Apple Tree Release
By Keel Kemper, MDIFW Wildlife Biologist

Without question one of the most common questions we receive into our regional office from landowners is "what can I do to improve wildlife habitat conditions on my property"? The answer runs the gamut of options from high maintenance food plots to attract and hold deer, constructing wildlife ponds for fire protection and wildlife enhancement, to building bird house for cavity nesting species. However the simplest and likely the most effective effort than a landowner can under take to improve habitat conditions on a property is to indentify and properly release, prune and fertilize the apple trees that are to be discovered hidden amongst the regenerating forest. There was time when apple trees were the equivalent of a retirement plan to be utilized and passed to the next generation. Searching a property for these historic relics and bringing them back to prominence allows a landowner to really discover his property, get exercise and greatly improve habitat conditions for wildlife.

Generally apple trees are found in previously open areas such as old clearings and edges because apple trees grow best in full sunlight. As the forest matures around the apple trees, they are crowded and shaded and loose their vigor and ability to fruit. Additionally, as the apple tree grows, it's internal branches compete for space and sunlight which limits fruiting. The best way to improve the productivity of apple trees is to provide direct sunlight as they grow best in full sun. By removing the surrounding trees and shrubs that compete for nutrients, water, space and sunlight tree vigor and fruiting ability are greatly enhanced. This "release" of the tree from the surrounding vegetation is the key. Remove any trees that are growing into the tree and all adjacent shrubs and trees growing within the drip line of the tree's canopy. Direct sunlight is critical for restoring apple trees. As such, this may require removal of larger over story trees that are shading the apple tree being released. Safety should be a top priority especially if using a chain saw, proceed accordingly.

Proper pruning of the apple tree is important to tree health and fruiting. Pruning should be completed in late winter (late February – early April) while the tree is still dormant. Pruning is a little tricky and should be done according to established guidelines. When cutting a branch, look for the "branch collar," a ring of tissue at the base of the branch. Cuts should be made at the branch collar, not flush with the main stem. This collar is needed for proper healing of the cut. Remove all the diseased and dead branches and limbs from the apple tree. Remove limbs to open up the tree canopy as this will allow more sunlight into the tree. Don't remove too many limbs at once as it is better to stagger larger pruning jobs over a few seasons. Remove branches that cross or rub against each other as well as drooping and low hanging branches. Select for strong branches with wide crotch angles to the main stem as limbs with narrow crotch angles are weak and frequently break. Remove upright growing shoots as they seldom fruit well. In general try to work with the shape of the existing tree rather than try and shape it a certain way. After a good release and prune job a healthy dose of fertilizer is recommended. Fertilizer spikes or stakes which release nutrients slowly can be hammered into the ground under the canopy edge at the cardinal directions around the tree.

If there is only one thing a person could do on their property to improve the habitat conditions for wildlife the effort to identify and properly release, prune and fertilize the apple trees is hand downs the priority. It has the added benefit of really getting to know ones property and the exercise that results is a bonus.