

Alice and Riddick Ricks

In August of 2011, Hurricane Irene hammered Northampton County in Eastern North Carolina, with winds of up to 80 miles an hour and 18 inches of rain that destroyed hundreds of acres of crops and downed thousands of board feet of timber.

At Whispering Pines Wildlife Preserve, owned by North Carolina's 2009 Tree Farmers of the Year Alice and Riddick Ricks, the storm hit just two weeks after they completed a 330-acre thinning operation. The result – a loss of 10 percent of the remaining trees and hundreds of 40-year-old pines in another part of the farm.

"In our forests, when our efforts are altered by acts of nature," Riddick said, "we are quickly reminded of how fragile ecosystems can be." And of how quickly landowners must adapt to change.



Alice and Riddick Ricks are North Carolina's 2009 Outstanding Tree Farmers of the Year.

After surveying the damage, the Ricks family established new goals and forest management priorities. First they cleared and repaired the main roads, fire lanes and stream crossings that had flooded during the storm and began salvaging the downed and damaged timber. Then they clear cut three areas of pine and replanted with 150 hardwoods.

"The storm created an opportunity for Riddick," said Paul Boone of the Northampton County Natural Resource Conservation Service. "Rather than being concerned about the downed timber, he took the opportunity to create some diversity in his forest. He went in and planted hardwoods, with stakes and tree tube protectors, to provide variety in what previously had been a monoculture pine forest. You don't see many landowners who'll do that."

In fact, that's the thing that makes the Ricks family tree farm exceptional – they do a lot of things that other landowners don't do.

Alice and Riddick, owners of three tree farm properties in Northampton County totaling 1,100 acres, both grew up on farms and learned to love the land at an early age. They come from five generations of forest managers and both have parents who were enrolled in the Tree Farm Program.

"Alice and I were raised where there was no other way than being a positive forest steward," Riddick said. "Our forests and fields are managed with the understanding that all creatures are of value to nature, and it is our responsibility to help them survive and flourish."

That's a responsibility that the whole family takes seriously.

Alice, Riddick and their sons, Ben and Will, consider themselves wildlife managers and tree farmers. But when you start talking to them, you realize they are so much more. They're also biologists, hunters, botanists, fishermen, bee keepers, teachers, researchers, students, mentors, frog callers and lepidopterists – that's someone who studies butterflies, in case you didn't know.

Each family member brings a different interest and expertise to managing the tree farm. Ben, a fisheries biologist, is the expert behind the development of a new pond at Whispering Pines, which, when completed, will be a waterfowl sanctuary, wildlife watering hole, source for agricultural irrigation and a fun place to fish for bream and bass. Will, a wildlife biologist, advises on creating habitat and maintaining healthy game and non-game wildlife populations. Alice, a wildflower aficionado, spends much of her time cultivating native flora. And Riddick, a full-time veterinarian and self-described wanna-be forester, serves as the point person and main laborer.

"We capitalize on individual family members' strengths by developing a team approach to forest stewardship," Riddick said. And in doing so, they achieve a remarkably balanced approach to forest management with equal emphasis on wildlife, native plants, water quality, recreation, aesthetic beauty and timber production.

This multi-faceted approach, though, takes a lot of work.

"Most people won't believe what we do in a week," Riddick said. His forest management to-do list from one week in January reads like a list for three or four men

"I don't have a staff of three or four. It's just me and sometimes my sons. But it's a to-do list, not a burden. For me, it is about the honor of following in our parents' heritage."

Alice agrees. "It turns into a lifestyle," she said. "I don't think you could do it if it was just a hobby. We want to give back to the land, to be easy on the land, to tread softly."

"Forests need to be nurtured, loved and respected," Riddick added. "It's when one considers our forests to be *owned* property rather than *managed* property that it often becomes neglected or unappreciated for what it can become," he said. Alice and Riddick realize that it's a privilege to manage the land.

For most of his life, Riddick hunted quail and rabbits with his father, but in the 1980s he rarely saw quail anymore. He decided then that he wanted to purchase a piece of land to help restore quail to the area.



In 1991, Riddick and Alice became forest landowners with the purchase of a 140-acre tract. They began actively managing their farm, which they named Ricks Tree Farm, and became certified tree farmers in 1994.

“I started thinning, burning and creating field borders,” Riddick said, “and I immediately started getting quail in.”

In 2004 and 2005, Alice and Riddick purchased White Oak Alley, a 234-acre tract with mature hardwoods. And in 2006, with proceeds from a timber sale, they purchased Whispering Pines Wildlife Preserve, an overgrown and largely neglected property.

Their first priority at Whispering Pines was improving and adding roads for easy access to all parts of the property. “We got maps and started dreaming it and walking it, flagged where we wanted trails,” Riddick said, “because we knew that if you can’t access a property, you can’t



enjoy it.” Today, they have 20 miles of trails and firebreaks at Whispering Pines (31 miles total on all three properties).

