

SOIL CONSERVATION SERVICE PROGRAMS IN NONGAME

BIRD HABITAT MANAGEMENT

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INTRODUCTION

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Soil Conservation Service has provided leadership in the conservation development and productive use of the nation's soil, water, plant, and wildlife resources since 1935. Among SCS activities are erosion control, sediment reduction, pollution abatement, land use planning, multiple use, improvement of water quality, and several surveying and monitoring activities related to environmental improvement. All of these activities are designed to assure quality in the natural resource base for sustained use; quality in the environment to provide attractive, convenient, and satisfying places to live, work and play; and quality in the standard of living based on community improvement and adequate income. All SCS programs, directly and indirectly, may affect the habitat of nongame birds.

The Soil Conservation Service, in the process of executing its responsibilities, provides technical assistance designed to conserve soil, water, plant, and animal resources. Soil and water conservation receive the most attention because they are essential to the conservation of other resources. These resources include the habitat of nongame birds.

To wisely use soil and water resources, the Soil Conservation Service has developed about 130 conservation practices to assist landowners and operators. These practices range from construction and development of access roads to woodland site preparation. About 20 of the practices include wildlife among the purposes for installing the practice and three of them are designed solely for the improvement of wildlife habitat.

Technical standards and criteria have been established for all of these practices

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which provide guidance to assure meeting the purpose and quality for an adequate life expectancy. Standards and criteria are developed in consultation with universities, research institutions, individuals, and private firms and tempered with practical experience.

For example, "woodland improvement" is a practice that is being used in a number of states. Woodland improvement is the practice of removing unmerchantable or unwanted trees, shrubs, or vines from wooded areas. The practice is designed to fully use the potential of a site; to maintain plant cover for soil protection; to improve stand composition by leaving the best trees properly spaced for best growth; and to improve natural beauty, wildlife habitat, or recreational values. The practice is applied where a stand of trees is overstocked or where desirable trees are overtopped by less desirable trees, shrubs, or vines; where removing part of a stand will improve stand quality, forage production, or the recreation, wildlife, aesthetic, or hydrologic values of an area.

Standards and specifications for this practice usually include the following for wildlife:

1. Exceptionally attractive trees are preserved regardless of their value as crop trees.
2. Den trees, nut trees, cull and wolf trees are preserved because of their value to wildlife.
3. The growth of shrubs or other low growing vegetation around the edge of woodlots or plantation areas is favored.

The specifications for woodland improvement in Indiana require a 40-foot width of untreated woodland adjacent to open fields, highways or open water. This strip provides wind protection for the rest of the woodland; serves as an excellent food and cover site for wildlife, and contributes much to the beauty of the community. Plants such as dogwood, red-bud, viburnums, black gum, sugar maple, serviceberry, sassafras, sumac, Virginia creeper, and bittersweet are encouraged in the woods border.

Other practices that provide habitat for nongame birds include conservation treatment of critically eroding areas and establishing field, farmstead and feedlot windbreaks, hedgerow plantings, and field borders. Practices designed specifically for wildlife include wildlife wetland habitat management and wildlife upland habitat management.

Environmental quality is an objective in all SCS practices, but getting wildlife requirements included in conservation practices depends a great deal on the landowner's degree of interest. Usually, their initial interest is in the economic opportunities of a practice or its effect upon soil and water conservation. District conservationists in some 3,000 soil and water conservation districts are the primary Soil Conservation Service contact with landowners and operators. Special consideration for wildlife is in their hands to a large degree. When the benefits of including wildlife options in conservation practices are identified, they are generally well accepted.

The potential of these practices to provide nongame wildlife habitat is shown by the total amounts installed. For instance, in 1977 woodland improvement was applied to nearly 300,000 acres (121,500 hectares) in the United States. A field windbreak is a strip or belt of trees or shrubs established in or adjacent to a field. Since the practice was started in the 1930's, the field windbreaks planted would circle the globe more than four times, some 174,000 kilometers in total length. Farmstead and feedlot windbreaks accounted for about 21,000 acres (8,500 hectares) of new woody plantings in 1977. Total acres established in this kind of woodland now exceeds 800,000 acres (324,000 hectares).

Planning for nongame birds in the northeast follows several avenues that are not totally forest oriented. In the heavily wooded region of the northeast, any manipulation of the forest affects many nongame species. Much of the forest is located in urban or suburban acres.

Most of northeastern land is in privately owned small woodlots. Much of this forest is located in the suburbs and the rural forest lands are often owned by retired or part-time residents. These persons have a broad interest in songbirds as evidenced by the many bird watching groups, carloads of bird seed sold, and plantings to attract birds.

Forestry practices normally planned with Soil Conservation District cooperators are not

often primarily planned for wildlife, especially nongame birds. The planner often has to convince the landowner that forestry practices should be used to create the desired nongame bird habitat. The increased use of wood as fuel now provides the incentive needed to cut small openings, maintain woods roads, and to create cutback borders. Landowners are advised to leave the important fruit bearing trees and shrubs for wildlife purposes. They are encouraged to leave standing dead cull trees such as poplar and gray birch to provide nesting sites for woodpeckers, chickadees, and other cavity nesting birds. Leaving snags on den trees are encouraged and seeding wood roads and log decks to plants, such as Lathco flatpea, may maintain openings for over 20 years. These areas are used by doves, grouse, and for song bird nesting.

The release of old orchards or wild apple trees benefits both game and nongame species. The cavities in these trees are especially attractive to bluebirds. Information on top grafting apple trees to small fruited crab apples is becoming more popular. This is being done in old orchards and to the many wild apples that are normally found in woodland and hedgerows.

Bluebird trails are planned and installed by many landowners, conservation commissions, and schools with outdoor study areas. Outdoor study areas or "outdoor classrooms" are saving existing woodlands and create some new ones. Because young people learn about nongame birds and other wildlife, these areas are very important to this resource. The future welfare of wildlife, like so many other things, will pass to the hands of these people.

In New Hampshire, landowners along the large rivers are encouraged to leave elm and silver maple. The latter is a brittle tree that forms natural cavities for nesting. While these are used primarily by woodduck and goldeneyes, the cavities are also utilized by other birds.

The creation of small marshes and protection of beaver flowages create or preserve great blue heron rookeries. The standing dead trees are used by cavity nesting birds. Cooperators are encouraged to cutback the edge of marshes to create shrub borders for warblers and similar birds. Mowing is an important means of maintaining open land bird habitat. Mowing dates are typically from late July-on to allow ground nesting. Landowners are encouraged to do random mowings of old fields to create more edges and to leave pruned shrubs. A 5-year rotation is planned where each year a fallow strip is plowed to set back plant succession and encourage weedy growth for song bird feed.

The installation of many soil and water conservation practices on forested or wooded areas helps enhance the habitat needed by nongame birds. New habitat is created where practices provide for establishing woody plantings for a variety of purposes.

Landowners are encouraged to include specific considerations for wildlife when they install conservation practices. When this is done, the practices become even more important to nongame birds and other wildlife. Landowners are also encouraged to use the practices that have been designed solely to benefit wildlife.

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