

Start planning now to improve wildlife habitat on your property

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November is a popular month for hunting in Michigan; it's also a good time to take stock of the conditions on your property as it relates to attracting wildlife to your property.

Autumn is a popular month for Michigan hunters because of the many hunting seasons that are open at the same time (e.g. archery and firearm season for deer, upland game bird season and others). For those hunters fortunate enough to be able to hunt on their own land, the fall season is also a good time to think about the long-term health and condition of the woods on your property. So if there are not many white-tailed deer moving as you sit in your tree stand or blind waiting, then perhaps you can start thinking about what you want to do to improve the habitat on your land in the future.

Michigan State University Extension recommends the following tips on starting to make a wildlife habitat improvement plan for your property:

Before venturing out on your property to take stock of what's there, take time to think about what you would like to accomplish in terms of goals for the property. Instead of just thinking "I'd like more wildlife on my property;" think instead in terms of what type of wildlife and what that species requires to thrive. Ask yourself what type or variety of game and non-game species that you might like to encourage on your property.

While all wildlife species require some amount of food, cover, water and space, the amount and location of these elements of habitat can vary greatly depending upon the wildlife species. For large animals such as white-tailed deer, they can sometimes range over greater distances to obtain what they need as compared to a cotton-tailed rabbit or fox squirrel. So depending upon the wildlife species you are interested in, your property may not need to provide all the elements of habitat in order to attract that species to your property. If your property is small in size, perhaps you could work with your neighboring landowners to manage habitat over several ownership parcels.

The next step is to start an inventory of your land to see what elements of habitat exist and in what condition they are to support wildlife. As part of this inventory process, assess how much of your land is in woods, how much in openings and whether there are any sources of water on the property.

If your property is small and limited in size, then try to assess the condition of the habitat across neighboring lands as well (without trespassing) to see what elements of habitat that exist on your property but may be limited elsewhere. The type of information gathered here may help you better understand how and when wildlife might use your property to get what they need to survive. For example, if your property is surrounded by mature forest, then perhaps a timber harvest on your property can create an opening and source of browse that is not as accessible nearby.

In particular, as you look at different cover types (e.g. aspen-birch; lowland conifers, etc.) on your property, assess what type of cover it is and what condition it is in regarding its attractiveness to wildlife. For woodlands, is it a young forest with a dense amount of browse and cover? Or is it an mature forest with limited browse and food in the understory? Where natural openings exist, assess their condition as well. Are they truly open or are they beginning to “brush in” with native (pioneer) trees and shrubs? What type of grass and forbs are growing in these openings? Again, the goal here is to determine the quality of your habitat conditions as it relates to the needs of the wildlife species you are hoping to attract to your property.

Once you have your goals in mind and a better sense of the conditions on your property, you can begin to develop a plan to improve the wildlife habitat. Depending upon your property, some tools to accomplish your habitat goals include: timber harvesting in your woodlands to create openings and browse; mowing and fertilizing natural openings to remove brush and restore native grass and forbs; planting a few fruit-bearing trees and shrubs to improve the attractiveness of openings for wildlife; or perhaps creating (i.e. planting) a food plot to attract wildlife in the fall or improve the health and nutrition of wildlife coming out of the winter and more.

These are just a few ideas to start planning for in your deer blind or tree stand to help keep your mind off the freezing cold as you wait for a deer to wander within view! For more help in getting started, there is also an informative resource that is available on-line published by the Michigan Department of Natural Resources and the Michigan United Conservation Clubs entitled “[Managing Michigan’s Wildlife: A Landowners Guide](#)”. Help and technical assistance may also be available through your local conservation district or through the Michigan Dept. of Natural Resources [Landowner Incentive program](#) or [Forest Stewardship Program](#).

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