

Low Cost Habitat Improvements

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Managing for wildlife involves the maintenance and enhancement of the food, water, and cover components necessary for healthy populations.

The smaller habitats that abound on private lands and in many backyards can be enhanced using a variety of improvement options. Wildlife improvements can be simple, inexpensive and fun for the whole family.

This publication discusses selected low-cost habitat improvements that will enhance food and cover for wildlife on private lands.

Protect Key Areas

Not all habitat components are created equal. Within habitats, there are a few special areas that are important for their ability to provide unique benefits necessary for wildlife. The availability of these areas may often be a limiting factor for wildlife species. The protection of key habitat areas is the easiest and least expensive way to enhance wildlife populations.

Identify and maintain these important areas:

| Key Habitat Areas | |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| Old orchards | Spring seeps |
| Old house sites | Fencelines and hedgerows |
| Savannas and natural forest openings | Groves of mature hard and soft-mast producing trees |
| Natural mineral licks | Snags and fallen logs |
| Bottomland and streamside areas | Rock outcrops and caves |

Figure 1. Key habitat areas to be identified and maintained.

After key wildlife areas are protected, improve and enhance food and cover components by using the following low cost techniques:

Improving Wildlife Food

- Promote tree, shrub, vine, and flower species that are beneficial to wildlife (see table at top of page 2).
- Broadcast fertilizer on honeysuckle during the growing season; burn or severely prune old, unproductive patches.
- Broadcast Japanese millet in damp areas prone to flooding .
- Transplant aquatic plants such as duckweed, bullrushes, smartweed, sago and panic grass in wetland areas where they are scarce or absent.
- Manage for herbaceous vegetation by disking, mowing, or controlled burning where practical. Always check local regulations before burning.
- "Daylight" or remove trees shading access roads and logging decks to provide important browse, nesting, and brooding areas.

| Native Plants for Wildlife | | |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------|------------------|
| Trees | Oak | Black walnut |
| | Dogwood | Red bud |
| | Black cherry | Maple |
| | Hickory | Beech |
| | Pine | Holly |
| | Pecan | Persimmon |
| | | |
| Shrubs | Blackberry | Smooth sumac |
| | Waxmyrtle | Strawberry bush |
| | Elderberry | Blueberry |
| | Pokeberry | Wild plum |
| | Sassafras | Lespedeza |
| | | |
| Vines | Trumpet creeper | Virginia creeper |
| | Wild grape | Honeysuckle |
| | Greenbriar | |
| Flowers | Smartweeds | Sunflowers |
| | Clovers | Wild |
| | Black-eyed | strawberries |
| | Susan | Thistle |
| | Ragweed | Beggarweed |
| | | |

Figure 2. Native plants used by wildlife.

Providing Protective Cover

Animals depend on dense cover throughout the year for concealment, protection from predators and severe weather, and for resting and loafing.

Construct brush piles on your land to provide cover for ground-nesting birds, rabbits, and other small mammals. Here's how:

- Stack layers of 6" diameter logs at right angles to each other to make a base for the pile. Space logs within each layer 6-10 inches apart.
- Place tree tops, old Christmas trees, limbs, stones, or stumps on top of the base to complete the pile.
- Ideal piles are 4 to 8 feet tall and from 10 to 20 feet in diameter. Well-constructed brush piles can supplement natural cover for 10-15 years.
- Construct up to four piles per acre. On woods edges, one brushpile every 200 to 300 feet will provide adequate cover and travel lanes between food sources.
- Place piles along forest edges and in openings, field corners, or along streams and marshes.
- Situate brush piles in close proximity to food sources and other natural cover. Isolated piles will receive little use and may be detrimental to some wildlife species.

In addition to constructing brush piles, take the following steps to improve and create wildlife habitat:

- Thin unwanted trees and/or control burn to "restart" woody vegetation in fencelines and hedgerows. Periodic renewal maintains optimal wildlife cover.
- Construct and properly place artificial nest structures for birds, bats, and small mammals.
- Manage for new snags by mechanically girdling or injecting selected trees with herbicide.
- Create temporary pools for breeding frogs and salamanders, songbirds, and other wildlife by digging out springs and potholes or by placing logs in low areas to pond flowing water.
- Open dense forest canopies with annual firewood cuttings or "daylight" logging and access roads.

Living Brush Piles

- Choose wide-crowned trees that are 6 to 8 feet tall; red cedar and holly provide excellent cover.
- In the spring of the year, make a cut in the tree with a hand or chainsaw 3-4 feet above the ground opposite the intended location of the pile.
- Cut deep enough so that you can push the top over, leaving a connecting strip of bark and wood (hinge) to nourish the tree. Use a stake or stone to tie the top of the tree to the ground.
- Rework old piles every 5 or 6 years.
- Select trees with grape or honeysuckle vines nearby that will grow and cover the pile.



Figure 3. Example of a living brush pile.