



Extension FactSheet

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The Benefits of Managing Your Property for Wildlife

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Loss of habitat is a major threat to plants and animals around the world. Because only 7 percent of the land in Ohio is publicly owned, we cannot rely on parks and nature reserves alone to provide enough habitats to support native species. If wildlife populations are to be successfully conserved, habitat must also be available on private lands.

Habitat management is especially critical in metropolitan centers, where development has eliminated most natural areas. As our populations grow and people settle in suburban and rural areas, urban sprawl can dramatically change the landscape. As sprawl progresses, areas that are free from housing or other development become increasingly rare. Consequently, fewer places are suitable as habitat for native plants and animals or as places for outdoor recreation and education. Almost any land holding that has *open space* can provide wildlife or natural habitat. Examples range from workplaces, schoolyards, golf courses, parks, cemeteries, and even backyards. As a landowner or manager of open space or *greenspace*, you have the ability to manage your land in a way that is sensitive to the needs of wildlife and, at the same time, enjoy the recreational, educational, ecological, and economical benefits of more natural landscaping.

Aesthetic and Recreational Benefits

At some point in time, nearly everyone has felt a certain intrinsic appreciation of nature. Whether you have enjoyed watching the leaves change color in the autumn, a butterfly fluttering through the air, or finding deer tracks in freshly fallen snow, you were connecting with nature. Creating or enhancing wildlife habitat is beneficial in that it can bring beauty and enjoyment to our lives. Because wildlife habitats generally provide native trees and shrubs for *cover* (protection from predators or weather), they also make places feel more private and relaxing than areas with little vegetation.

Managing for wildlife can also provide recreational opportunities for friends, family, and nearby residents. Healthy and abundant wildlife in natural areas can be harvested through

hunting and fishing following local regulations. Millions of people across the state also enjoy viewing wildlife or searching for wildflowers. In particular, bird-watching has become a tremendously popular activity that recruits thousands of new members each year. Amateurs and experts alike can take great pleasure in greeting warblers along their long migration routes between their breeding and wintering grounds annually. Hiking, too, is more exciting in natural areas than in highly disturbed or developed places.

Social and Educational Benefits

By providing areas that are suitable for wildlife, land managers can increase access to more natural areas that are often lacking in metropolitan landscapes. Programs such as the National Wildlife Federation's "Backyard Wildlife Habitat" and "Schoolyard Habitat Project" strive to bring people and nature together. For example, natural habitats at the workplace can provide employees with the healthy, calming effects of a break-time walk on a pathway through a prairie or along a wetland. These sites are places where friends, family, and the community can gather for activities such as picnicking, hiking, camping, and learning. Children and adults alike can interact and discover the wonders of nature together while nurturing an environmental ethic.



Photo by Thomas G. Barnes

Examples of Programs that Provide Opportunities to Interactively Learn about Nature and Wildlife

National Wildlife Federation

Backyard Wildlife Habitat
Community Wildlife Habitat
Schoolyard Habitat Project
www.nwf.org

Ohio Department of Natural Resources

Project WILD
Project Learning Tree
www.dnr.state.oh.us

Boy Scouts of America

www.bsa.scouting.org

Girl Scouts of the USA

www.girlscouts.org

Wildlife habitats and natural areas on your property also can provide your company or agency with opportunities for public relations and interacting with nearby residents. Children from local schools can be invited to participate in active habitat management, such as tree or wildflower planting or building nest boxes. Similarly, schools can be given specific areas to design and implement a wildlife habitat management plan. Schoolchildren benefit by learning about nature, ecology, and wildlife management, while landowners gain visibility within the community and get additional help. Organizing clean-ups in neighborhoods and natural areas is another way to foster relationships between land-managers and members of the community, while benefiting the environment.

Ecological Benefits

There are many ecological benefits to managing land for wildlife. In general, land that is suitable for native plants and animals also is healthy for people. In *riparian zones*, the regions along streams, natural vegetation provides corridors for wildlife and valuable streamside habitat for birds, amphibians, and mammals. Natural vegetation in riparian buffers filters pollutants from surface run-off, stabilizes the stream bank, shades the stream, and drops leaves that provide a base level for the food chain. Wetland ecosystems provide habitat for numerous species, such as frogs and dragonflies, as well as reduce the risk of flood damage, help to control run-off, and buffer shorelines against erosion. Wetlands also are capable of filtering many pollutants from our waters.

Other ecosystems provide ecological services too. Prairies filter chemicals and prevent soil erosion. Forests produce oxygen and are essential in removing carbon dioxide from the air. Currently, much ongoing research is focusing on carbon sequestration by forests and its impact in reducing global warming. By providing these and other types of wildlife habitat, one helps to ensure that essential processes within the ecosystem do not diminish and people continue to have cleaner water, air, and food sources.

