

The Habitat Corner

MESHING WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT WITH PRODUCTION AGRICULTURE

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Oil and water are definitely two things that don't mix. I often hear the same analogy applied to production agriculture and wildlife management, whether it's the cattle farmer telling me "I need all the pasture I can get to run more cows," or the row crop farmer that says, "I need all the tillable acres I can handle to maximize production." If looking to manage for more wildlife on that same land, the manager also needs to be thinking, "I need more acres of good usable cover for deer, turkey and quail."

What if I were to tell you that you can have both? Yep, that's right. My fellow biologist, Aubrey Deck, stated in a previous habitat corner article that "Failing to plan is planning to fail!" In this situation he couldn't be more correct. By this, I mean arming yourself with knowledge. If the subject is cattle and maximizing cattle production go talk to your NRCS district conservationist, local extension agent or TWRA private lands biologist. Ask them about livestock practices that you can implement to achieve the same or better results with your herd on less acreage.

If it's agricultural crops and improving yields, go talk to those same people about how you could possibly achieve better results on less acres. Have them evaluate your farmland and come up with a plan to maximize profit, which often provides options to leave marginal acres out of production that are then managed for wildlife. These "odd" acres often include: 1) acres that are excluded from cattle, such as through a fence that is set-back 30 to 40 feet from a wooded edge, 2) the forested acres that are excluded by that fence, 3) corners of fields that are not easily accessible to farming equipment, 4) wet areas that are determined to be impractical to farm, and 5) whole or partial fields that are too steep to row crop or even successfully manage for cattle.

Now it's time to determine what the limiting factors for wildlife are on this particular piece of property. Use the

"zoom out" approach. You should use aerial photography to zoom out from your property and determine what is happening on the surrounding landscape at 1, 5, and 10 miles out from your particular site. Ask yourself what practices could I do to "hold" game on my property. Remember, in Tennessee, food is usually not the most limiting factor for wildlife, but typically the lack of good usable cover. Managed correctly, good nesting and protective cover can also provide native food sources through much of the year.

Layout and design can be critical during this process. As a wildlife manager, you want to take into account the fact that areas will be fenced out from cattle or that areas will not be used as turn rows for planting operations. With a little forethought and planning you can permanently exclude your wildlife areas from the disturbances of daily farming activities, or allow temporary use at appropriate time if disturbance needs to be applied to manage the vegetation.

Another benefit to managing for wildlife in agricultural operations is the potential to generate secondary income through hunting leases. You might even be able to receive a few more dollars per acre for that lease because of the active wildlife management that is now occurring on the property. Some properties have the potential for leasing to several groups, for example one lease or pay hunt for doves after crop harvest, another for fall/winter deer hunting, and another for spring turkey hunting.

Now it's time to finalize and implement that plan. This is where your TWRA or NRCS biologist can help you out. These biologists can guide you through the maze of cost share programs that are available to private landowners through the U.S. Department of Agriculture and help you develop a well written management plan that can be modified as needed over time.



Fencing protects a field edge buffer of native grasses, wildflowers and other forbs. Combining this buffer with pasture plantings that include clover enables both profitable livestock management and a productive wildlife environment on the Borum farm in Giles County.

"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.