

## The Great Mulberry Dilemma

*Matt Merrick, Natural Resource Manager*

As I go into my fifth spring season as the trail manager for Dallas County Conservation Board, I feel like it's safe to say the mulberry tree is one of the biggest dilemmas I face on a seasonal basis. It almost never fails: when May and June roll around, the phone calls start coming in. "Mulberries on the trail" is something I hear on a daily to weekly basis. What is the problem, and what are we doing to help steer it in the right direction?

The mulberry tree is widespread in Dallas County. It is usually found as an understory species near powerlines and fence rows. You will typically find two species of mulberry along the trail: red (*Morus rubra*) and white (*Morus alba*). Red mulberry is our native species, while white mulberry is considered a "naturalized species." White mulberry, which is native to Asia, was planted in the eastern U.S. in the 1800s. Not long after, white mulberry spread westward, and began hybridizing with red mulberry. Red mulberry is not very common anymore, and in a lot of regions it is declared endangered.



Red mulberry (*Morus rubra*)

If you see a mulberry, it's most likely white mulberry or a cross between the two. Telling the difference is very challenging without a proper field guide or genetic testing.

What is the problem? Well, after countless conversations with bicyclist and runners, it boils down to stained clothes and equipment, along with a potentially slippery surface. It's a messy tree and we are fully aware of that. When talking with birders and hikers, I get asked, "why are you removing all the fruit trees?" This is where "The Great Mulberry Dilemma" is rooted. Why not remove all the mulberry trees? Mulberry is a vital understory species that provides multiple crops of fruit for countless birds, deer, rabbits, possums, squirrels, and even humans just to name a few. The trail system is not only a means of recreation for people, but is also an important wildlife corridor which has to be taken into consideration when making management decisions.

So, what are we doing about it? The trail system is a long and diverse piece of land to manage, with each section having its own unique set of challenges. Every time there is a spring or summer storm, nine out of ten downed trees are mulberry trees. I have taken the approach of completely removing the whole tree and chemically treating the stump instead of trimming it back to the tree line. If there's a particularly large mulberry that overhangs the trail, is a constant frustration for trail users, or a hazard, it will be addressed. Furthermore, the entire trail system gets blown off once a week and is also cleared as we mow along the trail. Both varieties of mulberry spread very easily via wildlife and human activity. When one tree is removed, it seems four or more take its place. Along with the other problematic tree species along the trail, the mulberry requires a lot of time and energy to be kept under control. We aim to address The Great Mulberry Dilemma by responsibly managing wildlife habitat while also addressing the concerns of trail users.