

# 6 Idle-Area Management

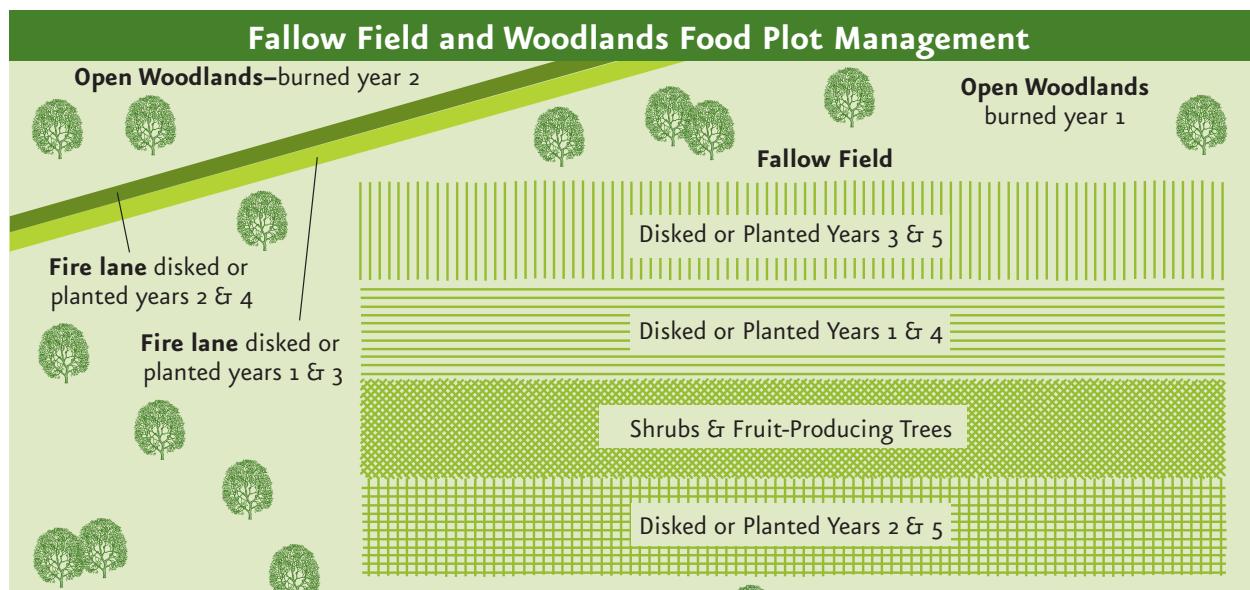


Nearly every tract has some land that is unsuitable for or not needed for cultivation, forage production, growing trees, or landscaping. These idle areas and openings such as old fields, abandoned house sites, pond edges, utility rights of way or roadsides, logging decks, stream banks or corridors, brushy draws, erosive areas, or even a portion of your lawn can be used to benefit wildlife. With management, these areas can provide wildlife food, sites for nesting and raising young, and protection from the elements and predators.

## Old Fields and Woodland Openings

Abandoned pastures, crop fields, and woodland openings can provide excellent wildlife habitat. One common problem in managing these areas is the pressure we place upon ourselves to keep them looking neat and orderly. Interspersion of plant communities, which is beneficial to many species, is contrary to our desire to have habitat divided into orderly management units. These areas will naturally produce beneficial plants, such as broomsedge, goldenrod, wild aster, beggarlice, sunflowers, wild strawberry, ragweed, blackberry, sumac, wild plum, and persimmon. All of these plants provide wildlife with either food or cover. Many songbirds use clumps or islands of wild plum and blackberry for nesting; quail use them for escape cover; deer browse on the twigs; and a host of species eat the fruits. So, resist the temptation to over manage.

Many species of wildlife are dependent upon the earlier stages of plant succession. Examples are field sparrows, common yellowthroats, quail, woodcock, and rabbits. Soil disturbance is necessary to stop the “old field” from growing into woodland. Disking and fire will help start the process over again making the area more productive.



