

A Day in the Woods with Healing Harvest Forest Foundation

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Author: Donna Born

This is an article written by a supporter from Georgia

A Day with the Healing Harvest Forest Foundation
by Donna Born

He walks to the pasture gate with two buckets of feed and waits quietly. The two Suffolks stop grazing and walk down the hill toward the gate. The horses are willing workers, ready to begin another day of pulling logs from the woods. The Suffolk team, Tong and Wedge, and Healing Harvest Forest Foundation woodsman Jason Rutledge have an agreement to work together.

The partnership between humans and work animals has existed for thousands of years. Work dogs are trained to help sight impaired people and security personnel in ways that technology cannot improve on. Even with the modern logging equipment available today, work horses are still the best way to pull logs from the woods, causing the least disturbance in the forest.

Jason Rutledge has been logging the woods of Virginia for more than 30 years. In 1999 he founded the 501(c)3 non-profit Healing Harvest Forest Foundation (HHFF) to train woodsmen and promote an advanced method of restorative forestry using work horses.

The biological woodsmen of the HHFF are much more than horse loggers. They practice a unique brand of restorative forest management and share their

knowledge and cultural heritage with apprentices and the public. The mission of the HHFF is "To address human needs for forest products while creating a nurturing coexistence between the forest and the human community."

Jason continues his work of forest management and active mentoring through the Environmentally Sensitive Logging and Lumber Company. He is joined by woodsmen Chad Vogel, Justin LaMountain, Jason's son Jagger Rutledge, and apprentice Greg Simpson.

They are working on the farm of Ms. Birney Robert in Fauquier County, Virginia. Ms. Robert wanted some of her timber harvested, but she did not want the woods destroyed.

Suffolks Tong and Wedge are working the Birney Robert woods. Jason Rutledge is driving.

Biological Woodsmen

Jason Rutledge and

Justin LaMountain

head for the landing

where the log stack

keeps growing.

Today they will send

two truck loads of logs

to the sawmill.

The goal of restorative forestry is to encourage a shift in forest structure toward a healthier condition characterized by multiple age classes of trees. Five age classes, spanning five decades of tree growth, and spaced a decade apart are ideal to promote future timber harvests.

Using single tree selective harvesting, the damaged and diseased trees are cut to open the woods and accelerate

the growth of the remaining trees. Jagger is the principal tree feller for the group. Jason gave Jagger a small chain saw at age 12 and Jagger has been working in the woods ever since.

The trees with frost cracks, dead limbs, and scars from lightning strikes will be cut. It is likely that many of these ailing trees would die within a few years anyway after being attacked by insects. This "worst first" harvesting method provides timber for saw logs, railroad tie logs, poplar plywood peelers, and pallet lumber. The occasional high grade log is sold for veneer, furniture, and flooring.

A large part of the HHFF apprentice training is focused on choosing which trees to cut and which ones to leave for a future harvest. The invasive undergrowth is cut and left on the ground to create more growing space for desirable trees. Non-invasive understory trees such as

Justin LaMountain drives Suffolks Cherry and Birch while apprentice Greg Phillips cuts up brush.

Jason Rutledge (background) heads for the landing with Tong and Wedge pulling.

Chad Vogel works

Suffolks Tray and

Ridge.

dogwoods, beech, and elm are not cut. The shade-tolerant beech and elm will grow for a future harvest.

Woodsman Justin LaMountain believes a low-impact harvest improves the soil and the watershed hydrology and strengthens the ecosystems. In short, everyone benefits. Justin is a recent graduate of a 3/2

Cooperative Program between Warren Wilson College and Duke University. Justin earned dual Master's degrees in Forestry and Environmental Management in 2005 and completed his HHFF apprenticeship with Jason and Chad in early 2006.

The horses pull the logs along paths just wide enough for the team to clear the trees. The biological woodsmen of the HHFF use a Charlie Fisher logging arch that provides front-end suspension of the log. The logging arch reduces the load on the horses and helps limit soil disturbance. The blue print for the logging arch is available for free on the HHFF web site.

