Three new machines have land managers speeding the assault on invasive shrubs.

Continuing the War on Exotics

Removing autumn olive and other invasive shrubs enhances wildlife values.

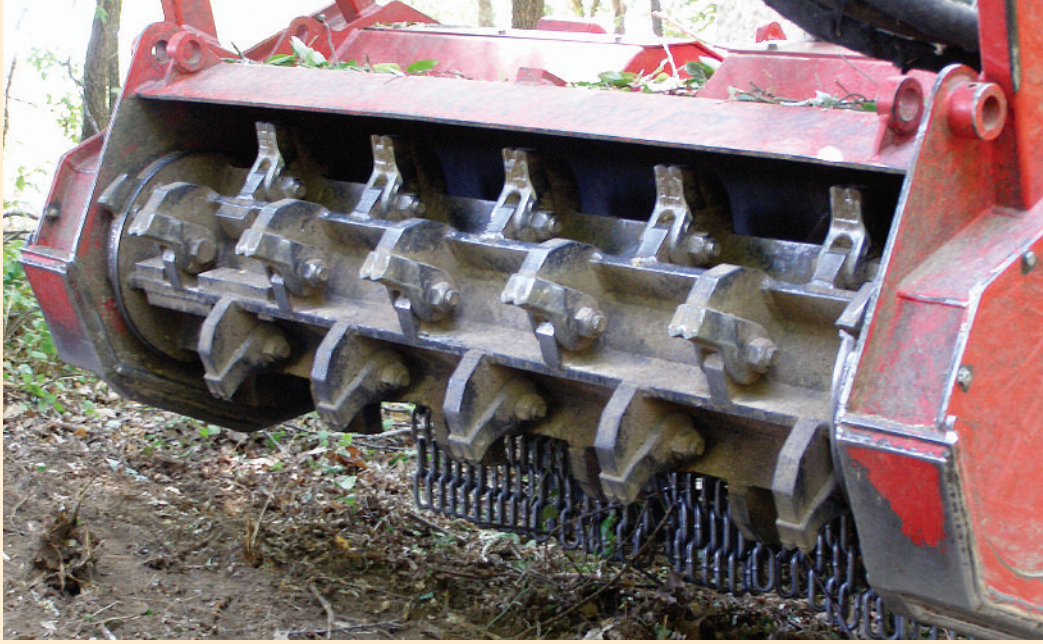
Story and Photos
By Kathy Andrews

Drastic landscape changes are occurring at Department of Natural Resources (DNR) sites throughout central and southern Illinois. It is happening at wide, open grasslands, at seasonally flooded waterfowl management areas, along hiking and equestrian trails, and at day-use areas and campgrounds. Thanks to a new, versatile tool, DNR staff have taken the war against exotic species to a new level.

"The last few weeks have been tremendously rewarding," said Mic Middleton, site superintendent at the southwestern Illinois Kaskaskia River State Fish and Wildlife Area where a bull hog—a rotary-operated drum equipped with carbide cutting tools—ran from sunup to sunset throughout the month of August. "DNR staff take great pride in the work that they do, and it has been highly satisfying to sit in this machine and shred several acres of autumn olive, bush honeysuckle and other exotic shrubs every day."

Stands of nearly impenetrable invasive, exotic shrubs are quickly obliterated thanks to the protective cab on a bull hog.

Normally, several staff would be detailed to clear an area. Chainsaws would run. Brush would be dragged and fed into a chipper. A mountain of mulch would be created—and equipment brought in to transport it to areas where it was needed. A chemical would be



Carbide cutting tools on a rotary-operated drum quickly turn exotic plants into mulch.

sprayed on stumps to prevent regrowth. It was long, hot, loud, labor-intensive and potentially dangerous work.

"The bull hog operator sits inside a protective cab and is able to tease the machine into impenetrable thickets of autumn olive," explained Cha Hill, site superintendent at Pyramid State Recreation Area in Perry County. "One person can now clear 4 or 5 solid acres of 6- to 8-inch diameter autumn olive shrubs in a day. And when it comes to sporadic plants, the machine doesn't even slow down."

Where exotic shrubs have slowed, or even reversed, habitat restoration projects, DNR is once again taking the upper hand.

At Sangchris Lake State Recreation Area south of Springfield, staff feared a restored prairie had been lost to the aggressive exotics.

"We were pleasantly surprised at how well the native grasses fared after the bull hog cleared the shrubs," Site Superintendent Steve Carey explained of the work on a 7-acre prairie. "We thought we were facing purchasing bushels of expensive prairie grass seed, but it was quickly evident that some spot chemical application and a controlled burn will be all that is needed to breathe life back into this prairie."

In just a few short months, three bull hogs have become invaluable tools to Illinois land managers. And, thanks to heavy-duty construction and a climate-controlled cab, the opportunity to operate each of these machines nearly 365 days a year will escalate Illinois' battle against the No. 1 enemy on the land; aggressive, invasive shrubs.

Site Superintendent Mic Middleton inspects a woodland area cleared of autumn olive (left). In an attempt to minimize sprouting, some areas are burned after clearing.

10 great uses for a bull hog

1. Revitalize a native prairie.
2. Reduce competition in woodland openings so native, mast-producing trees can mature.
3. Allow planting low areas with moist soil food plants for waterfowl.
4. Minimize risk of a levee breech created when shrub roots penetrate the berm.
5. Reclaim a shoreline fishing access area.
6. Rehabilitate a campground.
7. Create park vistas.
8. Clear an overgrown day-use area.
9. Remove thickets where deer hide so hunters can aid in controlling deer population problems.
10. Clean up debris after 100 mph straight-line winds ravaged a park.