrowed a deer there on the first weekend of the Urban Archery season (all of Roanoke County is under the UA designation). And several years ago, I tagged a doe there during the later muzzleloader season.

For the retired Roanoke College professor, habitat management is a year-round proposition. In this management, he has also had to take into account the fact that several years ago, he suffered a stroke that resulted in him losing partial use of his left hand.

“After I got into QDM, it took a while to make the habitat changes, like the clear cuts and the TSI, plus deemphasizing food plots but locating them more strategically, and cordoning off sanctuary areas.”

“This past winter, I spent lots of time doing TSI in my woods,” he says. “I’m really looking forward to next fall so I can improve the areas I’ve located for hunting in the woods – since I need to make permanent ground blinds with a stable support for a rifle or muzzleloader because of my left hand disability. Since I can’t hunt anymore from tree stands, I believe it’s important to have a number of ground blinds located in different places and different habitats so that the deer can’t pattern me. I also have a lot of black birch on my property which is supposedly good firewood. I’ve been thinning that too, and cutting it up for next winter.”

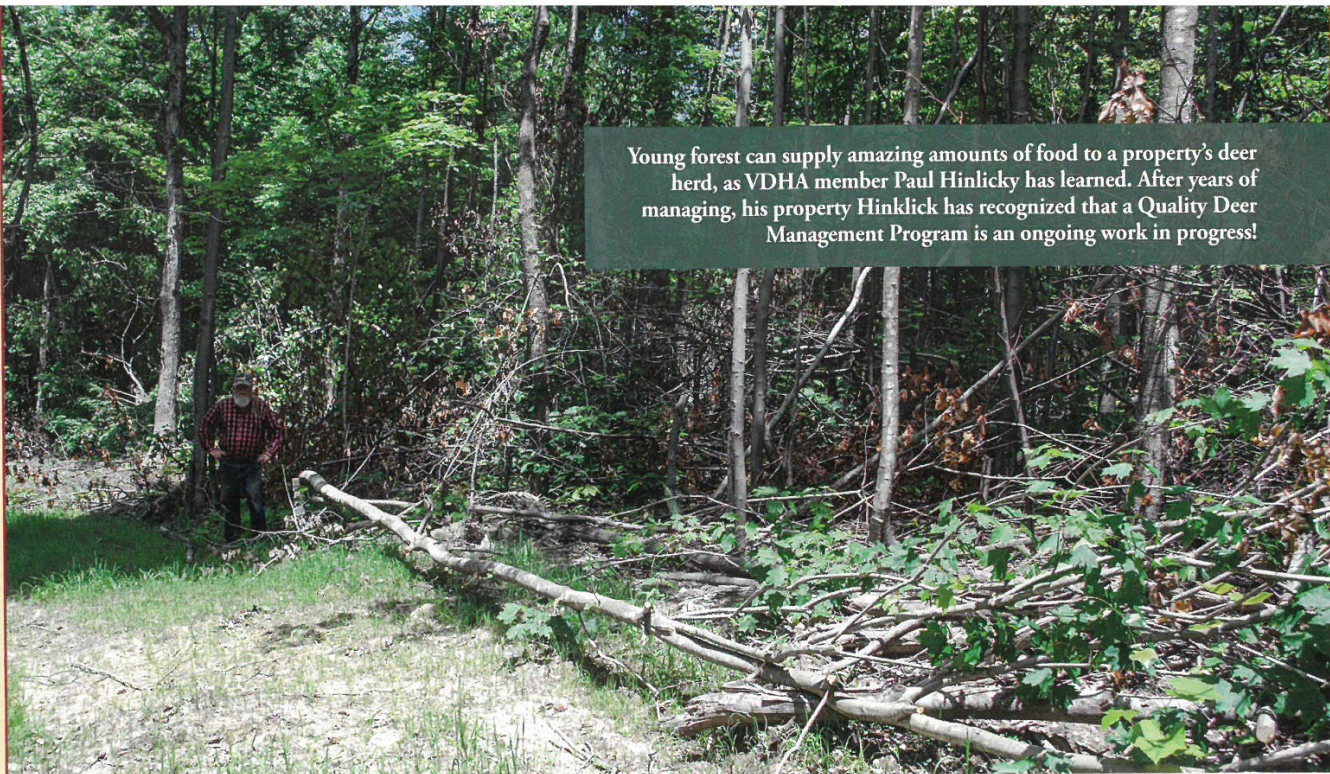
Interestingly, Hinlicky says that he has learned that a logical way to undertake TSI projects is to concentrate on one section of a woodlot at a time. He also feels that land managers should use field guides and other resources so that they can identify all the tree species on their property. For example, he desires to have a good mixture of white and red oak trees as well as beeches, plus a contingent of soft mast trees and shrubs such as native plums and persimmons. These food sources can be supplemented by strategic plantings of apple trees and Chinese chestnuts, for instance.

