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NRCS

Do Something “Wild”

Provide a Home for Wildlife

With a flash of brilliant plumage a pheasant explodes from its fencerow thicket. The raucous sound of the ring-neck cock silences the music of songbirds in the nearby windbreak. The mallard in the pond glides her downy yellow brood to shelter among the cattails.

Anyone who has seen or can imagine these things knows something about the value of wildlife on farms and ranches. There is no need to miss such sights and sounds since they are easy to create. Simply match what the land is producing to the needs of wildlife, and wildlife will respond.

You can have wildlife on your land and have a better farm or ranch because of it. Every farm and ranch is a complex community of living things. In this community are the plants and animals that convert nutrients, moisture, and sunshine into food and fiber for our support and into trees, shrubs, grasses and forbs for the support of wild creatures. It is a successful community only if the living elements are working in harmony for the benefit of the community as a whole.

In Montana, wildlife belongs to all the people but habitat that wild creatures is mostly in private ownership. What a farmer or rancher does with his or her land can have a tremendous impact on wildlife.

Numerous species of upland and wetland wildlife are found on farms and ranches used mainly for cultivated crop, livestock, or wood production. Here, farmers and ranchers are the key to wildlife abundance. Farms, farmers, and farm programs influence the existence of wildlife because wild animals react quickly to agricultural management practices, good or bad.

Of course, if farmers or ranchers are to make a go of their business, their first priority must be crop and livestock production. Sometimes wildlife must, by necessity, represent a secondary land use.

But often, with little or no cost, a landowner can easily adjust the farming or ranching operation to encourage production of wildlife—from pheasants, doves, partridge and prairie grouse, to songbirds and waterfowl, to amphibians, reptiles, and big game. On most agricultural lands wildlife is a secondary crop from which the landowner doesn't expect or receive an income. The beauty, though, provided by patches of shrubs, trees, and grassland scattered throughout wheat or fallow does enhance the value and appeal of the land. The pleasures derived from wild creatures inhabiting this diverse landscape is part of the heritage of farm and ranch life.

There is another benefit of maintaining healthy, diverse wildlife habitat on a farm or ranch. A complex wildlife community provides the landowner with a free pest control service. Songbirds, bats, and many insects, for example, save farmers, ranchers, and foresters billions of dollars each year by consuming harmful insect pests. A single little brown bat eats about 1,200 mosquito-sized insects per hour. And, the pollination service provided by bats, insects, and hummingbirds is critical to healthy agricultural operations.

Windbreak.

Grassed waterway.

Management Hints

Here are some do-it-yourself hints for managing land to provide habitat for wildlife. Keep in mind that many practices used on farms and ranches can help or harm wildlife.

One of the most effective actions landowners can take on behalf of biodiversity is to restore or create wetlands. The emphasis should be on providing a high proportion of productive, shallow water that is no more than three feet deep. A deep, steep-sided fish pond is rarely very good habitat for many wildlife species because emergent vegetation, critical for wildlife food and cover, can't grow in deep water. Your local NRCS field office staff can work with you to plan the specifics of an effective wetland habitat development project.

Cropland practices helpful to wildlife include cropping systems that use perennial, soil-building grasses and legumes, grassed waterways, cover crops, and reduced tillage. Avoiding or delaying mowing of roadside rights-of-way and ditchbanks until after the nesting season and leaving unharvested areas of small grain adjacent to good cover are also very helpful practices. Always try to maintain undisturbed cover associated with old homesteads and other "odd areas."

On rangeland, the potential for Prescribed Grazing practices to improve wildlife habitat (and watershed conditions in general) cannot be overemphasized. Residual cover, old grass/forb residue from the previous year, is essential to hide ground-nesting birds, many of which initiate nesting before current year's growth is adequate to conceal a nest site. Residual cover is also essential for livestock nutrition in the spring and, along with litter cover on the soil surface, greatly improves soil moisture infiltration. Riparian areas, possibly the most valuable (and often degraded) wildlife habitat in the west, can also be greatly improved using proper livestock grazing management.

Practices can be designed to contribute to the whole of good land use without detracting from the objectives of a farm or ranch operation. Most conservation practices have multiple values. Those essential to wildlife production also improve agricultural operations by contributing to good soil and water conservation.

