

Waterfalls, Watershed Moments and a Little Red Book

WILDLIFE BIOLOGIST MARK MCDONALD

has seen and done some amazing things in his career as a land manager, consultant and trapper. Although he has all of the credentials and formal education, he says that most of his knowledge came from his experiences on the land, in the woods, on the rivers and from “every old country person I’ve met.”

As a child growing up in Dallas, McDonald had a strong fascination with God and all of his creations. Every moment McDonald could, which included every weekend and the summers, he spent at his grandma’s farm near Shreveport, Louisiana, or in rural Alba, Texas, in the Sabine river bottoms before Lake Fork was made. Some of his best memories come from the times he’d head out into the bottoms on a Friday night with nothing but a rifle and a little red Gideon New Testament. He’d hunt, fish and explore, sometimes not returning until Sunday evening.

McDonald always knew he wanted to work with nature and wildlife, but the path to his job was winding and less than conventional. Cornell University offered him a partial scholarship out of high school, but he couldn’t afford the additional tuition plus room and board, so he opted for East Texas State University. He followed with three years at Texas A&M University, other studies at a community college near Dallas and some classes at the University of Wyoming. To pay for it all, he wrote for a newspaper, rode bulls for prize money, and trapped and sold furs.

During that period, 19-year-old McDonald ditched school after his first year for a stint in rural Alaska. His plan was to earn his fortune filming wildlife. He says things had been going pretty well; he’d filmed three mountain ranges and traversed three major rivers. Then he met with disaster as he was crossing some rapids; he got caught up and carried by the river. As he neared a bend, he had to shed his backpack to pull himself to safety to avoid going over a deadly waterfall.

He escaped with his life, but that incident put an end to all of his gear, his camera equipment and film photographs. It also ended his photography career. He was grateful to be left with



Married for almost 20 years, Mark and Marie McDonald have many entertaining stories to tell about their wildlife management business.

his life, his little red Bible, a lighter to build a fire, and a gearless 45-mile trek to civilization.

After college, McDonald made some stops and starts working in land surveying, life insurance and real estate. In surveying, he learned about land searches and boundary law. In real estate, he gained knowledge about real estate law and environmental assessments. He then moved into timber management, where he bought and sold timber and also developed his timber and wildlife management expertise. In each of these ventures, a watershed moment always upended the job.

In his timber management position, a substantial market drop forced him to seek a new direction. Mark and his wife, Marie, prayed for guidance on what to do next. Then Marie suggested, “Mark, you’ve always loved wildlife, and you went to college for it. Why don’t you try to make a living working with wildlife?”

McDonald called his friend James Yantis, a noted expert and Texas Parks and Wildlife Department biologist, for advice. Yantis suggested specializing in writing wildlife and timber



Mark McDonald is at home among any variety of woodland and swamp creature.

management plans and timber exemptions for tree farms, counties, municipalities and individuals. Since 2001, McDonald's wildlife and land management business bloomed and took on life from business and referrals from agencies such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture, TPWD, Texas Forestry Service, and the National Resources Conservation Service, as well as local businesses and past customers.

McDonald says he is extremely grateful for those referrals, but he is also thankful for the seeming catastrophes that placed him on his current path. "When it seems our life is disorganized and full of detours and pitfalls and problems, it is often the hand of God guiding us to do what he designed us to do," he says. A guiding principle he incorporates into his daily work also comes from scripture: "Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as unto the Lord."

He says he believes that if you work hard and always do your best, just as if you were working for God, then your work will not only glorify God but also be successful because God is directing the path. "When people want or need work done, my

name seems to come up," he says.

McDonald's path has now become a well-traveled road, as his business has expanded to include all elements of wildlife and fisheries management, including consulting and designing, environmental assessments, pond and lake management, as well as fish stocking and management, with a specialty in trophy bass and nuisance control. His clients include oil and gas companies, cities, municipalities and individuals.

McDonald performs many diverse tasks, but in addition to academic roles, his challenges also involve a little action and adventure. He hunts and traps problem alligators, hogs, coyotes, beavers, raccoons, foxes and snakes.

Once he was called in to remove a "6-foot" alligator. When he arrived, he had to face a 12-foot, 850-pound reptile that had eaten two neighborhood dogs. That was a memorable catch because Marie, who goes on many of his calls with him, was helping. They'd had to wait many hours for McDonald to snare the gator, and once he caught it, he had to pull it ashore.

The only problem was that the rope was too short to wrap around a tree for traction, and a tug of war was on. Mark would drag the gator out of the water, and then the gator would drag itself back in.

