

## Wildlife Habitat Improvement

In seeking to attract wildlife to your land, it is helpful to keep in mind the necessary requirements for each animal. All wildlife need the following:

- Food - Sources of food may include waste grain from crop fields, or acorns from a stand of oaks
- Water - Water may be provided by a nearby stream or by a pond
- Cover, which is also known as habitat - this is a term for where a wildlife species likes to spend most of the day. By providing areas for wildlife to feed, raise their young and seek shelter, you'll increase the likelihood of these species using your land on a consistent basis.

This fact sheet provides a few notes on the preferred habitats and food items of several popular Ohio wildlife species that are attractive to landowners. These include ring-necked pheasant, ruffed grouse, wild turkey, and white-tailed deer. The size of their home range, preferred foods, and preferred habitat types are given for each of these species. Listed below are several key terms that will be referred to frequently when discussing animal's food items.

**Hard mast** – a term for the nuts and acorns produced by a variety of mature hardwood trees such as oaks and hickories. Hard mast often makes up a majority of the food eaten by both wild turkeys and deer.



**Soft mast** – a term for the berries, fruits, and buds produced by smaller shrubs and deciduous plants such as berry bushes, dogwoods, blackhaw, hawthorn, wild grape, or sumac.

**Cool-season grass/legume mix** – these include red/white clover, timothy, orchard grass, perennial rye grass, birds-foot trefoil, or alfalfa. These varieties grow well during the spring and fall but not during the summer. Cool-season grasses are most often used by wildlife as nesting habitat.

**Warm-season grasses** – these include varieties such as indiangrass, switchgrass, and Big and Little Bluestem. These grasses are more difficult to establish, but grow well during extended summer warm/dry conditions when cool season grasses are not productive. Warm-season grasses offer wildlife excellent escape cover and winter habitat.



## **Ring-necked Pheasant**

Although pheasants are not native to the U.S., they quickly became a popular game bird after they were introduced early this century. Ohio's ring-necked pheasant population peaked in the late 1930's and early 1940's at nearly 5 million birds. However, their populations declined to all-time lows in the mid 1980's. Some positive gains have been made from the USDA's Conservation Reserve Program or CRP, which was created by the 1985 Farm Bill. Although a few pheasants may have been seen in wooded habitats, they are generally concentrated in the level terrain and fertile soils in the glaciated portions of the state. In many central Ohio counties the percentage of acres enrolled in CRP corresponds to the density of pheasants in the county. There are currently nearly 7,000 acres enrolled in CRP in Fairfield County. Ring-necked pheasants are most common in the largely agricultural northern half of the county. Pheasants have a home range of about one-half mile. They can be found in pairs or small groups during most of the year. During the winter months, pheasants are usually found in small groups divided by sex.

Typical foods include waste grains from crop fields and seeds of foxtail, smartweed, ragweed, wild grape, sumac and poison ivy. They also consume buds and fruits from dogwood, wild plum, raspberry and blackberry. Young pheasants feed almost exclusively on insects for their first few weeks of life. Availability of food is not a limiting factor for Ohio pheasants.

Lack of safe nesting cover has been identified as the primary reason for the decline in Ohio's pheasant populations. Nesting cover can include brushy fencerows or undisturbed grassland in blocks of 5 to 20 acres or more. These cover types will be most successful if they are within one-half mile or so of winter cover. For this reason it is important to minimize disturbance to nesting cover (such as hay fields) from May through early July. If mowing must be done before these dates, mow from the center out, allowing escape routes to adjacent areas.

Warm-season grasses are excellent nesting and winter cover sources. These taller grasses seldom lodge in high winds and require little maintenance after the first two years. These grasses are planted on many of the Wildlife Production Areas (WPA's) managed by the Division of Wildlife for upland game. Several of these areas can be found near the Deer Creek Wildlife Area in Pickaway County.



## Ruffed Grouse

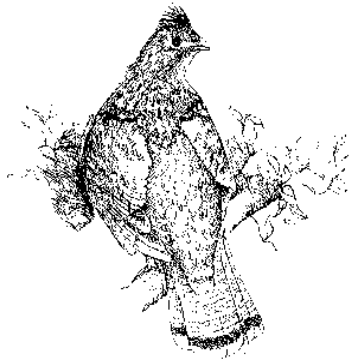
Ruffed grouse are a woodland bird species that are native to Ohio. Grouse thrive in a mixture of brushy cover and immature woodlots. These habitats occur most frequently in Fairfield County in Rush Creek and Berne Townships. Grouse populations in the Midwest are often subject to widely fluctuating cycles of abundance. Their abundance in Ohio has generally been declining since the early 1970's due to aging woodland habitat. Good grouse habitat can be grouped into three general types:

- Mixed species stands of hardwood, shrubs, saplings, and brush-vine tangles
- Moist areas with dense clumps of shrubs
- Young forest stands of mixed hardwoods

Ruffed grouse have a home range of 20-40 acres in size. However, they will forage on a larger area if necessary. Grouse do well in harsh winter conditions, often roosting under the snow. In this way they differ from both pheasants and quail, both of which are heavily impacted by severe winters. Grouse are also more solitary birds and are seldom found in groups.