Good Practices

Here are examples of cropland practices and conditions that can frequently spell the difference between abundance or scarcity of farmland wildlife:

- Strip-cropped fields contain more "edge" where food and cover are close together and attract about twice as many ground nesting birds as undivided fields.
- Grassed waterways provide nesting cover and, if not mowed or mowed after mid-July, ensure better survival of pheasant broods.
- Field hedgerows used to control wind erosion and conserve soil moisture make a "living fence" which provides travel lanes for many species of wildlife and are used as homesites by birds, small mammals, and pollinating and predaceous insects of benefit to people. Field hedgerows are useful as irregular contour fences, particularly in areas where permanent fence lines are needed.
- Windbreaks and shelterbelts provide protection from prevailing winds, especially during the severe winter months. These are soon populated by many wildlife species seeking cover furnished by the trees and food produced by the shrubs. The larger and older the

Strip-cropped fields.

Field hedgerow.

Living fence.

shelterbelt, the greater its value to wildlife. Shelterbelts can also reduce heating fuel costs when planted to protect farm dwellings.

- Plantings of grasses and legumes with woody plants such as conifers and fruit-producing shrubs make worn-out gullies, rock outcrops, pivot corners, and similar idle areas highly productive for wildlife and reduce the opportunity for weeds to establish.

Pastureland and rangeland practices helpful to wildlife include:

- livestock grazing which leaves adequate cover,
- reseeding or renovating hay and pasture with legumes,
- building ponds for livestock/wildlife water.

Woodland practices useful for wildlife habitat improvement include:

- proper grazing,
- selective cutting to encourage tree age and size diversity,
- leaving snags for den trees when cutting timber or firewood,
- constructing brushpiles,
- seeding grasses and legumes along roads, trails, and in openings following timber harvest.

Another approach to improving wildlife habitat is to avoid practices harmful to wildlife habitat:

- fall plowing,
- mowing grassed waterways, ditchbanks and roadsides before ground-nesting birds have hatched,
- draining marshes,
- burning of ditchbanks, fencerows, and crop residues.

Planning for Wildlife

If you are serious about increasing wildlife on your farm or ranch, draw a plan for the wildlife habitat improvements you are willing to make, whether your land is used for crops, pasture, range, woodland. A plan doesn't have to be fancy, just something that will help you keep track of what's being accomplished. Give thought to involving your family, especially the children. You can get help in developing a plan from your NRCS conservationist or Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks biologist.

Because wild animals have differences in their requirements for food, nesting areas, winter shelter, cover, and daily living quarters, your first step is to inventory your land. At this time you should identify the species of wildlife you would most like to benefit. In designing your wildlife plan you will want to include the types of habitat attractive to these animals. Can additional cover be of benefit? Does your ranch or farm operation provide sufficient food in the form of waste grain or fruit-bearing shrubs? Will additional supplies help wildlife through the stress of the winter months? Will a pond or watering facility be of help to wildlife?

A worthwhile wildlife plan can be developed for virtually any farm or ranch, even if it is only a fencerow, a field corner development, or a small planting of shrubs and trees. Every increase in permanent cover and food for wildlife will help.

The theme of a successful plan for more wildlife may be to increase the variety of vegetation types and to attain a wider diversity of land types and more edges where a number of habitats meet. This type of plan often works well for "generalist" species like pheasants, which thrive on "patchy" habitats. On the other hand, your target wildlife species may require larger, unfragmented habitat such as large blocks of sagebrush grassland. Habitat specialists, like the sage grouse, favor this scenario. The success of your plan depends on identifying one or more target wildlife species and the factors that limit their habitat.

Here are habitat requirements for some of Montana's important wildlife species and successful practices and techniques for improving the farm and ranch environment for them.

Pheasants

The ring-necked pheasant is at home in agricultural areas that grow grain and feed crops. In fact, the better the agricultural area the better the opportunities for improving habitat for pheasants.

A favorable land use pattern for pheasants is diverse and consists of 50 to 75 percent cultivated crops such as corn, wheat, and barley, and 25 to 50 percent uncultivated land

including hay and rotation pastures, woody cover and permanently protected herbaceous cover and wetlands with tall, emergent vegetation such as cattails and bulrushes. The ring-neck's greatest need in Montana is for undisturbed nesting cover and good winter cover near food supplies. Dense woody cover (trees and shrubs) is required for survival during severe winter weather.