Old fields can be maintained in a productive condition by using some of the following techniques:

- If the area was formerly pastureland, there is a good chance that exotic, sod-forming grasses compromise its value to wildlife. If fescue, orchard grass, Bermuda grass, Bahia grass, or another grass forms a thick sod, use a herbicide to kill the grasses prior to disturbing the soil. Dense stands of sod-forming grass can inhibit the growth of other plants and produce little food or cover for wildlife. Moreover, the thatch and dense growth at ground level can inhibit travel and feeding of some species.
- Some bare ground is important. Studies show that most quail nests are located within a few feet of bare ground. The hen quail will move her chicks, immediately after hatching, to bare ground in search of grit and insects. Songbirds and small mammals will use the bare spots to dust or to loaf when vegetation is wet. During the fall, winter, or very early spring, disk strips through the field on the contour to expose 75 to 80 percent of the soil within the strip. Make strips 30 to 60 feet wide and allow weeds to grow. You may want to seed some of the strips at the rate of five pounds of Kobe or Korean lespedeza per acre.
- Burn a portion of the areas between the disked strips. Burning sets back the plant community and stimulates production of seeds and insects that are important to quail chicks and songbirds. Burn at three- to four-year intervals and at different times of the year. Burning the ground litter also aids in quail chick movement and exposes seeds.
- A good rule of thumb is to disk or burn about one-third of the old field each year. Mowing is not preferred because it does not set back plant growth as much as disk or burning and it leaves a mulch of vegetation that smothers germinating seeds and buries potential food resources. Burning and disk can be used to prevent the area from reverting to forest. If a portion of the area is in danger of being reclaimed by forest, consider using a hot burn or herbicides to knock back vegetation to a manageable stage.

### **Timing is Important**

Conducting management activities at the right time is important; for example:

- Burning during December leaves an area bare of cover for months. Burning just prior to or during spring green-up minimizes the time that an area is deficient of cover.
- Disking in the fall, winter, or early spring usually stimulates production of annual weeds that provide large seeds and great habitat for young wildlife. Disking during the summer often produces dense stands of undesirable plants such as crabgrass or sicklepod.
- Disking a weed patch to plant a food plot in June may destroy nests and young. This can be prevented by planning ahead and disk areas scheduled for summer plantings prior to nesting season.

Leave clumps of shrub or briar growth of about one-tenth acre each at 50- to 100-yard intervals to provide wildlife cover. These cover areas can be more easily managed if composed of vines (grape, greenbriar, or trumpet creeper), shrubs (alders, elderberry, blueberry, blackberry, hawthorns, or plum), and small trees (dogwood, serviceberry, sassafras, or persimmon) rather than fast-growing trees species such as pine, maple, poplar, or sweetgum.

Construct brush piles about one-tenth acre in size to augment natural cover. Discarded Christmas trees and limbs from tree trimming make ideal brush piles. Loosely constructed brush piles will develop into tangles of blackberries and vines. Where practical, protect these from burning.

Hinge cut small trees located in idle areas by cutting two-thirds of the way through the trunk and bending the tree parallel to the ground. Many trees will continue to live in this position, creating a living brush pile.

Plant a portion of the area to a green browse plot, a grain food plot, or, if cover is sparse, plant native warm-season grass strips. But keep in mind wildlife habitat requirements and resist the temptation to over manage your old field, former pasture, or opening.

## Landscaping for Wildlife

Many of the techniques discussed in this booklet can be applied in the front or backyard. Creating zones of progressively taller wildflowers and native grasses, and transitioning to shrubs and small trees between small lawns and wooded areas can be an attractive way to provide cover. Many native fruit-producing shrubs and small trees are suitable for planting in “islands” to break up extensive areas of lawn. Other techniques such as brush piles or half cutting are more suitable for back corners and hidden nooks.

Actions that replace monocultures of grass (lawn) with more diverse plants are a step in the right direction to benefit wildlife.