Marie, in the excitement, dialed the sheriff's office, screaming, "He's got him! He's got him!" and then she hung up to go help Mark. The fire department, police department and game warden showed up because they thought the alligator had gotten McDonald. Instead, they were relieved to see McDonald was unharmed and had the gator all tied up.

McDonald says he was glad all the help showed up because it was the middle of the night, and he did not think he and Marie could get the gator in the vehicle themselves. They still laugh about that as Marie explains, "I was just afraid the alligator was going to get away after all those hours hunting him."

On rare instances, McDonald's job can also be much easier than expected. On one emergency midsummer call, a customer had an air-conditioning problem, but repairmen could not access the attic to repair it because of a raccoon. That was an emergency because the inside of the house was 103 degrees.

When McDonald arrived on scene, he was met by three air-conditioner repair companies. They all had been run out of the attic by a viciously attacking raccoon.

Cautious of rabies and the raccoon's violent attacks, McDonald crept into the attic with a pistol and a snare. He slowly edged in to discover an extremely cold attic. Then he discovered a mother raccoon and all of her babies comfortably asleep in the cool air of a ripped-open air-conditioner duct. He quickly captured the snoring mother with his snare, collected her babies and returned to report an "all clear." He then relocated mom and babies to a more suitable habitat. Problem solved.

McDonald says another thing he loves about all the time he spends outdoors is that "I see very rare things. An avid bird watcher may spend 40 or 80 hours a year in the woods. I spend 3,000 hours."

He says he has seen many endangered, threatened and unusual specimens in the wild, including pure black coyotes; black bears in Northeast Texas; and an albino cardinal, albino opossum and albino alligator.

A local landowner showed him a picture of a jaguar taken in 2012 that McDonald believes is authentic. McDonald also

discovered a mountain lion and her two 60-pound cubs right outside of Tyler.

With a knack for finding the extraordinary in unusual places, it's fitting that McDonald discovered his beautiful bride-to-be, an immigrant from Lebanon, in a Quitman church. McDonald says, "I prayed that God would give me a girl from the country. I just did not expect it would be a girl from ANOTHER country."

While he's the outdoorsman, he is quick to give Marie credit as a full business partner. He says, "She has much better business sense than I do." And, he says, she paddles a canoe pretty well, too.

They've been married almost 20 years, and their admiration for each other still shows in both of their faces. Marie says, "He is a diamond with a little dust. I just had to polish that off."

Together, this couple has encountered much of the beauty and wonder of rural East Texas. With their business, they've also helped preserve it and return some of it to natural habitat.

Mark McDonald makes easy work of nuisance animal relocating and often gets help from his wife, Marie.





Reported as a pest, this 12-foot alligator was relocated by McDonald to the East Texas Gators and Wildlife Park Texas Alligator Farm, where it will live out its days well-fed in a place of sanctuary and education.

They're also both students of plant life, and a hobby is learning about the medicinal properties of natural resources.

"I love wildlife and nature, and even in my spare time, I'm doing research," McDonald says. Other times he hunts. But, he also admits, "Sometimes I get so involved in looking at different things that I forget to shoot something."

McDonald teaches children about nature, and he also has a jail ministry where he uses some of his many stories about hunting and trapping to channel participants' interest.

He says he gets great pleasure in relocating nuisance alligators to learning centers such as the East Texas Gators and Wildlife Park in Grand Saline, where he has supplied almost 90 percent of the alligators on display. He says he still knows every alligator he has caught, and he loves that they are in a place where people can learn about them and admire them.

In all his travels and travails, McDonald says, "I have never been afraid in the woods because God is always with me." He points to a scripture in Habakkuk 3:19: "The Lord God is my strength, my personal bravery, and my invincible army; He

makes my feet like hinds' [deer's] feet and will make me to walk and make progress upon my high places."

Of his work, McDonald says he believes all of his detours in life and the knowledge gained from each was directed by God, and that is how he has excelled. As a noted expert, he's now routinely asked to teach or speak at wildlife society meetings, festivals and clubs. He says he loves doing it, mostly because he wants young people to learn about nature and enjoy it. He also wants them to know "nothing accidentally evolved, but was beautifully designed."

For potential clients, he wants them to know: "The No. 1 thing I am is a wildlife resource. If you have a wildlife problem, I'll make an attempt to solve it."

Marie has been a Wood County Electric Cooperative member since 1984, and together the McDonalds have been members of WCEC since 1996. They live in Hawkins, and their work takes them throughout East Texas, Oklahoma and Louisiana. For pond management, environmental easements, lake and land management, consulting, trapping and speaking engagements, you can reach them at (903) 569-7603 or (903) 769-3651.