The daily home range of a pheasant is about 200 acres. It is reasonable to use this size area as a basic management unit and approximate the following example with similar vegetation types that are adapted to your area:

- Grain and seed crops consisting of barley, corn, wheat, sorghum, and proso millet (140 acres).
- Grasses and legumes including alfalfa, clover, or pasture grasses (30 acres).
- Wild herbaceous plants such as cattails, smartweed, sedges, sweetclover, and sunflowers (20 acres).
- Trees and shrubs such as crabapple, rose, honeysuckle, plum, willow, buffaloberry, serviceberry, snowberry, blue spruce, and juniper (10 acres).

A variety of improvements can be planned and applied where these basic vegetation patterns exist or have been established.

- Allow some standing grain to remain near cover (no more than one-fourth mile from cover).
- Leave crop residue on the field until spring.
- Protect areas such as brushy fencerows, field corners, waterways, marshes, and weed patches (not noxious weeds). Many native plants such as wild rose, willow, snowberry, and chokecherry provide fine wildlife food and cover and should be encouraged whenever possible.
- To control weeds, idle areas can be planted to a permanent cover of grasses and legumes. Mow only one-half of grassy areas each year. Delay mowing until the nesting season is past, mid-July.
- Cattail marshes and dense tangles of low-growing shrubs where birds can avoid snow and cold as well as hide from enemies serve as ideal winter cover. Native rose, plum, willow, and snowberry fencerows, brushy hillsides, coulees, and creek bottoms containing thorny trees and shrubs provide excellent wintering habitat and should be retained wherever possible.
- Where brush thickets and tangles have been removed or are in short supply, shrub and tree plantings can provide essential habitat and control soil erosion. NRCS conservationists are willing to provide you with information on wildlife plants suitable for establishing on your farm or ranch. When creating habitat, it is better to plant an assortment of shrubs and trees rather than only one or two species to provide the variety of food and cover combinations needed. Wildlife-attracting trees and shrubs are available from commercial nurseries across the state.

Partridge

The gray or Hungarian partridge is distributed throughout the plains and croplands of Montana. The greatest numbers are found in the eastern two-thirds of the state. Preferred habitat consists of a mixture of cultivated and uncultivated lands: grasslands interspersed with wheat fields, weed patches, and brushy cover. Partridges select nesting sites in alfalfa, weed patches, grassy fencerows, and on grass-covered rangelands.

If food is available, these birds will remain on the open prairies throughout the winter and are capable of scratching through the snow for food. Brushy cover is important for escape and protection when the prairies are mantled with snow. Their preferred foods include barley, wheat, corn, millet, barnyard grass, pigweed, clover, and smartweed.

A highly beneficial practice for Huns is to leave grain stubble unplowed through the winter. This will provide food in the form of waste grain as well as deter soil erosion when spring runoff occurs.

The proper management of rangeland is of benefit to gray partridge as well as prairie grouse. A Prescribed Grazing plan is the key to healthy rangeland.

Sharptails

The sharp-tailed grouse is a widely-distributed native upland game bird of Montana's prairies. Although the ring-necked pheasant often receives more publicity, the less colorful sharptail is held in high esteem by many ranchers and farmers.

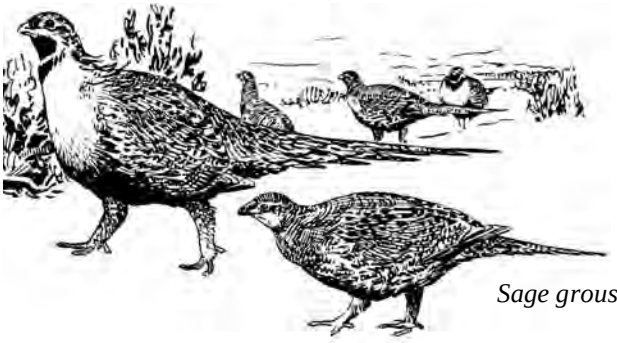
Preferred sharptail habitat is primarily grassland interspersed with brush-filled coulees. Sharptails do not rely on cultivated crops for food at any time of the year, but prefer to feed on a wide variety of seeds, leaves, flowers, and fleshy fruits of wild plants.

