

# Technical Notes

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## WILDLIFE HABITAT APPRAISAL GUIDES FOR IDAHO

Habitat Appraisal Guides provide the NRCS planner with a relatively simple and objective means of determining the value of wildlife habitat on any conservation planning unit. The guides can be used on land where wildlife is a primary objective or on land (such as farmland) where wildlife is a secondary objective. They can be used to evaluate habitat on different land uses including farmland (i.e., cropland, hayland and pastureland), rangeland, forest and woodland. Planning unit boundaries for wildlife may coincide with those delineated for rangeland, farmland or woodland OR a wildlife planning unit may be delineated that includes two or more land uses or land types.

The Guides are based on the following assumptions:

1. All land and water provides habitat for wildlife.
2. The quality of habitat is variable depending on the quality, quantity and interspersion of food, cover, water and space.
3. Habitat elements can be measured and compared to optimum conditions.
4. Wildlife populations are proportional to the quality and quantity of habitat available. A 400 acre planning unit may have potential to provide more diverse habitat and thus a greater variety of wildlife than does a 40 acre unit. Likewise, a 1,000 acre unit is more apt to have more potential than does a 400 acre unit. Wildlife use of an area is dependent on the variety of habitats it supports and the area's size.

These guides can be used to determine if a conservation planning unit meets the minimum quality criteria for wildlife as directed in Section III of the Field Office Technical Guide (FOTG). See Section III - Resource Management Systems (RMS) - Animals in the FOTG. Conservation practices and management measures can be identified to meet the minimum RMS standard or to meet the higher habitat quality objectives of the landowner. These guides are not intended to be used to evaluate the potential for introducing wildlife species not presently found on the planning unit.

The Guides have been developed to consider the needs of a variety of species using a particular land use/cover type, a goal commonly referred to as the management for species richness. They were not developed to evaluate the habitat quality for individual species. The guides may not reflect complete habitat needs or home range requirements for any

particular wildlife species. They are intended to evaluate habitat richness or diversity of the planning unit. A planning unit that exhibits high habitat diversity is likely to have equally diverse fauna. The farmland habitat guide, for instance, evaluates habitat components for a variety of wildlife species (game and non-game) commonly inhabiting farmland, not just pheasants. When a landowner is interested in improving or managing habitat for a particular species, a species-specific habitat model should be used.

The Wildlife Habitat Appraisal Guide:

<ftp://ftp-fc.sc.egov.usda.gov/ID/technical/technotes/tn19revised.xls>

### **Instructions for the Use of Habitat Appraisal Guides**

1. Determine the landowner's objectives with regard to overall conservation program, interest in wildlife, the specific practices to apply, etc. Is the land to be managed primarily for wildlife or cropland or both? Does he/she wish to increase wildlife populations or maintain at present levels?
2. Based on your or the landowner's knowledge of the planning area, identify the wildlife species present and their seasons of use. Are threatened or endangered species present or other species that require special attention?
3. Delineate on an aerial photo or other suitable planning map the conservation planning unit to be evaluated. Wildlife planning units should be delineated by the appropriate habitat (farmland, rangeland and woodland) after considering the types of habitats that occur within the farm, ranch or planning unit. Large or complex planning units may require the use of more than one guide to evaluate wildlife habitat suitability.
4. Refer to soil survey reports or Certified Soil Survey Data (found in the eFOTG) for soils/wildlife interpretations and soils potential for plant groups on the soils you are dealing with. Where soil surveys have not been conducted, use the best available information for the establishment of plants for wildlife.
5. Completion of the guides is better achieved when done in the field with the landowner. Enough of the planning area should be visited, referred to on the aerial photo and discussed with the landowner to accurately evaluate habitat condition. Keep in mind that these are guides. When encountering situations not specifically covered, use your judgment to rate such elements. These Guides can be completed while collecting other resource information such as rangeland health, woodland site index or soil erosion information.

Rate only those elements which are applicable to the planning unit. For example, when rating farmland, if no wetlands are present, then do not rate this element. In areas where pastureland is the dominant land use and no cropland is present, you can drop cropland questions from the evaluation. Be sure to adjust the number of elements inventoried when calculating the final habitat value if no rating is given to

one or more elements. Do not use this evaluation to rate individual practices like shelterbelts. Include shelterbelts in the surrounding land cover types (i.e., woody cover) when completing a wildlife evaluation.

6. After habitat values have been determined, look back through individual scores to find those factors that are deficient and could be improved. Any habitat element(s) that scores less than five (5) is considered a limiting factor. Habitat improvement efforts should be directed to overcome such limitations. Compare those deficient factors with the soils interpretation. For example, if on a cropland planning unit, a score of zero to four (0-4) for herbaceous and woody vegetation is indicated, refer to the Soil Survey Data to find the potential for growing shrubs, hardwoods, grasses, forbs and conifers.
7. When calculating the Habitat Value, follow the guidance provided in each land use habitat type to determine the overall habitat value.
8. With the landowner, develop alternatives for improving deficient elements. A conservation cropping system may improve farmland habitat quality. A small clear-cut of merchantable timber may be used to create a forest opening. A planned grazing system will not only improve the score for that factor, but may, in time, lead to improved range conditions. A stock pond will provide drinking water for wildlife as well as livestock. Shelterbelts may offset the lack of woody cover.

For further planning guidance, refer to:

- Habitat management guides
- Section IV of the Field Office Technical Guide for Upland Wildlife Habitat Management (645) and Wetland Wildlife Habitat Management (644)
- National and Idaho Biology Technical Notes for species-specific habitat requirements