

WASHINGTON COUNTY
Wildlife



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NEWSLETTER

Fall 2006

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Food Plots for Wildlife

By Robert Lehmann, TPWD

The planting of supplemental food plots for wildlife seems to be a practice that is welcomed by most landowners and land managers who are interested in wildlife management. A well planned food plot can provide as much as 4 to 5 tons of forage per acre. However, the maximum benefits can only be obtained if the food plot is a compliment to the native vegetation. Food plots should be available when native vegetation is lacking or is low in nutritional value. These "stress periods" normally occur in late summer and late winter. September is the time to start preparing to plant cool season plots. The success of the plot depends on the land managers ability to correctly choose an appropriate seed variety, plant in a suitable site and use the correct planting procedures. Some considerations before you plant may include: Where should I plant? What should I plant? When should I plant? How should I plant?

Where: Best if plots are located adjacent to some type of escape cover and in good soils. If possible, use separate areas for warm season and cool season food plots. The size of the plots should be one to five acres for every hundred acres of habitat present. Several smaller plots spread throughout an area is better than one large plot. Long narrow plots are better than wide ones. Food plots should be fenced to exclude cattle with the bottom wire eighteen inches from the ground. It is not recommended to plant plots near public roads since they might encourage illegal hunting.

(Food Plots continued on page 2)

Nestboxes Need Predator Guards

By Dave Redden, New Years Creek WMA Director

So, you have your bluebird nestboxes up and are enjoying seeing the beautiful bluebirds build their nests. You are even checking the nests every few days to track their progress to tell when they lay eggs and when the chicks hatch. Right on schedule the chicks appear (about two weeks after the first egg is laid) and things are looking great. You have another 13 days that you can observe their growth before it is nearly time for them to fledge. One day you check the nest and find nothing there even though it is not time for them to fledge. Your nest has been lost to a predator.

This scenario happens all too often with nestboxes not protected by predator guards. In fact, some advocates of the guards suggest that if you are not using predator guards, you are just feeding the predators instead of helping the bluebirds or other wildlife you are trying to encourage. The counter to this is that nature does not provide predator guards, so providing a nestbox of any sort is at least as good as what nature does. However, since we are already interfering with the natural process to help a species that is having trouble, we might as well give it all the help that we can.

(Predator Guards continued on page 2)

Food Plots (continued from page 1)

What: A combination of Wheat and Austrian winter peas works very well. Wheat is preferred over oats only because of its seed producing capability. Wheat tends to have a longer lasting erect stubble that will hold the seed longer into the summer. This seed is consumed throughout the year by many different bird and wildlife species. Many times in a dry summer condition, wheat can be left to stand all year and resprouting will occur by shredding and lightly disking each September. Clover plots are some of the most preferred, however special care should be taken in selecting the proper variety of clover to coincide with your soils pH. Many varieties of clover will reseed and have extended growing seasons that can possibly extend into the summer months. There are many commercially produced specialty mixes available that will work well, but often at a much higher price.

When: Planting of cool season plots should be planted September 15th through October 15th depending on available soil moisture.

How: Wheat and winter peas are fairly simple to plant; the site should be shredded and disked or tilled to create a clean seedbed. Approximately 25 lbs of wheat and 25 lbs of winter peas should be planted per acre. The seed should be evenly spread over the area by a commercial seeder or even by hand depending on the size of area to be planted.

Seeds should then be lightly covered with a disk or some type of drag to insure ground to seed contact. The end results should be a planting depth around 1 inch deep. One of the most common mistakes in planting is getting the seed in too deep. Clovers should never be disked in or planted deeper than ½ inch deep. On well-prepared seedbeds or loose sandy soils, clovers can be planted

directly on top of the soil without dragging or redisking to cover the seed. Clovers should be inoculated to increase nitrogen fixation that will aid in improving soil quality over time. Plots will need to be fertilized correctly to realize the full benefit. Soil test should be taken to determine the lime and fertilizer requirements.

Finally: Food plots are no way a cure-all for poor habitat management. Without consideration of the native food source and cover requirements for wildlife, food plots will not provide the adequate nutrition needed by most wildlife species on a daily basis.

If you have any questions about habitat management on your property please feel free to contact me: Robert Lehmann, Texas Parks and Wildlife (979) 277-6297 or come by my office in the Washington County Extension Office Annex at 1305 E. Blue Bell Road. k

Clover Seed Now Can Be Purchased by the Pound

This year Wildlife Society members and others wanting to plant Clover food plots for wildlife can purchase several different varieties of clover by the pound at Brenham Produce Company located at 1103 S. Market Street in Brenham. The cost of the clover will vary depending on the variety. This is a great opportunity for persons who would like to try several different types of clover or have smaller areas to plant. Keep in mind clovers are very particular to soil types and the ph of your soil. Also, to maximize production and to encourage the plants to produce nitrogen inoculants should be applied to the seed prior to planting. If you need a small amount of inoculant for your seed it will be available at the Extension office located at 1305 E. Bluebell.