Jason Rutledge and the horses are not in a hurry. The horses work hard and Jason gives them the reward of regular rest breaks. When we stop along the trail to rest, Jason surveys the forest, further evaluating the stand of timber. There's another damaged tree that should be cut. There are some that are still too close together. A non-invasive service berry tree is blooming a little way down the hill.

"Did you hear that owl?" Jason says during a rest break along the trail. The owl's home is still here. The old snags with woodpecker holes have been left standing as bird habitat. We listen and the owl calls out again.

Jason is ready to chain another log to the logging arch, but he pauses to interpret the stump of the tree. On this stump the inner rings show good growth for about the first 20 years. The outer rings of the past 10 years or so are spaced very close together; the growth rate dramatically slowed down over the past 10 years. The heart of this tree also shows fire damage and windshake damage. The windshake damage and recent small growth rings are an indication that the trees in this location were too crowded.

The HHFF mentors teach apprentices how to determine the optimal basal footage of trees to forest floor. On this site, the basal footage was around 220 feet of stump to forest floor at the start of the job. The

woodsmen have thinned the trees to around 100 basal feet of stump to forest floor. After thinning, the growth rate for the remaining trees will improve.

Mentor Chad Vogel says the apprentice must have a strong personal interest in the HHFF method and a drive to succeed. Chad earned a degree in forestry from Paul Smith's College six years ago and has logged with horses from Maine to Virginia. Since completing his apprenticeship with Jason, Chad in turn has served as mentor to more than half a dozen HHFF apprentices.

The logging arch lifts the front end of the log reducing the load on the horses and limiting disturbance to the woods. Justin LaMountain drives Cherry and Birch.

Jason Rutledge points out the outer growth rings which are spaced close together.

This indicates slower growth in recent years due to an overcrowded stand.

Further south in Virginia another HHFF member is practicing restorative forestry. Ben Harris is logging the woods of T. L. Richards in Craig County.

Ben has worked draft horses since he was a child. With his Sinking Creek Horse Logging operation, he uses his teamster skills and provides advanced forestry services for his landowner clients. Ben comments that even with the worst first harvesting method, the quality of his logs is often better than logs taken to the sawmill by some traditional loggers. T. L. Richards appreciates that restorative forestry will make his remaining timber stand more valuable.

By the end of the day at the Robert woods in Fauquier County, two truck loads of logs have been taken to the saw mill. Ms. Robert is pleased that the woods are healthier now. She states that there was very little soil erosion in the woods after a recent storm. She is also happy to see the Johnny Jump-ups blooming in the

woods this spring.

After the woodsmen and the horses are gone, the trails will soon grow over with new tree and plant seedlings. The brush piles are left in the woods to serve as nursery areas for the young seedlings that will soon sprout. The brush is a barrier that discourages deer from foraging on young seedlings. The remaining healthy trees will grow at a faster pace providing a more valuable future timber harvest.

The horses have done their job of limiting disturbance to the forest floor. The woodsmen have provided the service of improving the forest by helping it become more productive in the future. Horses and woodsmen have the satisfaction of a job well done.

Tomorrow morning Tong and Wedge will again walk down the hill from the pasture when they see Jason Rutledge waiting at the gate. The woodsmen and the horses will be ready for another day of work in the woods.

Twenty five biological woodsmen are associated with the HHFF in the Eastern U.S. Each apprentice agrees to be a mentor after completing the HHFF program. In addition to training woodsmen, the members of the HHFF provide education, events, and demonstrations to the public and to forestry students from Virginia Polytechnic Institute, Appalachian State University, Duke University, and other educational institutions.

The HHFF is funded by tax-deductible donations of horses, equipment, dollars from individuals, and grant money. For more information about the HHFF and to donate visit the HHFF web site at the following address:

<http://community.roanoke.com/>

HealingHarvestForestFoundation

You can reach Jason Rutledge at 540-270-0587.

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Ben Harris working Dewey and Frank. Summer 2006 issue of Rural Heritage magazine.

Ben Harris works the T. L. Richards woods with Suffolk-Percheron Dewey and Suffolk Frank.