Hinlicky’s meadow is also a point of emphasis.

“Some of my pastureland is steeply sloped and had eroded with very thin topsoil,” he says. “A lot of that I’ve transitioned into switchgrass. But now I’m trying to regenerate the soil for cool season grasses. It’s a process of planting and grazing cover crops for several years.

“For example, the way winter rye works is that it is sown in late August or September along with crimson clover, kale, and radish. It can be grazed in December, and the kale and radish are consumed at that point. In March the winter rye and crimson clover start growing and can be grazed again in

◀ **Paul Hinlicky of Catawba with a fine 8 pointer that was taken during the 2018 early muzzleloader season. Paul has taken several mature buck on his property over the past several years that he credits to his habitat improvement and his commitment allowing young bucks to walk!**



Young forest can supply amazing amounts of food to a property's deer herd, as VDHA member Paul Hinlicky has learned. After years of managing, his property Hinklick has recognized that a Quality Deer Management Program is an ongoing work in progress!

April into May before we transition to the buckwheat and cowpea mixture. After several years of this rotation of cover crops, the soil is built up and sown to a permanent cool season pasture of combining endophyte-free tall fescue, orchard grass, and bluestem along with legumes like red and white clovers and birdsfoot trefoil.”

“Finally, Hinlicky has set aside two different sections of his land as deer sanctuaries; both are about 20 acres in size. One is the uppermost section of his land, and the other is on a steep mountainside on the east side of the parcel.”

As one would expect, Hinlicky is also an advocate of controlled burns to regenerate a grassland or woodlot. Of course, prescribed burning is always at the mercy of the weather and the forestry department’s availability. He also notes that after a burn or clear cut he has to attack and remove the various invasive

plants that tend to appear such as paradise trees, autumn olive, and multiflora rose. These removal projects often have to be done early in the regeneration process before the invasive plants take over an area.

Finally, Hinlicky has set aside two different sections of his land as deer sanctuaries; both are about 20 acres in size. One is the uppermost section of his land, and the other is on a steep mountainside on the east side of the parcel.

The Result of this Hard Work

Besides a healthy deer herd and a rejuvenated forest and grassland, Paul Hinlicky has other tangible results from all his hard work toward habitat improvement.

“When I started letting small bucks walk around 2012 or so, it was difficult,” he says. “All I shot were does for two or three years, but in 2015, I took my first of three mountable bucks, a 10 pointer. That was followed by a 12 pointer in 2018 and an 8 pointer in 2021. During that time, I also killed a 430-pound black bear.”

The 10-point mossyhorn was especially satisfying as it involved a long tracking episode.

“During the early muzzleloading season, the buck came out in my meadow at a distance of approximately 110 yards. After I shot, the deer ran into some thick

brush. I had to go inside that thicker and followed the trail until dark when I lost the trail and had to quit.

“Fortunately, I found the trail again and followed it for 80 to 90 yards when once again the blood stopped. But I thought the deer might be dead because of the blood loss, so I did a grid search and found it. I had seen the buck on my trail cameras and that also made killing that deer very memorable and satisfying.”

Paul and Ellen are now both retired and are raising bees for honey, chickens for their eggs and meat, and grass-fed beef. To learn more about their enterprise or to purchase their products: www.stgallfarm.com.

EDITOR’S NOTE: *Bruce Ingram, staff writer for Whitetail Times, lives in Fincastle, Virginia with his family. Ingram is a serious whitetail hunter and fisherman. His hunting and fishing articles have been published in state, regional and national publications. Our author has written four books on river smallmouth fishing. Bruce and his wife Elaine write a weekly outdoor blog that readers can visit at www.bruceingramoutdoors.com. Readers can also order Bruce’s books on smallmouth fishing from the site. Our staff writer welcomes and looks forward to hearing from readers via e-mail be_ingram@juno.com with their questions and comments about his articles in Whitetail Times.*