CHRIS MOORMAN/NCSU

*Replacing lawn areas with diverse plantings of native species will benefit wildlife.*

Landscaping your home site with native wildflowers and shrubs will make it attractive to many species of butterflies and songbirds. Hummingbirds are particularly attracted to red or orange tubular flowers such as trumpet creeper, honeysuckle, cardinal flower, columbine, bergamot, and red buckeye. Other songbirds will use fruits and seeds of shrubs such as viburnum, American beautyberry, silky dogwood, and spicebush. Butterflies are attracted to native flowers such as milkweeds, coneflowers, phlox, mints, blazing stars, and asters.

Choices must be made in the backyard just as they are made in managing larger properties. Do you want to focus on providing habitat for species that prefer taller trees and a shady understory or species that thrive in sunny landscapes? Preventing disturbance and wildlife mortality from dogs and cats, planning food and cover sources in close proximity, and managing against nest competitors like brown-headed cowbirds should be considered when planning your landscape. More detailed information concerning landscaping for wildlife is available from your local NC Cooperative Extension Service office or from

*Going Native Urban: Landscaping for Wildlife with Native Plants* (N.C. State University).

## Old Home Places

The shrubs, lawn grasses, fruit trees and weeds found around old home places can provide an oasis for wildlife. The abandoned house site usually has a mix of weeds, overgrown shrubs, and mast trees that provide food and cover resources valuable to many species of wildlife. The stately old trees, with their many cavities and high production of nuts, fruits, and seeds, are attractive to squirrels, deer, and songbirds. Old concrete and rock foundations attract groundhogs, whose burrows provide homes and cover for rabbits, raccoons, and red foxes. Grasses, flowers, and shrubs are eaten by deer and rabbits. Grasshoppers and other insects, which are critical foods for quail and turkey broods, are attracted to this lush vegetation.

Old home places can be improved by practices such as half cutting, constructing brush piles, and strip-disking in openings. Fruit-bearing shrubs and trees such as walnuts, persimmon, cherry, hawthorn, and wild plum can be released from competition. Disk strips around and through the lot to stimulate new growth of grasses and legumes. Disking from fall through early spring is best.