Predator Guards (continued from page 1)

Common predators for bluebirds and other cavity nesters are raccoons, feral cats, bobcats, opossums, chicken snakes and rat snakes. In addition, ants are a deadly nuisance for young chicks. All can be discouraged from raiding your nestbox with a little effort.

The Mounting Pole

The most common practice to reduce predator impact is to mount the nestbox on a smooth metal pole, usually galvanized water pipe, electrical metal tubing (also called EMT or conduit), or chain-link fence posts. This is a good start but is not sufficient. Typical recommendations are to mount the nestbox at a height that is around eye level, 4 - 5 ft. Un-



fortunately this height is an easy leap for a cat, so if cats are a problem in your area, you will need to raise the nestbox higher. An easy way to do this is to use a telescoping pole system.

Perhaps the least effective pole to use for a nestbox is a wooden pole such as a fence post or tree. These are easily climbed by all predators. However, the metal poles can also be climbed by predators, even snakes. So, a smooth metal mounting pole is not sufficient in itself.

Location of the pole is also important. If a predator can climb a tree, pole, guy wire or building nearby and drop onto your nestbox, the pole and other protection you may have are irrelevant.

Predator Guards (continued on page 3)

Predator Guards (continued from page 2)

Predator Baffle



The most common type of baffle used is made from lightweight stovepipe or air duct material. You can get this in 6" or 8" sizes at almost any major hardware store. It comes in approximately 2-ft lengths. All you need to do is to make a way to attach the pipe around your telescoping pole just below the nest box. There are numerous ways to do this, but a popular way is to use pipe strapping (available in the plumbing section of hardware stores usually) to make an attachment bracket. An example is shown at the Texas Bluebird Society web site at <http://www.texasbluebirdsociety.org> (click on Building Plans tab). Of course there are numerous ways to achieve this objective, so be creative.



You also need to have something inside the stovepipe at the top to keep snakes and small animals from crawling inside the pipe and getting to the nestbox. This can be 1/2" mesh hardware cloth, also available at hardware stores, or other material that allows light through. It is important for the light to shine through so that the predator thinks that the way to the nestbox is up the pole inside the stovepipe, but he runs up against the barrier at the top and has to turn around. Coons and bobcats will not be as easily deterred by the stovepipe since they can just tear it apart if they want to. As a result, I have experimented with a different type of baffle that works well for the larger predators.

The baffle I use for keeping coons and cats away (also works on smaller animals such as snakes, squirrels, and possums) is a metal plate approximately 3 ft in diameter with a hole in the middle just large enough to fit over the mounting pole. The plate is supported by a pin through the pole just below the nestbox. (This system also works well for keeping squirrels and coons out of bird feeders.) The difficulty with this system is finding a suitable source for the metal sheet to make it and getting a 3-ft circle cut. If you do not have metalworking tools and skills, you can probably get one of the local sheet metal shops or machine shops that do custom fabrication to cut you a plate. I use 18-gauge steel or lighter. If you use very light sheet, you will need to add some bracing on the top of the plate. Do not put anything on the bottom of the plate that allows footholds or makes it feasible for a predator to work his way around to the top.



Small cylinders around the entrance to the nest box may discourage squirrels and 'possums, but will likely have little effect on a determined cat or coon. They will have no effect on snakes.

Protection from Insects

The final step is to keep fire ants and other ants and insects from getting to the nest. Some experts recommend smearing the mounting pole with axle grease (available from auto parts stores or farm equipment stores). Another method is to use a material called Tree Tanglefoot. It looks like the material you see on sticky flypaper and acts the same way except you just smear it on the pole. It is available through Forestry Suppliers (www.forestry-suppliers.com, tel.: 800-360-7788 to request a catalog) in a 5-lb tub for about \$27. This amount should last you several lifetimes, so you may want to share it with a friend. Avoid sprays that may get into the nest.

I am sure there are many other successful approaches to assisting nesting birds. Send us your stories and ideas and we will try to put some up on our web site or publish them in future newsletters. k

Upcoming Events

October 4–16 – Monarch Butterfly Migration (*date most likely to encounter good numbers of monarchs*)

Are you ready for a large migration? The Monarch butterfly migration this year should be the largest seen since 2001 although our dry conditions could prove to be a hazard for migratory monarchs that need sources of water and nectar as they migrate. Here's a challenge. If you are outdoors during much of the migration, why not keep a notebook and record the number of monarchs you see each day? Did you know? The Monarch butterfly is Texas' state insect. Check out www.MonarchWatch.org or http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/learning/texas_nature_trackers/monarch/ for more information.

