



The Habitat Corner

CAN'T SEE THE COVER FOR THE WEEDS? BOBWHITES CAN AND MUST.

Chris Hunter, TWRA Wildlife Habitat Biologist

Most people have heard the quote “you can’t see the forest for the trees.” This saying suggests that a person may lose his or her perspective when they are only focused on an individual aspect or detail. In other words, a person may not be able to see the big picture of what makes up a forest if the individual is only focused on what they can easily see. This is especially true in terms of the habitat and species that reside within a forest and is also true when it comes to old fields that consist of native grasses, forbs, briars and shrubs.

Bobwhite quail are often considered early successional habitat (i.e. old fields) specialists. However, to the average person, quality habitat for quail and other native grassland birds may not look appealing, but look rough and downright horrible. A field of thick briars and shrubs may seem impenetrable to humans or even something to be mowed or sprayed. To some, it may not look as good as a manicured pasture or row crop field, but beauty is in the eye of the beholder. To a quail or a field sparrow, rough is habitat and habitat is home.

In most instances, the limiting factor for grassland and shrub wildlife is not water or food, but cover. Cover may not always be aesthetically pleasing to the eye, but is a necessary element to a species’ survival.

Cover comes in many shapes and sizes but generally there are three primary types that biologists distinguish: nesting cover, brood cover, and escape/thermal cover.

Nesting cover is usually found in clumps of native grasses (such as little bluestem) and forbs (such as partridge pea) from the previous year. If good nesting cover is not present, it is relatively simple to provide. It can be created by planting native grasses and forbs or properly managing an old field. Having “bunch type grasses”, as opposed to sod-forming grasses (like Bermuda and fescue) is important. When grasses become too dense, nest success drops dramatically.

Brood cover is essentially “weedy” cover (such as ragweed and annual lespedeza) with bare ground underneath. Bare ground allows chicks to move around and locate preferred food sources such as insects. The native forb species attract

insects and provide thermal protection. Brood cover can include native grasses, but most important is an abundance of forbs and legumes to attract insects.

Escape cover often is viewed as the most rough and unappealing cover type, but is an essential habitat need for quail. They need close proximity, quality cover to escape predators and harsh ever-changing weather conditions. Quality escape cover can consist of, but is not limited to, species such as American plum, crabapple and American beautyberry. Escape cover can also be enhanced by removing potential predator perches. An important rule of thumb is to establish escape cover patches every 100 yards or less so that quail have quick access to them.

Large trees were removed to eliminate predator perches. Also, the removal of the trees enhanced the growth of the native cover.



ASK THE BIOLOGIST

- Q: What if I would like to provide habitat for grassland species including quail on my property but need help in deciding what to do?
- A: There are TWRA wildlife habitat biologists, USDA NRCS wildlife habitat biologists, and Quail Forever biologists strategically located throughout Tennessee available to provide assistance with your land management plan. Please visit this TWRA habitat page for more information:
<http://tn.gov/twra/section/habitat>

“Helping Landowners and Wildlife Through Habitat Enhancement”

The Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency has Private Lands Biologists that will assist you in developing a management plan for your property and a strategy to implement it. See www.TWRAprivatelands.org for who to contact for technical assistance and other useful information on habitat management and programs.