Adult grouse are omnivores, feeding on insects and a variety of forbs, grasses and soft mast. Soft mast preferred by grouse generally includes greenbrier, wild grape, dogwood, sumac, poison ivy, cherry, hawthorn, and bittersweet. Grouse also feed frequently on the buds of young hardwood trees. Food types such as these are often found in open areas that have recently been timbered or cleared. Like pheasants, young grouse rely heavily on insects.

Wherever feasible, small clear cuts of 1/2 to 3/4 of an acre encourage growth of vegetation used by grouse as food, such as greenbrier. Grouse also rely on the cover types that grow up in these areas as nesting cover. Leaving a 12-14 inch diameter log in cleared areas as a "drumming log" for males to use during spring courtship activities is also beneficial. Male grouse like to hop up a log of this size where they puff out their breast feathers and rapidly beat or drum their wings. This noise is used to attract females that may be in the area.



## **Wild Turkey**

The wild turkey is Ohio's largest forest game bird, attaining weights up to 24 pounds. Although the wild turkey once inhabited every county in Ohio, they were nearly gone from the state by 1904 due to unregulated hunting and the loss of forest habitats. From 1956 through 1963 turkeys were reestablished in Ohio by releasing birds trapped in surrounding states. Wild turkeys are now found in 80 of Ohio's 88 counties. They are most common in the wooded forest tracts in the southern and western areas of Fairfield County.

The home range of an adult wild turkey is about 2 square miles, or from 400 to 1,000 acres daily. Spring densities for wild turkeys during the breeding season average about 2 birds per square mile. Turkeys are often the most visible during this period as toms seek out hens with their familiar gobble call. This mating activity often brings them to the edges of woodlots and pastures where their brown and black plumage and red heads make them visible from a distance.

The primary food of wild turkeys is acorns, which make up half to two-thirds of the turkey's diet. Other foods include beechnuts, and the fruits/buds from dogwood, black gum, wild grape, and greenbrier. Grasses and open clearings often provide a good source of insects that are important for the survival of young chicks.

When seeking to attract wild turkeys, keep in mind that they are dependent on mature forests. Having some open areas will encourage growth of shrubs and grasses. Good turkey habitat should have a clearing of 1 or 2 acres in every 100 acres of wooded land. Water sources are also important; these may be springs, ponds, or creeks close to the food sources mentioned above.

## **White-tailed Deer**

The white-tailed deer is Ohio's largest forest mammal. After nearly disappearing from the state by 1900, deer have returned through careful management. The current herd size is estimated between 400 to 500 thousand deer. White-tailed deer can be found in every county in Ohio; however, their numbers are greatest in unglaciated, hilly eastern Ohio. Fairfield County lies at the extreme western edge of this high-density deer area, with numbers in the range of 5 to 15 deer per square mile. The normal home range for deer is ½ to 2 square miles. However, the range during the breeding season (or rut) in early November is greater as bucks search for receptive does. This high-movement period also coincides with the greatest number of deer-vehicle accidents in many Ohio counties.



Deer are strictly herbivores, consuming leaves, stems, fruits, and buds from a variety of soft and hard mast producing trees and shrubs. When available, acorns make up a majority of their diet. Soybeans and corn are also readily consumed. Deer also seek out dogwood, black gum, cherry and persimmon trees. This variety of food items and accessible cropland enable Ohio deer to reach a larger average size than they can attain in several neighboring states. Within Ohio, average deer weights recorded from hunter check stations are nearly 20 pounds greater for farmland (western, glaciated Ohio counties) than for hill country (unglaciated, eastern Ohio counties). White-tailed deer are less particular about habitat requirements than many of the other wildlife species. Deer rely on openings in forest cover for many of their daily needs. These openings may be in the form of crop fields, meadows, or areas that have been timbered or clear-cut. As with wild turkeys, a nearby water source is also important.

Deer do best in habitats with a diversity of food and cover types, including some immature and mature forests. Deer are probably more numerous now in Ohio's mixed forests and farmlands than they were in Ohio's presettlement virgin forests.

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