

Wildlife Habitat Improvement Program

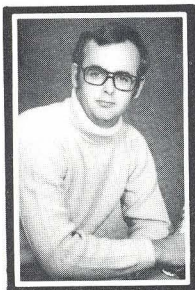
By Ross Harrison, Staff Writer

THE SITUATION:

Fact # 1—

The key to wildlife abundance is the quality of its habitat—simply a place for wildlife to feed, rear young and escape the rigors of nature.

Fact # 2—



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continue to shove wildlife considerations into lower priorities.

Fact # 3—

Public hunting lands owned or operated by the Forestry, Fish and Game Commission and managed for game production total about 200,000 acres. These public hunting areas have accounted for 10 to 15 percent of all hunting activities in the state. Obviously, many farmers and ranchers allow hunting on their lands,

accounting for 85 to 90 percent of all hunting activity in the state.

Fact # 4—

A poll of the state's landowners by the Forestry, Fish and Game Commission in 1971 showed almost one-third of them would like to improve wildlife habitat conditions on their land if the FF&G Commission would provide technical assistance. Another quarter said they also wanted to improve habitat, but would like cost-sharing funds to help.

Fact # 5—

Talking and writing about declining habitat probably will not change the situation.

The Solution

WHIP—Wildlife Habitat Improvement Program, WHIP is a new, action program of the Forestry, Fish and Game Commission in which district game biologists provide technical assistance to landowners to improve and develop wildlife habitat on private land. Although the FF&G Commission at present cannot provide cost-share funds for

habitat improvement, some federal conservation programs make such funds available. All landowners and tenants of Kansas are eligible to participate in WHIP and all WHIP cooperators still retain the right to allow or not to allow hunting on their land. WHIP got underway last March as one of the five goals of Project SASNAK.

A Wildlife habitat improvement program is not a novel idea. The Kansas version of WHIP was created by borrowing bits and pieces of successful habitat programs from other states and adding those ingredients that will make it work in Kansas. WHIP is larger in scope than the "Acres for Wildlife" program of the Extension Service which is aimed primarily at setting aside small tracts of land for wildlife. Its plan of attack is simple.

First, a Kansas landowner has to decide wildlife on his farm or ranch needs a helping hand. He then must get in touch with his local Forestry, Fish and Game Commission employee, game protector, or biologist. Or he can write the Forestry, Fish and Game Commission headquarters, Box 1028, Pratt, Ks. 67124, for the WHIP brochure which explains the program and contains a WHIP application form.

To apply, the landowner obtains two copies of the aerial photographs of his land from the county ASCS office and mails them with the application to the appropriate regional office of the FF&G Commission. These addresses are shown in brochure.

From that point the regional office assigns the farm or ranch unit to a district biologist. He studies the aerial photos, makes some preliminary suggestions then meets with the landowner. Preferably with the accompaniment of the landowner, the district biologist will evaluate the situation of the land and its potentials and take into consideration the particular desires of the landowner. From this, final recommendations are drawn and methods to carry them out are explained.

A landowner can direct such recommendations to particular habitat types



Programs like WHIP are designed to improve and increase habitat for species like the prairie chicken and quail pictured here, as well as many non-game species.

for particular wildlife species. He will be provided several informational sheets clearly describing certain habitat management practices and he will receive advice on the best and most economical sources for planting materials if they are needed.

Included in the assistance by the district game biologist will be information on how landowners can receive federal cost-share funds for habitat improvement if available in that country.

In general, WHIP is designed to be flexible enough to fit the needs of wildlife and landowners throughout Kansas.

It is designed so there is little or no cost or sacrifice of agricultural production.

It should be stressed: All landowners still retain the right to allow or not allow hunting. Cooperators will receive upon request "Safety Zone—No Shooting" signs for placement around buildings and work areas.

As mentioned before, WHIP is not a novel idea. Versions of wildlife habitat improvement programs for private

landowners have been tried in many other states with varying degrees of success—from dismal to outstanding.

Even Kansas had a statewide habitat improvement program in the late '40s through the '50s. If you recall it, which many can't, you'll remember it wasn't totally successful.

So then, is the FF&G Commission gambling on another habitat program that will consume the time of many biologists and the dollars of many sportsmen?

Sure, it's a gamble, but the odds now are more favorable. Project SAS-NAK has provided the funds and 21 new game biologists to see that WHIP works. And, nearly all the "bugs" in Kansas' old system, as well as those of other states, have been ironed out.

Game chief of the FF&G Commission, Lee Queal, believes the severe drought of the 1950s was the biggest reason for the failure of the earlier attempt at a private land habitat program. He lists the lack of manpower and funds as other causes for its failure.





Without adequate cover, game birds are more susceptible to predation like this coyote-killed quail.

