

Improve Your Woodlot for Wildlife

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When considering how to improve a woodlot, it's important to understand that each woodlot is unique in its own way whether it is in size, age or plant species. A woodlot may be a couple of acres large and dominated by young hardwood saplings like maple, or it may be decades old and consist of mature conifers like spruce and pine. Yet, another woodlot may be a couple hundred of acres large and consist of both hardwoods and conifers. Nonetheless, the type of forest you have and how you manage it influences the diversity of wildlife in your woodlot.

Wildlife survival depends on the availability of food, water, shelter and space. However, wildlife is also specific in their habitat needs. For example, the American Woodcock, a small woodland game bird, spends its spring and summer on a heavily leaf littered ground, in a moist young forest, that does not have much ground cover. In this environment, their food, earthworms, is plentiful, plus shelter and water are accessible. In addition to these essential needs, the woodcock also requires a "singing ground" for early spring mating. The singing ground is an area of bare ground (15-20 feet in diameter) and is surrounded by a few acres of open grassland or shrubs. If this type of habitat is not available, the American Woodcock will not thrive. With the woodcock as an example, the first step in wildlife management is to look at what your woodlot has to offer and what wildlife species it will be able to support.

Young or old forest:

A mixture of an old and young forest will yield the greatest variety and diversity of wildlife. However, not all forests have layers of young and old trees, therefore, it is important to determine the age of your woodlot. A young forest has an abundance of berry producing shrubs, bushy cover and saplings for animals like ruffed grouse, cottontail rabbit, American woodcock, and white-tailed deer. Older or more mature forests provide little shelter for many wildlife species but are favored by white-tailed deer during the winter. Nuts are abundant in a mature forest and are a great food source for turkeys, gray fox, rabbits, bears and birds. Also, large tree cavities in mature trees create great nesting sites for animals like the squirrel and screech owl.

Tree Species:

Certain tree species attract wildlife because of the fruit they bear and the shelter they provide. It is important to remember that not all trees will survive in your woodlot's current environment, thus the focal point now becomes choosing the right tree for wildlife habitat for your woodlot. For example, planting a sun-loving sapling in your old growth forest, which probably has a full canopy, will not work. All trees need the right conditions to survive; in this case sun was crucial but was not available because of the forest canopy. Before you order any seedlings take into account whether your forest is young or old, the soil conditions (drainage & composition) as well as, sun availability. Once you have discovered what your woodlot can support then you may focus on attracting wildlife. Here are some examples of wildlife that often associate with different types of trees.

Conifers:

- White Cedar: white-tailed deer, red squirrels, ruffed grouse, ring-necked pheasant, wild turkey and song birds.
- White Pine: white-tailed deer, gray and red squirrels, chipmunks, wood duck, turkey, mourning dove, woodpeckers and song birds.
- Balsam Fir: white-tailed deer, gray squirrel and song birds.

Hardwoods

- Aspen: beaver, white-tailed deer and ruffed grouse
- Black Cherry: black bear, raccoon, red squirrel, ruffed grouse and cedar wax-wing.
- Beech: black bear, blue jay, white-tailed deer, chipmunk, squirrel, ruffed grouse, wild turkey and tufted titmouse.
- Oak: black bear, white-tailed deer, raccoon, ruffed grouse, wild turkey, wood duck, and blue jay.
- Red and Sugar Maple: beaver, chipmunk, white-tailed deer, and rose-breasted grosbeak, wild turkey.

Shrubs:

- American Plum: great habitat for song birds, grouse and ring-necked pheasant.
- Serviceberry: white-tailed deer, red squirrel, bluebird, cardinal, cedar wax-wing and scarlet tanager.
- Silky dogwood: rabbit, ruffed grouse, wild turkey, bluebird, cardinal and cedar wax-wing.
- High bush blueberry: black bear, white-tailed deer, rabbit, and gray cat bird.
- Elderberry: rabbit, bluebird, cardinal, indigo bunting and rose-breasted grosbeak.
- Blackberry: white-tailed deer, chipmunk, rabbit, ring-necked pheasant and robin.

Arrangement:

The arrangement of food, shelter and water will also determine the wildlife species present in your woodlot. For example, the ruffed grouse lives its entire life in a relatively small area and prefers a woodlot that has a high density of small slender trees. They also favor a forest with a large canopy and an open floor with little downed material. The canopy protects the ruffed grouse from raptors and an open forest floor allows them to use their keen eyesight to detect danger. Other species need a different arrangement of habitat features. The arrangement of your forest, the trees within it as well as its age or maturity play an important role in the abundance and diversity wildlife found in your woodlot.

If you are interested in attracting a wildlife species to your woodlot, then developing a forest stewardship plan with a professional will enable you to enhance and meet your wildlife habitat goals. A forest stewardship plan develops a workable management plan for your woodlot and identifies unique forest communities, and endangered species within. For more information on developing a forest stewardship plan, contact your local Cornell University Cooperative Extension office.

For additional information on forestland activities that will benefit your objectives, visit Cornell's forestry website at www.ForestConnect.info, contact your local office of Cornell University Cooperative Extension, or join the New York Forest Owners Association through their website at www.nyfoa.org

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