How to Attract Wildlife to Your Property

THE SAMUEL ROBERTS NOBLE FOUNDATION

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With cities and towns spreading into rural areas and more people moving to the country, people and wildlife interactions are becoming more common. Attracting wildlife to one's property can be enjoyable and rewarding. The first step in attracting wildlife is deciding which wildlife species to target. The second step is learning the habitat requirements of the species. The third step is providing the proper habitat components as well as implementing appropriate habitat management practices. This fact sheet describes how to attract desirable species and discusses the importance of managing native habitats and habitat management practices.

When determining a target species, a landowner should first look to see what species are present in the area. It is much easier for a landowner to manage for wildlife species that are already present than to attempt to attract wildlife that are not in the area. A landowner can manage for migratory species such as waterfowl or non-migratory animals such as white-tailed deer, but the key to attracting any species is providing the proper habitat.

Habitat is made up of necessary physical components such as food, cover, water and space that a species needs to both survive and raise its offspring. Habitat for native wildlife is primarily comprised of native plants. Therefore, a landowner wishing to attract a native species should manage native plants, including grasses, forbs, trees, shrubs and vines, to provide the necessary food and cover needs of that species. Examples of common native grasses include little bluestem, big bluestem, switchgrass and Indiangrass. Examples of common forbs include western ragweed, annual sunflower, Maximilian sunflower, panicled tick clover, small wild bean and tropic croton. Examples of common trees include post oak, blackjack oak, pecan and cottonwood. Examples of common shrubs include sand plum, fragrant sumac, smooth sumac and roughleaf dogwood. Examples of common vines include greenbrier, Carolina snailseed, heart-leaf ampelopsis and mustang grape. Every wildlife species eats specific foods, uses certain types of cover, may or may not need surface water, and requires different amounts of area to survive.

Different types of food sources include seeds, grasses, browse, forbs, insects and other animals. If a landowner is managing for butterflies, a backyard garden filled with colorful flowers could work nicely. However, a landowner managing for white-tailed deer would need a mixture of wooded and open areas that provide cover and foods such as forbs, browse and grass.

Water is one of the most critical components. Some species such as white-tailed deer need to drink surface water, whereas species such as northern bobwhite will take advantage of surface water, but do not need to drink water; rather, bobwhite receive enough water from food they eat. A landowner can provide water to wildlife by developing ponds and wetlands, wells, seeps, water tanks (especially those that overflow), wildlife guzzlers and bird baths. An elevated bird bath in a backyard garden can provide water for some songbirds and squirrels, whereas water overflowing a stock tank could be used by these species as well as mourning dove.

Different types of cover or shelter include native grasses, woods, shrubs,

forb communities, brush piles, flower beds, nest boxes and roost structures. Areas with scattered grasses and either greenbrier thickets, low shrubs or brush piles meet most of the cover requirements for eastern cottontails, whereas rural landscapes with grassy areas and scattered trees, with nest boxes near some of the trees, would be ideal for eastern bluebirds. Evergreen shrubs with a bird feeder and bird bath help attract songbirds during fall and winter.

A landowner must take into consideration the home range or space (acreage) that a species needs to meet its daily and annual habitat requirements. To put this in perspective, a pair of eastern bluebirds may need just 5 acres to find enough food, cover and water during nesting season to raise their young; however, a white-tailed deer doe may need several hundred acres to raise her fawns. When a landowner wants to manage for a species that has a home range larger than his or her property, the landowner can work with neighbors to provide the proper habitat on multiple properties.

An important part of providing appropriate habitat is implementing correct habitat management practices, including prescribed burning, grazing, tree planting, selective tree removal and rest from disturbances such as burning, grazing, mowing, disking and herbicide treatments. Prescribed burning is useful for controlling young woody encroachment, removing thatch, encouraging legumes and other forbs, and improving palatability and availability of browse. Grazing and rest are used to manage thatch, plant cover and plant composition. Planting trees can increase diversity, cover and food, whereas selective tree removal can be used to decrease abundance of less desirable invasive trees. Mowing can be used to increase sunlight to the ground, manage thatch and change the plant community. Disking can be used to decrease thatch and increase forb abundance, but this practice should not be used in erodible soils. Herbicide treatments can be used to selectively treat undesirable plants. Before a landowner implements a practice, he or she should determine whether it has positive or negative effects on the species of interest.

Attracting wildlife can be a rewarding and enjoyable experience. Attracting wildlife that already exists in the area increases the success of a landowner's efforts. For a successful long-term wildlife attraction program, a landowner needs to learn the habitat needs of the target species and maintain the proper habitat through appropriate management practices.

For more information about managing wildlife populations and wildlife habitat, go to www.noble.org/Ag/Research/Wildlife.htm. ■