Other causes may have been the lack of a statewide habitat inventory. Such an inventory would show what and where the habitat needs bolstering throughout the state and it would provide a basis for comparison to see how the WHIP program is working. Also, there was no follow-up on the grass roots level to see if landowners took to heart the recommendations for improving habitat.

Queal now feels these ills, except for a possible drought, have been remedied. A statewide habitat inventory technique is being developed.

That 1971 poll of landowners referred to in Fact No. 4 indicates at least 20,000 farmers and ranchers are willing to give WHIP a try.

WHIP is by no means designed to benefit only game animals. As mentioned before, a landowner can channel WHIP to any particular wildlife species or group of species he wants, within reason. Still, what is good for song birds will also be helpful to numerous other critters such as quail and rabbits.

Landowners can view WHIP as one

way to boost the value of their land. More often than not, good wildlife habitat aids in control of soil erosion from wind and water. And an abundance of wildlife on a farm or ranch can make it just that much more attractive to a possible good tenant or prospective buyer.

There are a number of speciality management practices for wildlife habitat, one, some or all of which may be incorporated into a farm unit. Following is a brief discussion of three such practices to give an idea of what WHIP is all about. WHIP cooperators will be given informational bulletins on these and other practices for more detailed information.

Managing Pond Areas for Wildlife—Waterfowl, pheasant, quail, shorebirds, mammals and song birds all are attracted to the well managed farm pond area. Those ponds with water level control structures can be lowered several feet in July, shoreline seeded to a cover crop, then reflooded in early fall as an excellent waterfowl attractant.

With adequate fencing, any pond can become attractive to a variety of wildlife. Where ponds are used for stock watering, fences could surround just the main basin of the pond near the dam or around and below the dam, where the outflow moistens the soil for good vegetative growth. Vegetative cover around ponds in rangeland of native grasses generally will bounce back in good shape after it is fenced from grazing. Reseeding may be necessary if an adequate natural seed source is not available. Tame grasses are of poor quality for such wildlife areas.

Miniature shelterbelts and clumps of shrubs also add to the wildlife drawing power of ponds. Using live fence rows of multiflora rose, for example, sometimes can replace traditional fencing. Shrub clumps should be at least four rows wide and 50 feet long, scattered throughout the fenced area about 100 feet or more apart. If enough room exists, establishment of weed patches is encouraged. These patches need annual attention, such as burning in April or early May, otherwise grasses and perennial weeds may take over.

Managing Brush Piles—High quality cover is the main ingredient of wildlife habitat usually lacking on most Kansas farmland. It may take a number of years for new plantings of shrubs and trees to provide good wildlife cover, but creation of brush piles can solve this problem immediately and you can't beat the cost.

Since wildlife will not spend their entire lives in brush piles, their other needs must be close at hand. Brush piles should be located near or adjacent to cultivated land and other cover, such as in field corners, odd grassy areas or along the edge of creek timber. A series of piles 100 to 200 feet apart will provide good escape cover and travel lanes as well. The piles should measure about 20 feet wide and from three to five feet high. Any shape will do.

A good brush pile must be built dense enough to protect wildlife during storms and loose enough to provide access into it and a comfortable loafing area.

Construction should begin with a base which will support brush and is elevated anywhere from six inches to three feet off the ground. This is accomplished by placing the butt end of large branches on a rock or stump or similar object.

Half Cutting—Half cutting is another way to provide a good brush pile. If trees are removed from the middle of a hedge row for firewood or corner posts, the edges of that hole in the hedge row can be half cut for an effective brush pile. Cut the two or so trees on the edge of the hole three-fourths through and about two or three feet above ground. Push them towards the hole so their bases hinge on the tall stump. Place smaller limbs on this base, butts pointing

towards the center of the pile. This makes a brush pile dense in the center and loose on the edges where grass and weeds can grow to further improve the habitat. If the pile sags later, pile more branches on it.

It may be desirable to scratch the ground around the pile, scattering lespedeza, millet or sweet clover seed for additional food and cover.

Slash from cottonwood logging in central and western Kansas can be turned from a problem into a boon for the rancher and wildlife. By making brush piles of the slash, more grazing land is opened and wildlife are provided new homes.

A sidelight to creating instant cover is to fell a tree while the leaves are still on it during the fall. The tree will

keep its leaves most of the winter, providing good escape cover and loafing cover for quail and song birds.

These are but a few of many wildlife management techniques. Like any project there is a right and a wrong way to do it. Just a plain old pond in your field may never be worth anything but a stock watering hole unless properly managed. Throwing a bunch of sticks into a pile may be good for nothing but a fire.

It is the duty of WHIP and the district game biologists to see that the farmer and rancher get the right guidance so their lands can be as beneficial to wildlife as they are in providing food for the nation.

