

# So You Now Have the Old Home Place

*Part 8: Wildlife Management* by James L. Cummins



This is the eighth in a series titled “So You Now Have The Old Home Place.” In our previous article, we discussed landscaping, barns, sheds and shooting areas. In this one, we will discuss wildlife management.

The goal of wildlife management is to balance the needs of the wildlife you want to attract with your own needs and wants. Maybe you enjoy fishing, hunting or simply observing wildlife in its natural habitat. You need to know going in that it takes a lot of dedication to follow through with wildlife conservation plans, but the payoff is well worth the effort.

Successful plan implementation begins with a thorough evaluation of your land for its wildlife habitat potential. Let us look at a few aspects of inventorying your land. Once you have done this you can maximize the number and diversity of wildlife on your land which will in turn increase the desirability and value of your land. A good wildlife management plan will improve your chances of attaining wildlife, but remember that management plans should not be static. Effective management plans will allow for changes depending on plant responses to your practices, wildlife usage, economic influences, seed availability, weather patterns and other such factors.

Also, match your management plan to the species of wildlife you want to encourage. It is useful to target your habitat management toward specific species. In doing this, you will likely benefit several other species so keep that in mind as you plan, to have adequate habitat available. Conversely, some habitat practices may actually reduce or harm habitat for other species. For example, clearing trees to create openings for turkey will reduce habitat opportunities for woodpeckers and squirrels, so also be aware of potential habitat you may be sacrificing as you plan.

As you develop a plan, obtain a recent map or aerial photo of your land. Determine which areas already contain adequate habitat for your targeted species. Begin by marking different habitat types with different colored pens, or use a computer to do it. Each type of habitat will meet the needs of different species so they should be intertwined within the property. Note isolated areas of habitat as some species, such as quail and rabbits, require that habitats be closer together; whereas, other species, such as deer and turkey, can easily travel further distances to meet their needs.

Next, note any areas that can be improved upon. For instance, by letting fields or field borders lie fallow for songbirds, rabbit or quail, you are providing adequate habitat; however, this can be improved upon by adding brush piles for rabbits to maintain or increase their presence on your land. So look for areas where improvements or enhancements may be made.

No matter which types of species you target, there are three essential ingredients to good wildlife habitat: food, cover and water.

## FOOD

To assess the amount of food available on your land, look closely at the types and amount of vegetation you have. The trees, crops, brush and grass largely determine the types of wildlife that can thrive on your land. Plants are the basis for nature’s food cycle, of which every animal is a part. Plant-eating animals such as deer, rabbit and insects convert plant energy to fat and proteins. Carnivores, such as hawks,



bobcats, predatory insects and insect-eating birds, feed on the plant eaters. So you can see how vital plants are.

Most species of wildlife need a variety of plants throughout the year and native plants are the most desirable. Managing for a diversity of native plants offers many advantages over non-natives. Native plants are best-suited to the rainfall, temperatures and soil conditions in the area. These plants are equipped to survive the stresses of extreme temperatures, drought, floods and even plant diseases present in the area.

Identifying native plants can be a task of its own. Talk to a local biologist or botanist to help identify any native plants you have growing on your property. They can also advise you on how to implement, encourage and care for native species.

## COVER

Both natural and artificial cover is essential to wildlife management. Cover provides nesting, roosting, resting, protection and foraging areas. Natural cover is managed through planting, pruning, thinning, clearing and burning. Artificial cover includes constructing bird houses, nesting boxes, brush piles, log and rock piles and other similar structures. Scattered covering is optimal for wildlife as most species will not settle in an area that is too far from escape cover.

A lack of cover can be very detrimental to wildlife management. However, with careful planning, the proper design and placement of cover can be effectively implemented and maintained.

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## WATER

Our third essential ingredient to wildlife habitat is water. And with 68 inches per year of average rainfall, we Mississippians sometimes take it for granted. Inventory your land for water sources. Water is essential for obvious reasons but it can become the focal point of a wildlife plan because it is a limiting factor for some animals such as furbearers and fish.

The quality of water and habitats needs to be considered in relation to your property. Protecting water sources from sediments, pollution and invasive aquatic species is important for maintaining wildlife populations. Keep in mind that trees stabilize streambanks and protect water from sedimentation. A lack of shade will allow higher water temperatures which negatively affects aquatic food chains. By maintaining adequate vegetation along bodies of water, pesticides and herbicides are buffered from entering the water. They also provide habitat and travel corridors for wildlife.

So, you know what you need to be successful. How do you go about ensuring these things can be found on your land? If you are comfortable with your knowledge of wildlife and their management options, some find it helpful to keep a journal. Take note of which animals can already be found on your land and make a note of any other species you would like to attract. Take notes often and during all seasons of the year. The evidence of animals will change with each season so this is important. Keep track of where you found the evidence – tracks, feces, etc.

– for each species and what might be lacking in these areas.

However, if you are like most people and you want to maximize your management plan, but need guidance, several state wildlife agencies provide guidance about improving wildlife habitat on privately-owned land. Your local county extension office is a good resource. There are also a number of references and books available to assist with wildlife management. Assuredly, the internet has several options, but be careful to check for local sources. The website, [msucare.com](http://msucare.com), is an excellent internet resource.

With all of your hard work, wouldn't it be nice if there were some financial assistance available? In many cases, there is!

Congress passed the Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956, which gave the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) broad statutory authority to enter into voluntary agreements with non-federal government entities, including private landowners, to restore and enhance habitat for federal trust fish and wildlife resources. In 1987, the USFWS began a voluntary partnership program with landowners interested in restoring wetlands and other important fish and wildlife habitats on their own lands. The Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program (Partners Program) provides financial and technical assistance to private landowners through voluntary cooperative agreements.

The Partners Program's philosophy is to work proactively with private landowners for the mutual benefit of declining federal trust species and the interests of the landowners

Clover is one of the preferred plantings of white-tailed deer.



PHOTO BY WILDLIFE MISSISSIPPI - RANDY BROWNING

involved. Usually, a dollar-for-dollar cost-share is achieved by working with landowners and a host of nationally-based and local entities. Landowners sign an agreement to restore the habitat for the life of the agreement (at least 10 years) and otherwise retain full control of the land.

Also, Working Lands for Wildlife is a new partnership between the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the USFWS to combat the decline of seven specific wildlife species whose decline can be reversed. This in turn also benefits other species with similar habitat needs.

The Food, Conservation and Energy Act of 2008 reauthorized the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP), thanks to Senator Thad Cochran, its author, as a voluntary approach to improving wildlife habitat in our country. The NRCS administers the WHIP to provide both technical assistance and up to 75 percent cost-share assistance to establish and improve fish and wildlife habitat. Cost-share agreements between the NRCS and the participant generally last from 1 year after the last conservation practice is implemented but not more than 10 years from the date the agreement is signed.

Fire on the Forty is a joint program of the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks (MDWFP), the USFWS and Wildlife Mississippi. This program reimburses landowners in selected counties in Mississippi up to 50 percent of the costs for implementing and performing a prescribed burn.

To learn more about these programs, contact your local office of the USFWS, the NRCS or the MDWFP.

In the next issue of *Wildlife Mississippi* magazine, we will discuss economics.

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