## Uplands Adjacent to Ponds

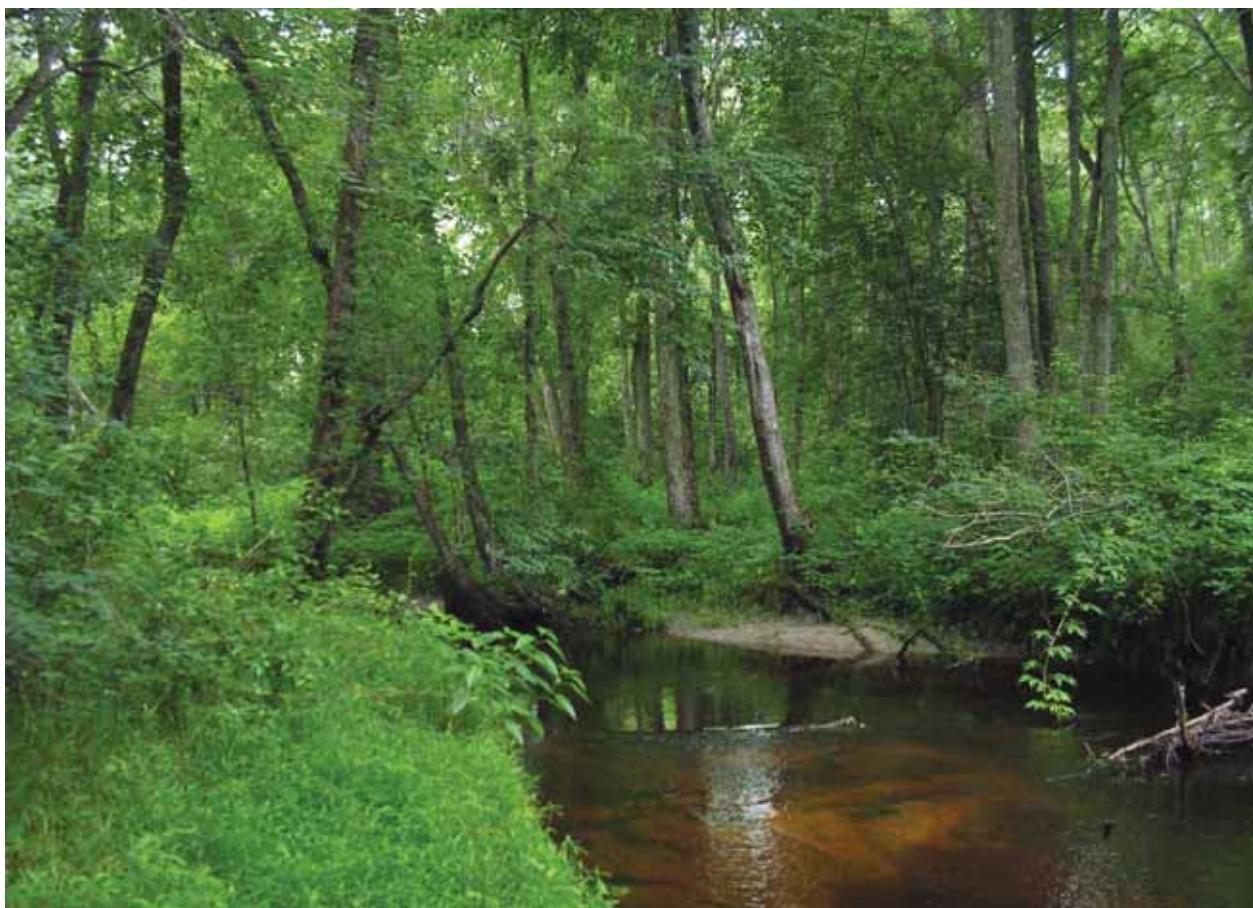
You should develop the area around your pond according to what you and your family enjoy. A pond site can be developed for wildlife habitat, fishing, or other types of recreation.

Trees and shrubs may be planted around the pond for cover. Windbreaks help reduce wave erosion and provide food and nesting areas for wildlife. To avoid damage to the dam by root penetration, do not allow trees to grow on the dam. Trees should be planted far enough from the shore so that they do not interfere with fishing. All ponds are used at times by wildlife. By developing good cover around the pond, a landowner can increase this usage.

If the watershed is grazed, fencing off an area around the pond that is one to one and a half times the water acreage permits the development of ideal wildlife cover but may limit access for bank fishing. The larger the cover area, the more attractive it will be to wildlife.

## Stream Banks and Riparian Corridors

Adjacent aquatic habitats, fertile soils, and the unique variety of trees, shrubs and other plants that grow along streams make riparian zones especially important to wildlife. Many wildlife species depend on riparian areas for all or part of their habitat needs. Some wildlife species are restricted to plant communities bordering streams and spend their entire lives within this zone. Examples of birds that live primarily along streams and in riparian zones are American woodcock, Swainson's warbler, Louisiana waterthrush, Northern Parula, and Acadian flycatchers.



JEFF MARCUS/NCWRC

*Many species depend on riparian corridors for all or part of their habitat needs.*

More often than planting, improving habitat along riparian corridors entails managing plant succession. With proper management, corridor plant communities can be developed to benefit species with diverse habitat requirements. Corridors managed to encourage early-successional shrub and understory plant communities by selectively controlling trees can benefit declining bird species such as American woodcock, Swainson's warblers, common yellow-throats, or even quail. Corridors managed to provide habitat for Eastern wild turkeys, migrating warblers, and woodpeckers should be allowed to mature and be protected from extensive timber harvest. These areas can be managed for mature mast producers, dead and down woody debris, snags, and den trees. In urban areas or intensively-farmed landscapes, a strip of riparian woodland may be the only woody cover to be found.

