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ALL PROFILES WRITTEN BY FRANK MCINTOSH

JOHN SUMMERFORD

John Summerford grew up in Falkville in north Alabama. His family worked a small farm and raised chickens, hogs and pigs. In addition to the farm chores, he was head checkout clerk at the family grocery store at age 8 and worked at the family's nursing home. Summerford quotes his father regarding all the hard work : "We get to put our feet under the table at night and eat."

His father had known hard work his whole life, growing up in Morgan County, Alabama in the 1930s. In addition to working his own small plot, he plowed other people's land and mowed fields for spending money. He then moved into hog farming, swapping hogs for school system leftovers to feed his herd. "It was a good system, but you can't do that anymore," Summerford notes.

Summerford left Falkville to attend medical school at the University of Alabama. Graduating in 1986, he set up practice in Tuscaloosa. At that time, an ongoing soybean "bubble" burst, and good land was available in Pickens and Sumter counties. Summerford purchased the first half of the easement property and added adjacent properties, eventually reaching the 1713 acres protected by the 2009 conservation easement conveyed to the Alabama Land Trust.

"The idea was to run to cattle on the property," Summerford says, and the family herd at one point numbered 350 Beefmaster purebreds. "When my father's health began to fail and he couldn't help with management of the property, it became more than I could handle along with my practice."

Like all husbandry, raising beef cattle is enormously time consuming. Summerford noted that winter, when the herd needs the most attention, is the hardest time. "At least it's not like dairy farming. With beef, you're monitoring calving, checking pregnancy and weaning schedules, and springtime is hectic, but at least you can take some Sundays off a lot of the year." Even with all that work, Summerford says managing cattle was his favorite aspect of owning land until its time constraints became overwhelming. He reports his children, Danner and J.T. share his love of the land but regrettably, "they're not beef people."

The Summerfords sold most of their cattle and now lease a good portion of the pasturelands on this Black Belt tract, while working to convert 800 acres to forest. "We harvested 200 acres to pay for planting that," Summerford said. "We are working with several programs, including a riparian buffer restoration project that helps cover the cost of planting hardwoods. Last year we toured the property with Alabama Wildlife and they advised us on widening our fire lanes, rounding their junction points so there aren't any corners on raising limb height in areas to assist turkeys in escaping predators."



Summerford has been devoted to wildlife management since his youth, winning 4-H and FFA Youth Conservationist of the Year and Wildlife Efficiency Awards in 1975. He continues this passion, following Quality Deer Management Association guidelines for deer management.

Summerford's forester also has him replacing Sawtooth oaks with Red and White Oaks, which produce acorns in the winter, when the mast is most beneficial. Summerford is pursuing Alabama Treasured Forest designation for his woodlands.

He is also working to improve conditions for quail on the property and has spotted three wild coveys there. "I grew up hunting them and it is the most enjoyable thing. It's hard to improve things for them, but you are just trying to bring up their numbers."

Asked his least favorite aspect of land ownership, Summerford, obviously thinking on this winter's rainy spell, offered, "Cold, wet and muddy. I've pretty much given up driving on the properties until things dry out a bit. There's just not enough cable in the winch."

Summerford says his motivation for doing the conservation easements was in part passed on to him by his parents. "We were raised with great morals and ideals, part of which was that we should be stewards of the land. We need to be friends of the public and the land." He takes this notion very seriously and beyond the easement has set up trusts to govern the land at the time of his death. "Generations from now we will still maintain these uses of the land."