Every species serves a function that, to some extent, affects its surrounding community and ecosystem, including humans. For example, many birds, such as blue jays, disperse acorns and other seeds throughout the landscape, making it possible for plants to become established. Bats, which consume up to 3,000 insects a night, may reduce the numbers of mosquitoes around your property. Similarly, insectivorous birds can benefit trees by consuming insects living on bark, leaves, or branches. Earthworms, beetles, and some rodents turn over the soil and recycle nutrients. Ecologists are continually learning about new complex relationships among organisms and their environment.

Economic Benefits

Maintaining wildlife habitat or other natural areas can be a cost-effective approach to land management. Planting a *shelterbelt* (rows of strategically placed evergreens, deciduous trees, and shrubs to reduce wind and erosion) creates habitat for wildlife, and provides the landowner with economic benefits as well. Properly designed shelterbelts, especially over 10 rows wide, offer shade and reduce air conditioning costs throughout the warm season. During the winter months, they serve as a windbreak, reducing heating costs by as much as 30 percent. Additionally, the shrub layer catches drifting snow, lessening the need to invest time and money in snow removal (Note: Local Soil and Water Conservation Districts [SWCD] and state forestry departments can offer advice in designing your shelterbelt and provide most of the plant species you will need). Furthermore, planting trees on your land usually increases property values by thousands of dollars.

You also may want to decrease your amount of lawn in favor of a more sustainable, heterogeneous landscape. Traditional turf is often expensive and time-consuming to maintain. Americans spend approximately \$30 billion each year maintaining lawns, with individuals devoting an average of 65 hours per year to mowing. Native plants are generally less timely and costly to maintain since they are well suited to local moisture and soil conditions. Choosing drought-tolerant and sun-loving species, like many native prairie flowers, can greatly reduce water and fertilizer demands. Prairies and meadows are excellent wildlife-friendly alternatives that can be less costly and not as labor-intensive. Although establishing a prairie can be a bit more expensive initially, savings can be substantial over time. For instance, some companies report spending as much as \$9,750 per acre for five years of intensive turf management versus \$5,630 an acre for five years of low-maintenance wildflowers. Furthermore, planting pest-resistant native vegetation and attracting insectivores such as bats, toads, and certain species of birds and mammals may eliminate the need to purchase costly insecticides for the yard.

There may be economic incentives to marketing your “wildlife-friendly” management approaches. With each year, more consumers and clientele prefer to deal with socially and environmentally responsible businesses. Venues providing recreational and outdoor activities may benefit the most from these trends. In some areas, bed-and-breakfast enterprises that

Examples of Wildlife Habitat Programs for Landowners

- WHIP (Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program)
- WRP (Wetlands Reserve Program)
- FSP (Forest Stewardship Program)
- FIP (Forestry Incentives Program)
- FLP (Forest Legacy Program)
- SIP (Stewardship Incentives Program)
- ECARP (Environmental Conservation Acreage Reserve Program)
- EQIP (Environmental Quality Incentives Program)
- CRP (Conservation Reserve Program)

Program details are available from the NRCS Ohio state office at 614-255-2472 and at www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs

offer food, water, and shelter for birds attract more birdwatchers and receive more business than bed-and-breakfasts that do not provide scenic wildlife habitat.

Several government and some private programs exist that compensate landowners for managing their property in an environmentally sensitive manner. These programs offer incentives to property owners to protect our natural resources or create wildlife habitat such as wetlands, setting an example for others in the area and the public. If neighbors participate in these programs, then together they may be able to protect a larger, connected patch of wildlife habitat providing greater benefits to biodiversity. Perhaps you have a forested area along a stream on your property that you feel is scenic and would like to see maintained, regardless if you decide to sell the land at a later date. You may be able to place a Conservation

Easement on the property and receive financial compensation for the land as well as some tax benefits. Contact your USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) district conservationist or local SWCD for more details on the various programs that may apply to your particular situation.

Species of plants and animals native to Ohio can greatly benefit from your conscientious land management methods for wildlife. Being a good environmental steward has its economical, educational, ecological, and social rewards for people as well. Don't hesitate to ask for assistance in realizing your habitat-enhancement goals. Local conservation organizations can be very helpful in designing habitat plans, offering resources, and getting you started with your project. The ultimate benefits for you, the community, the environment, and wildlife make the efforts well worthwhile.

Visit Ohio State University Extension's web site "Ohioline" at: <http://ohioline.osu.edu>

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