

## The Long Leaf Pines of NOLF Harold

Navy Outlying Landing Field Harold is a special place of co-existence of uneven aged towering longleaf pines, buzzing helicopters; bobwhite quails, new aviators, fox squirrels, and simulated emergency landings. The responsible stewardship of the US Navy's Forestry Program has created a model of mission readiness and natural resources conservation. NOLF Harold is unique because it is an island of quality wiregrass-longleaf habitat in an increasing area of housing, commercial, and agricultural development. Mr. Michael Hardy, USN Forester, knew the unique quality of the longleaf stands. Therefore, he sought the advice of The Longleaf Alliance for the maintenance of the two hundred seventy-seven acres of timber and in particular, the two hundred sixty-five acres of longleaf pine (*Pinus palustris*). NAS Pensacola and NAS Whiting Field are members of the Longleaf Alliance. The organization was established in 1995. The Longleaf Alliance was created for "...the express purpose of coordinating a partnership between private landowners, forest agencies, conservation groups, researchers and other enthusiasts interested in managing and restoring longleaf pine forests for their ecological and economic benefits." Mr. Mark Hains, a research forester with the Long Leaf Alliance, generously agreed to survey NOLF Harold Field and give his expert advice.

NOLF Harold is a small pocket of timber that provides a glimpse of what the longleaf pine forests used to resemble. The longleaf pines of yesterday were open park-like settings of tall timber. They were the primary forest type that dominated the south. The historic range covered Virginia, west to Texas, east to the eastern seaboard, and south all the way to Orlando. Unfortunately, the longleaf pine range has decreased because of the combination of unsustainable and faulty timber production, farmland clearance, and false information regarding growth characteristics of the tree. The former longleaf pine forests were replanted to slash pine and loblolly pine. However, the longleaf pine is the most disease, insect, and fire resistant species of southern pine. Additionally, it is hurricane resistant. The Longleaf Alliance is dedicated to dispersing these facts and promoting that with the correct management, longleaf pine can be a better economical choice for timber production, aesthetics, and wildlife diversity.

Working as the Navy's Forester, Michael Hardy has included two-year intervals of low intensity prescribed burns. His prescription has resulted in the excellent timber condition. Furthermore, with the buzzing of helicopters overhead, Mr. Hains confided during his tour of Harold that the presence of a grass species, wiregrass (*Aristida stricta*), was the best indicator of the high quality of the diversity of habitat. Many flora and fauna species have adapted to the natural fire regime of the longleaf/wire grass ecosystem. These species are dependent upon fire to increase forage and decrease underbrush. For instance, bobwhite quail do not aggressively scratch through leaf litter for food. Therefore, the longleaf/wire grass ecosystem is compatible for the bobwhites because the amount of legumes (foodstuff) produced is dependent upon sunlight reaching the forest floor. Legumes are a fire tolerant plant species that benefits from frequent low intensity fires by the extermination of competitor plant species. Hains recognized two rare species of legumes, *Baptisia calycosa* and *Baptisia lanczolata*, were favorite foodstuffs of bobwhites. Also, wiregrass and gopher apples (*Licania michauxii*) are fire dependent and are the favorite foodstuffs of gopher tortoises.

Mr. Hains continued to explain the characteristics of the longleaf pine. For instance:

- Longleaf pines are hurricane resistant because of their lengthy root development stage during which they resemble bunches of grass
- Longleaf pines begin to develop cones at the age of approximately twenty years and the larger and older the tree the more cones produced
- Cones take approximately two years of growth on the tree to mature, however, once they are shed they can germinate immediately if conditions are conducive
- Longleaf pines are adapted to fire and the wiregrass/longleaf habitat requires frequent low intensity burns to maintain high diversity levels
- The wiregrass/longleaf habitat is home to many endangered and threatened species such as gopher tortoises (*Gopherus polyphemus*), red cockaded woodpeckers (*Picoides borealis*), bobwhite quails (*Colinus virginianus*), fox squirrels (*Sciurus niger*), and numerous other animals.

Mr. Hains continued his survey of Harold and sadly noted the amount of immature cones knocked down by Hurricane Dennis. The category two hurricane made landfall at Pensacola region beaches on July 10, 2005 and dramatically reduced the number of seeds from the 2005 cone crop. However, the stands of pine should fully recover under the expert guidance of Forester Michael Hardy. Mr. Hardy stated that the excellent condition of the stands will be maintained with natural regeneration and the current prescribed fire regime. Calls of a bobwhite quail bid Mr. Hardy and Mr. Hains good day as they finished their survey and drove their vehicles past a helicopter practicing landings.

For more information about longleaf pines contact the Longleaf Alliance at: [www.longleafalliance.org](http://www.longleafalliance.org) and 12130 Dixon Center Road, Andalusia, Alabama, 36420-9025. Their phone number is 334-427-1029.



Measuring the circumference