## Utility Rights of Way and Access Roads

Rights of way and access road shoulders can provide excellent habitat for early-successional wildlife. Often rights of way support remnant native grasslands and diverse plant communities. The wildlife management goal for rights of way should be to provide a diverse groundcover or locations for food plots, if managing primarily for deer and turkeys. Areas outside of safety zones, along highways can be managed to provide wildlife habitat while accomplishing the primary purpose of keeping the site from reverting to woodlands. Rights of way can be enhanced by feathering woodland edges (page 15), managing as directed for old fields (page 34), spot-spraying trees, or burning.

Another consideration when managing rights of way and access roads is to gate, block, or screen them where they intersect with public roads to prevent trespass and reduce disturbance. Keep in mind the primary purpose of the opening and coordinate with right of way managers to prevent management conflicts.

## Brushy Draws

Brushy draws that extend into crop or hay fields can provide quality habitat for early-successional wildlife and help control soil erosion. A brushy draw should contain vines, brush, and grasses but only an occasional large tree.

Livestock should be excluded from these draws. Cattle can quickly destroy the low-growing shrubs important to wildlife as sources of food and cover. Brush piles can be constructed along the edges and at the head of the draws. To avoid clogging the drainage, don't place a brush pile in the bottom of the draw. Draws managed in a dense cover of vines, briars, and shrubs can provide excellent small game habitat. Use fire, mechanical methods, and spot-spraying of herbicides to control trees in brushy draws.

## Erosive Areas

Access roads, logging decks, steep fields and pastures are subject to erosion. A careful evaluation to identify the cause of the problem should be the first step. Sometimes the land will require reshaping to change flow patterns of runoff before the site can be stabilized. After redirecting water flows or reshaping the area, prepare the site by disturbing the soil and adding nutrients. Follow this by planting an annual grain and mulch to hold the site until volunteer vegetation becomes established. Avoid planting aggressive exotic perennial grasses and legumes. Because each site is unique, request assistance from your nearest USDA Service Center to develop a plan to rehabilitate problem sites.

## Hedgerows

A brushy hedgerow or fence line can provide an important connecting link between different habitat types on the farm. The simplest way to develop a wildlife travel lane is to stop mowing, grazing, or cultivating the strip next to the fence. On grazed areas, install a double fence to protect a wildlife travel lane. An electric fence is effective and inexpensive for this purpose, but it must be maintained in good repair. Hedgerows are most effective when developed adjacent to field borders or fallow areas.

If some of the larger trees in a hedgerow or fencerow are cut for firewood, the tops can be used to make brush piles. If the area planned for hedgerow development has a grass sod, spraying and disking will reduce grass competition and create a seedbed where seeds of shrubs and vines (such as redbud, blackberry, grape, sumac, hazelnut, wild plum, and greenbrier) and trees (such as persimmon, red mulberry, cherry, and dogwood) can volunteer or be planted. To speed the process, loosely pile tree tops and brush in the area planned for expansion. Birds perching in the brush will plant a diversity of shrub and tree seeds. If you are impatient, plant wild plum, grape, and blackberries to improve the cover. Seedlings should be mulched to conserve moisture and reduce grass competition.

### Idle-Area Wildlife Management Tips

- Disk strips in old fields to set back plant succession.
- Hinge-cut cedars and cull trees, such as locust and elm, for quick cover.
- Fence out livestock from pond banks, stream banks, brushy draws, springs, and seeps.
- Manage fencerows for cover and travel lanes.
- Use herbicides to kill exotic grasses and allow seed-producing weeds and legumes to grow.
- Burn native grass and weedy areas at different times and intervals to create plant diversity.
- Use approved herbicides to control invasive plants, release desirable tree species, create snags, or release shrub communities.
- Feather edges to create wide transition zones where rights of way border woodlands.
- Gate access roads and screen rights of way and openings to reduce disturbance.