October 6 - Greenvine WMA Semi-Annual Meeting

The Greenvine WMA is having a meeting for all members on Friday evening, October 6th. Social time will begin at 6:30 and the program will start promptly at 7:00 p.m. at the Greenvine Store. A hamburger dinner and refreshments will be provided. Please bring your favorite dessert. Greenvine WMA Director, Sara Byman, will give a talk on North American Bluebirds, what makes good bluebird habitat and guidelines for bluebird management. Afterwards, there will be a drawing for a bluebird nestbox.

October 7 & 8 - Texas Parks & Wildlife Expo 2006

An outdoor experience where visitors fish, shoot, kayak, rock climb, mountain bike, see wildlife, buy the latest outdoor gear and services, and learn, hands-on, about recreation in the Great Outdoors. Most importantly, visitors find out how they can help to conserve this precious resource. And, Expo is free! For more information about the Texas Parks & Wildlife Expo, contact Director, Ernie Gammage at 512-389-4472. <http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/exptexas/promos/expo/expo2006/>.

October 10 - Rocky Creek WMA Fall Meeting

The Rocky Creek WMA is having a meeting for all members on Tuesday evening, October 10th beginning at 6:30 p.m. at the Rocky Creek Fire Department, 9771 Long Point Road in Burton. Sloppy Joe's and refreshments will be provided. Please bring your favorite dessert. *Please RSVP to Gene Kelm at 979-289-2235 or email to gekelm@pdq.net or Ron Perry at 979-289-2234.*

October 20 - Sandtown WMA Fall Meeting

The Sandtown WMA will have their Fall Meeting and Election of Officers on Friday, October 20th at 6:30 p.m. at the Carmine Lion's Club, 201 Centennial in Carmine. Local birding expert, Darrell Vollert, will be our guest speaker and will talk about attracting songbirds to your property. Please join us for social time at 6:30. Dinner and presentation will begin at 7:00 p.m. Hamburgers with all the trimmings and refreshments will be served. *Please RSVP by Tuesday, October 16, 2006 to: Roland Contreras at (979) 289-3702 (rbcontreras39@yahoo.com) or Val Hinze at (979) 278-3120 (zinh@industryinet.com)*

October 25 - Second Annual Youth Shooting and Hunter Safety Event

Nails Creek State Park, Lake Somerville. Local high school students involved in wildlife and agriculture classes are invited to come out for a fun, safe, hands-on opportunity to learn about hunter ethics and safety and give them the opportunity to shoot different types of firearms and bows. Students are placed in small groups and rotated through eight stations where they receive one-on-one instruction. Students will also enjoy a picnic lunch provided by Washington County Wildlife Society. It takes a lot of people to put on this event and any interested volunteers will be welcome. Contact us at info@wcvwildlife.org or call (979) 277-6212.

October 28 - Post Oak WMA Fall Meeting

The Post Oak WMA Fall Meeting will be held on Saturday, October 28th at 6:00 p.m. at Phelps Country Properties in downtown Independence. A meal and refreshments will be provided. *Please RSVP to Craig Rosenbaum, Director, at (979) 836-7073, crdecoys@yahoo.com or James Kolkhorst, Vice-Director, (936) 878-2143, viviankolkhorst@earthlink.net.*

October 28-29 – Texas Bluebird Society Annual Convention

Please celebrate the Texas Bluebird Society's FIFTH birthday at the Annual Convention, October 28-29, 2006 at McKinney Roughs (adjacent to the new Lost Pines Hyatt) between Austin and Bastrop. Registration begins August 28th. Basic Registration is only \$5.00 per person for TBS Members! There will be a Build Your Own Nestbox with Camera (and 100' cable) session so you can watch your nestlings on your TV! Other great speakers and field trips are also on the schedule. For more information and/or to register go to www.texasbluebirdsociety.org.

November 18 - New Years Creek WMA Fall Meeting

New Years Creek WMA Fall Meeting and Election of 2007 Officers will be held on Saturday, November 18, 7 – 9 PM at the Blinn College Student Center, Conference Room (NW corner of building). There will be an election for Co-op Vice-Director. Nominations are open for that position if you would like to run for the office. Ms. Flo Hannah, Houston Audubon Society, will address native grass identification and the importance of these grasses to birds. Guests and non-members are welcome. There will not be a meal. Light refreshments will be provided.