Grazing management is the key to maintaining sharptail habitat. Proper range use that assures good forage and residual cover production and maintenance of the best forage-producing native grasses will provide adequate nesting sites, rearing areas, and roosting cover. This level of grazing will also maintain woody vegetation present in stream bottoms, coulees, and side-hill draws.

Establishment of shelterbelts and field windbreaks, in addition to meeting primary conservation objectives, can provide cover and food for sharptails, pheasants, and a variety of songbirds especially if shelterbelts and windbreaks are properly maintained and care is given to the design and selection of plant materials of value to wildlife.

Sage Grouse

The sage grouse is a habitat specialist; it absolutely depends on healthy sagebrush-grasslands for its existence. Late fall through early spring, this gamebird depends exclusively on sagebrush for food and cover. Insects and succulent forbs (flowering plants) are eaten spring through fall but sagebrush is still critical for food and cover during this part of the year.



Sage grouse.

Good sage grouse habitat looks like this: 10-30 percent sagebrush canopy cover, a healthy grass-forb layer beneath the sagebrush, and moist areas (for example, streamsides and moist meadows) that provide insects and succulent forbs.

Grazing management is the key to healthy sage grouse habitat. This requires a plan that provides adequate rest following grazing to allow full recovery of grazed plants and residual cover (standing grass from the previous year) for nesting grouse.

Sagebrush control projects often degrade grouse habitat. Many landowners don't realize that fire or herbicide treatment of sagebrush at a canopy cover of about 20 percent or less does not generally provide an economic return of increased forage production. At this canopy cover level, the value of sagebrush for snow trapping, calving cover, forage and wildlife cover outweighs the value of sagebrush control efforts.

Wild Turkey

Wild (Merriam's) turkeys are not native to Montana, although they represent one of our most successful wildlife introductions and are now found in suitable habitats across the state. In many cases, winter survival depends on the good graces of ranchers who provide livestock feed grounds and other food supplies near ranch headquarters.

Good wild turkey habitat consists of ponderosa pine and Douglas fir forests of varying tree densities with an interspersion of grassy openings and healthy riparian (streamside) vegetation. Roost trees are very important habitat features. These trees average about 64 feet in height and at least 15 inches in diameter.

Grazing management that maintains or restores riparian shrubs and trees and provides residual (previous year's growth) grass/forb cover is essential for good turkey habitat. Tree thinning can be used to provide pole-sized stands of pine and small openings in the forest. Food plots can be used to supplement winter food supplies. Reseeding logging roads and other disturbed areas with clovers or small burnet can provide valuable turkey food.

Water and Marsh Birds

Regardless of where you live in Montana, chances are good that you can attract waterfowl and marsh birds to your farm or ranch. To do so you may need to build a wildlife pond or marsh or improve the ones you now have.

The center of wild duck production in the United States is in the northern Great Plains and includes a portion of Montana. The numerous natural and artificial ponds, potholes, and marshes make much of our state ideal duck habitat.

Wetlands of every description are used by ducks, shore birds, and other wetland wildlife throughout the year. Habitat for ducks can best be achieved through protection or restoration of existing wetlands. Improvements may include manipulation of water levels with control structures, managing wetland vegetation, and fencing to manage livestock use.

In non-wetland areas, shallow artificial ponds attract ducks during the spring and fall migration periods and may be used by local nesting birds if sufficient food and cover are available to meet nesting and brood-rearing requirements. Utilization of artificial ponds by ducks increases as ponds become older. Adequate shoreline vegetation is important to ducks using ponds or marshes. It provides cover and areas for escape for many species.

Proper vegetation management in and around the pond or marsh is of major importance in attracting ducks and other water birds. Aquatic plants that provide food are desirable and should be encouraged. Grass and legume cover on uplands near a wetland is the preferred nesting habitat for ducks like the mallard, blue-winged teal, and gadwall. Small grain grown in nearby fields can provide an attractive source of food during late summer and fall.

The best nesting performance by upland nesting ducks occurs in blocks of dense cover 40 to 150 acres in size. Large square blocks of cover are preferable to narrow strips in reducing the impact of nest predators.