Pole Parole

Attaching objects to poles puts lives on the line—and it's a crime

WHAT DO YARD SALE SIGNS, basketball hoops, deer stands, satellite dishes and bird-houses have in common? They're often found illegally attached to utility poles. But this isn't only a crime of inconvenience. Safety issues caused by unapproved pole attachments place the lives of Wood County Electric Cooperative lineworkers and the public in peril.

Many people may wonder, "What's the big deal?" To them, it may seem like a simple matter of convenience to use a utility pole as a bulletin board or support structure. But to co-op line personnel, an obstruction on a pole is, indeed, a big deal.

Your co-op's line crews climb utility poles at all hours of the day and night, in the worst of conditions. Anything attached to utility poles can create serious hazards for them while they're on the job. Sharp objects like nails, tacks, staples or barbed wire can puncture rubber gloves and other safety equipment, stripping away critical protection from high-voltage electricity. Even a small nail partially driven into an electrical pole can leave a lineman vulnerable to electrocution.

Lineworkers regularly see poles used as community bulletin boards, satellite mounts and even support legs for deer stands, lights and carports. Not only do these attachments put line crews at risk, but also anyone illegally placing these items on poles comes dangerously close to energized power lines with thousands of volts of energy



BUTLER RURAL EC

Signs and objects illegally attached to utility poles can be a safety hazard for line crews that climb these poles.

pulsing overhead. It's always wise to keep yourself and any structure at least 10 feet away from utility poles.

Unauthorized pole attachments also violate the National Electric Safety Code. With this danger in mind, many states make it a crime to attach any unapproved item to a utility pole.

Please help us keep our linemen—and our community—safe. Remove any unauthorized items attached to utility poles. Fixtures not belonging to the cooperative or another utility will be removed by Wood County EC line personnel; the co-op is not responsible for any losses if an item is damaged or destroyed during removal.



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Beat the heat this summer by having your AC system inspected and maintained by a professional.

Will Your AC Hold Up for Another Year?

THE BEGINNING OF A TEXAS SUMMER

is a bad time for your air conditioning to fail. Is your AC unit in adequate shape to make it through another one?

That's a good question for a trained, licensed HVAC professional.

Even if things went well the summer before, you should still have your central air-conditioning system or heat pump inspected and maintained by a knowledgeable technician at the beginning of every cooling season. The tech will be able to tell you if your AC is displaying any warning signs that could cause it to break down in the heat of the summer.

You also can increase your chances of having a cool, comfortable house all summer by:

- ▶ Regularly cleaning around your outdoor unit so it's clear of debris, leaves, dirt and twigs.
- ▶ Keeping the grass around that unit trimmed.
- ▶ Caulking or weatherstripping around doors, windows and any gaps between walls and floors, ceilings or fixtures.
- ▶ Changing indoor air filters once a month during the cooling season. If your filters are not disposable, clean them each month. If your home has room air conditioners, change their filters every month, too.

Make One Green Change Per Year

IF YOU'RE READY TO "GO GREEN," you have a lot of choices, from switching to energy-efficient lightbulbs to buying a "net zero" home that produces as much energy as it uses.

Making just one change each year can do wonders for your energy bill—and help you do your part to make your home more efficient so it uses fewer natural resources. Here are five ideas:

1. Start small. Replace your old incandescent lightbulbs and fixtures with LED light fixtures, which use 75 percent less energy. A bonus: Most of them last for about 10 years, so you can stop changing lightbulbs.



2. Buy smart. If your refrigerator, heating/air-conditioning unit or washing machine is 10 years old, it's probably an energy hog. When it's time to replace a home appliance, choose one with the Energy Star label, which means it meets stringent government standards for energy efficiency.

3. Save water. Some households waste more water than they use. You can remedy that by turning off faucets while brushing your teeth and shaving, and by taking shorter showers. Plus, if you install low-flow faucets and toilets, you'll use less water with every shower and flush.

4. Think "green." Homeowners have lots of opportunities to choose a sustainable or energy-efficient product over one that's less beneficial to the environment. Keep that in mind as you select cleaning products and items packaged in a lot of plastic that will wind up in a landfill. And if you're remodeling, consider using durable products that won't wind up in the trash after a few years, and use materials made from renewable sources and grown in sustainable forests.

5. Take control. There's no reason to heat or cool your house for maximum comfort when nobody's home. Install a programmable thermostat that will automatically adjust the temperature to save energy when everyone leaves the house in the morning and then reset it for comfort just before you get home. New models let you control them using your smartphone, which means if your schedule changes, you can "tell" your house to get ready for your return.



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