Their objective now is to conserve native wildlife and plants by providing a variety of habitats, an objective that they’ve also incorporated into the management plans of their other two properties. They’ve transformed old lanes and firebreaks into planted wildlife

openings and created larger one- and two-acre food plots (45 acres total) to support quail, turkeys, songbirds, rabbits and deer. And they’ve planted 150 fruit trees in five different orchards.

But providing habitat is just the first step for the Ricks family. Since they’re all trained in the sciences (Alice is a registered nurse), they tend to take a scientific approach to measuring the effectiveness of their efforts. They maintain detailed spreadsheets on 135 bluebird boxes, documenting three times a year nesting activity, eggs, fledglings and predators. Boxes that are clean during three or four checks are moved to a new, potentially more desirable location. As participants in the Quality Deer Management Program, they monitor deer herds and predators using trail cameras and hunter observation twice a year, collecting data to establish harvest numbers for the next season.

Their greatest hope, though, is that their diligence in habitat management will one day attract the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker. They take pride in the fact that they are the only certified Red-Cockaded Woodpecker Safe Harbor Program Farm in Northeastern North Carolina. All three properties were certified in 2008.

While they don't have any red-cockaded woodpeckers yet, Riddick says that "it is our dream to one day host this endangered bird." To that end, their forest management plan calls for a thinned, open-canopy of mature pines and burning to maintain a clean midstory. These practices also happen to benefit game species such as deer, turkeys and quail. "I really want mature pine here," Riddick said. "I've talked with the boys, and they understand that's the goal for the rest of my lifetime and half of theirs."

Not surprisingly, their sons embrace the idea.

Ben credits his parents' love of the land for his own interest in the outdoors. "Dad took us hunting and fishing and taught us about the natural world at every opportunity," he said. "We learned stewardship of the land slowly became stewards ourselves." Ben also recalls his mother encouraging them to play outside, which "led to our finding a creek, a river, the fish in that river and ultimately my chosen profession."

Similarly, Will attributes his love of nature to his upbringing. "Ever since I can remember, the great outdoors has been my number-one passion," he said. "From tractor rides with my grandpa to picking strawberries with my mom and granddad, I have fostered a zeal for the outdoors. Growing up getting dirty and learning the basics on our family farm have made me who I am today."

"I didn't realize how strongly our passion for the land affected our sons until they chose their careers," Alice said. But she *did* realize being the only woman living in a household of men sometimes meant that she had to find some interests of her own.

"I like to shoot, but I don't like to hunt. I like to fish, but not for 12 hours," she said. "Instead, I get a big charge out of walking through the woods, viewing wildlife and learning about the plants that grow here."



As a result of her daily walks through the woods, Alice developed a passion for native wildflowers. "In the spring, you've got to be in the woods every day so you don't miss anything," Alice said. "I've learned that some wildflowers only bloom for two days. If you're not there, you'll miss it."

After reading all the books she could get her hands on and taking a wildflower class with Riddick at N.C. State University, Alice began establishing native wildflower rescue nurseries at Whispering Pines. To date, she has rescued more than 1,500 wildflowers from imminent

destruction at nearby construction sites. She now has more than 15 varieties of wildflowers in three nurseries on the tree farm and continues to search for new ones. "Our goal is to find a new wildflower each year," Alice said, "and this year we found one—a turtlehead."



Learning new things and just being in the forest bring Alice and Riddick great satisfaction, but their greatest joy comes from sharing their interests with others. Over the years Alice and Riddick have hosted hundreds of guests on their tree farm—state and local elected officials, landowner and wildlife organizations, garden clubs, church groups, school groups, university researchers, scouts, tree farmers, neighbors and friends—teaching them about forest stewardship and encouraging them to implement new practices on their own land.

"We're at a season in our lives when it's not so much about what we do," said Alice, "it's about what Riddick and I give back. If we were just back here enjoying it ourselves and our life was just us, we'd be missing the boat. We love to share the farm. Long after we're gone, I would like for our sons and the people who know us to say that we weren't users or takers. We gave something back."

Riddick agrees. "Those who know us personally will say we are passionate about our stewardship journey and the opportunity to share that journey with others who visit our tree farms. I like to mentor small groups, share what it's taken me 59 years of trial and error to learn. My pleasure in life is seeing other people succeed."

One of the most important elements to success, they tell other landowners, is having a plan and a vision for what you want your farm to be. "Alice and I realize we are responsible stewards when we walk our tree farms and are satisfied about the efforts made in the past but are more excited about the plans we have for the future," Riddick said.

But he also knows the importance of being willing to change directions when Mother Nature makes a call. After two tornadoes, an ice storm, a drought and two hurricanes—yep, two—the Ricks family knows a bit about the challenges—and opportunities—nature can deliver.

"Success, you see, is a process, a journey not a destination," Riddick said. "You take those steps through that journey and enjoy the process."