Songbirds

Who doesn't enjoy having songbirds around our homes and farmsteads? Their striking colors and pleasing songs appeal to our eyes and ears. Wildlife plantings in your farmstead, garden, or in conjunction with a shelterbelt, whether large or small, can help attract birds. A surprising variety and number of birds can be seen in yards and gardens, especially those that have the kinds of trees, shrubs, and flowers that appeal to birds. If feeders, bird houses, and a water source are used as part of the landscape, your home and farmstead becomes even more inviting. Your imagination and ingenuity will allow you to put together what is referred to as "habitat." The more diverse you make the habitat, the more varied will be the wildlife attracted. Some of the

species that are attracted are permanent residents such as the black-capped chickadee. Others are migrants that may be seen in the spring as they migrate northward or in fall when they return south for the winter. A few species, such as the northern shrike, are found only in winter, returning to Canada or Alaska for summer.

When creating wildlife habitat, use several different kinds of plants, since one or two species are seldom sufficient to attract a variety of birds. Plants of different growth forms, height, flowering times, and fruits are most appealing and will bring a number of species to your farmstead. Birds need places to feed, sing, court, nest, roost, and hide. They like a choice of places for these activities such as crowns of tall trees, dense shrubs, and low-growing flowers and grasses. They also like a choice of foods like seeds, fruits, berries, flower nectar. You can help meet these needs through a variety of plantings.

Yards and farmsteads that have only deciduous trees or shrubs can be improved by adding evergreens such as spruce, pine, and juniper that provide winter shelter. Where fruit-bearing shrubs are scarce, they can be planted with new shelterbelts or on the inside of already established shelterbelts. By intermingling different species, shapes, and sizes, you can develop varied and attractive landscape patterns. Shrubs and trees such as chokecherry, silver buffaloberry, sandcherry, Rocky Mountain juniper, hawthorn, golden currant, Nanking cherry, mountain ash, and American plum are especially attractive to songbirds. A small pool, pond, or bird bath will further enhance your farmstead for birds by making water available.

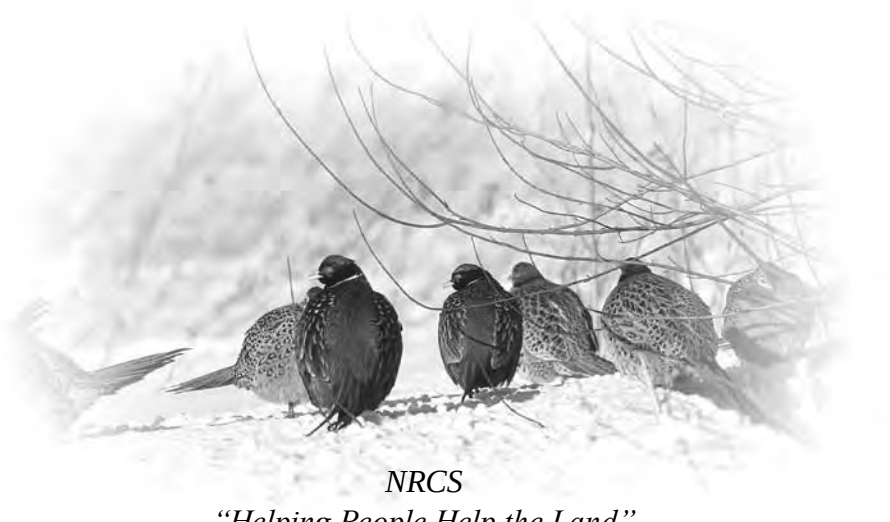
Summary

Most wild creatures ask little of the property owner. To survive, they need only a place to hide from danger, to find shelter from the elements, and to nest or bear young. Wild creatures also need food, preferably close to cover so they can scurry back to safety quickly when in danger. And they need water to drink or to live and feed in. All this is little enough payment for the pleasure and benefits they provide.

The preservation and enhancement of farm and ranch wildlife lies with the landowner. Incentives come in many forms including added soil and water protection, pest control, abundant wildlife, and good will.

Look around your farm, ranch, or rural home. You can do something “WILD” to improve your property for wildlife.

For more information contact your local Natural Resources Conservation Service office. The NRCS maintains specific habitat management guides for many species of Montana wildlife. They also have specifications for establishment and maintenance of conservation practices adaptable to your area. You can obtain practical help in planning and developing habitat for the kinds of wildlife you wish to favor.



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