

The Habitat Corner

WILDLIFE HABITAT EVALUATION – NOW IS THE TIME!

When it comes to a landowner's property or hunt lease, many wonder: "When is the best time to assess the habitat?" It is very common for most landowners and sportsmen to start thinking about habitat only in early summer or fall during peak time for food plots. It is easy to get "tunnel vision" with your favorite little project focused on one habitat aspect, but what about the rest of the land? Has it been evaluated properly? Many start out with food plots, but with a better understanding of all the habitat needs for wildlife they often graduate to a wider range of conservation techniques to improve habitat for their desired species.

Biologists often use a formal technique called Habitat Evaluation Procedures (HEP) and it can be somewhat complicated to work through, but it simply is a way to identify what habitat components are lacking for desired wildlife species. TWRA and Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) private lands biologists in Tennessee sometimes use basic HEP versions to document before and after conditions of planned conservation to show improvement. Typically, the HEP will score certain aspects of an individual species preferred habitat type.

When a property is evaluated, the sum of these scores will be calculated into an index that ranges from 0-1, with 0.75 to 1 being a high score. While these steps may at times seem silly or a waste of time to some, after a decade of using them I can tell you it creates an awareness for all cover type needs for a species; nesting cover in fields, shrub tickets, closed canopy woods, etc. Identifying these basic cover types (nesting cover, security cover) may help your property in some way, whether to maximize its potential wildlife habitat for game species or for wildlife in general. If you can raise your awareness for many different cover types, instead of just your favorite one or two, then you might produce more quail coveys, hold bigger deer, and provide essential needs to myriad other non-game species

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(e.g. songbirds, amphibians) as well.

So when are cover type deficiencies easiest to recognize?

It's not a bad idea to monitor your property year-round for invasive plants and monitoring overall vegetative growth, but I like the winter months to evaluate any property. During the dead of winter, the tall thick covers of summer have been reduced by frost, wind, precipitation, and time. The tall overgrown summer fields that were once full of ragweed and goldenrod with scattered native grass clumps are now some

of the landscape's last secure covers amidst harvested crop fields and grazed pastures. This type of vegetation is next year's turkey nesting cover, deer fawning cover, bobwhite nesting /brooding cover, and trophy deer bedding areas, just to name a few. But many times this is the first cover that is incorrectly deemed during summer or early fall as too thick and unwanted, resulting in the tractor and mower reducing it to meaningless yard-like conditions just before winter. This common practice reduces much

needed security cover, helping predators find an easy meal and often sending wildlife to other properties.

Landowners can have fun by trying the basics of habitat evaluations and maybe raise their awareness for their species of interest. Ask yourself do you have some basic habitat types such as: nesting, brooding, security, loafing, and food resources for each species of interest. A proper evaluation in winter might help identify shortfalls: did you mow when you didn't need to; do you lack protective shrub cover or nesting cover? These are just a few of the questions landowners should routinely ask themselves, and seeking the help of a seasoned professional for a proper habitat evaluation can potentially guide your management in a more successful manner.

Habitat Tip: Minimizing fall mowing to hunting pathways and problem vegetation areas can provide more secure winter cover for wildlife.



This field was previously evaluated during winter as being too thick from years of repeated mowing. Now, better techniques, like prescribed burning and strip disking, are being utilized to restore it to better structure and plant composition.

"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.TWRPrivatelands.org for who to contact for technical assistance and other useful information on habitat management and programs.