

WORKING WITH NEIGHBORS



To meet the needs of wildlife species it may be necessary for neighbors to work together to improve habitat on adjoining properties. Although Michigan has more public land than any state east of the Mississippi River, millions of acres also belong to thousands of private landowners. If wildlife populations survive in Michigan, it will be largely due to habitat management on private lands. Especially in southern Michigan where more than 95 percent of Michigan's land is privately owned.

Many of these private properties include small parcels of one to 20 acres each, and many more are backyards less than an acre in size. As more and more land is converted to houses, highways, and shopping centers, wildlife habitats become fragmented and isolated. This fragmentation makes it difficult for wildlife to find the right combination of habitat components necessary for their survival. Even in northern Michigan, where large blocks of public forest occur,

fragmentation and human development of land continues to increase.

Landowners can make a difference for wildlife, and lessen the impact of this fragmentation, by creating habitat on their land. However, landowners working together can make an even bigger difference by providing larger tracts of land for wildlife. No matter what size your lot is, you can still improve your plan by working with your neighbors. This chapter explains how to work with your neighbors to develop a better habitat management plan.

Begin a Dialogue with Your Neighbors

The habitat, animal, and plant inventories you made on your land (described in the chapter on **Evaluating the Land** in this section) have helped you to understand the habitats that wildlife use, and to identify what habitats you have and do not have to offer them. Animals do not understand human boundaries such as fences, roads, drainage ditches, and rights of way (although they may be attracted to them if key components of habitat are provided). They readily respond to natural habitat--wetlands, woodlands, and grasslands. Unless you own a large amount of land that is diverse in habitat types, you may not be able to manage for some species. Hummingbirds, for example, won't be attracted to your sugar-water feeder unless there is a wooded area nearby where they can nest and

find shelter. Deer might be attracted to the clover in your lawn but only if there is brushland shelter nearby in which to escape and raise their young. In addition, some species require larger blocks of one type of habitat, such as some grassland and woodland birds.

Opening a dialogue with property owners near you is an important part of your overall management plan. Your neighbors' goals may be the same as yours or altogether different. Either way, it is good policy to find out as soon as possible. Working with your neighbors can make your goals more attainable. Your neighbors may have one or more important components of habitat that you do not have. If you plan together, you may be able to provide all of the necessary components needed to obtain your goal.

It is always best to make your contacts long before your decisions have the potential to impact property that is not your own. If you think that your plan will directly affect someone else's property, seek their approval before you take any action. Your plan to restore a wetland, for example, may alter hydrology on adjacent lands. The water you impound



may spread to another's property and create a problem. Your neighbors may take any mishaps that might occur a lot better if they were involved in, and agreed to, your plans.

Your goals could also threaten a neighbor's plan for their land. If your neighbor earns income from farming, the deer population you have attracted to your property may eat the crops the farmer has planted. If you had taken the farm into consideration when planning, you could have planted preferred foods on your land to reduce your neighbor's crop damage. Other decisions you make could alter property values, make access difficult, or be in direct conflict with your neighbors' goals. The gains you make could cancel out your neighbors' improvements and vice versa.

Sharing Ideas and Combining Efforts

Sitting down with your neighbors to discuss short-term and long-term goals is the best way to avoid these problems. As you share plans, you may learn how much you have in common. The woodlands or wetlands you own may be connected to the woodlands or wetlands owned by your neighbor. Perhaps together you can manage shared habitats for the common good. You may discover that the idled farm field you own and the cattail marsh your neighbor

owns can be managed as a single unit. The grassland can provide nesting and brood-rearing cover, and the wetland can provide secure protection from storms and predators for mallards, pheasants, red-winged blackbirds, and bluebirds.

There are many advantages to communicating your ideas and goals with neighbors. One or more local property owners may be able to furnish valuable information about your land and its history. What grew there, how the property was used, what birds and mammals lived there at one time, when the timber was last harvested, and what farming practices were carried out are examples of useful information that will help you to set goals and objectives that could be mutually beneficial. Cropping patterns, pesticide and herbicide use, tiling and drainage programs, and fertilizing and grazing are all important things to know as you write your overall Management Plan.

Sharing your plans with your neighbors and asking for their ideas in return opens the door for good relations and may lead to complementary agreements. Although there is no guarantee that subsequent owners will share your mutual interests, it is the best assurance you can expect for long-term management goals. The reality is that if either of you sells your land, there is no way to know if future owners will be wildlife friendly. What happens when the goals are contradictory? The answer lies in negotiating to find some common ground.

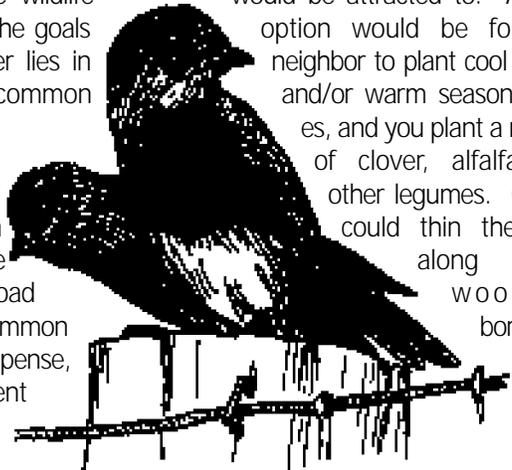
Creating, enhancing, and maintaining wildlife habitat can be hard work that costs time and money. Sharing the workload with neighbors who have common interests can save time and expense, and add to the overall enjoyment that comes from making a dif-

ference for wildlife. Two people can create a brushpile for rabbits in half the time it takes one person to do the job. The work of cutting trees for firewood while thinning a woodlot is not so difficult if you have a partner to help. Also, sharing tools and specialty equipment like chain saws, mowing machines, tractors, and farming implements is a good way to save money.

You might even find ways to cost-share certain projects such as creating food plots, windbreaks, wetland or prairie restorations, pruning wild-apple trees, planting fruit-bearing shrubs, timber cutting for commercial sale, building nesting platforms for ducks, and houses for birds and bats. Perhaps you will manage the sharp edge between grass and tall trees by each person planting a row or two of fruiting shrubs like elderberry or highbush cranberry. Besides benefiting wildlife that live in the diverse habitats you and your neighbor are managing, the shared plantings reduced costs.

Boundary lines offer a great opportunity to work together for wildlife. Fencerows, for example, can be widened through the joint planting of trees, shrubs, and grasses. If each of you planted one row of evergreens and one row of fruit-producing shrubs, you would create a living fencerow that many species of birds and mammals would be attracted to. Another

option would be for your neighbor to plant cool season and/or warm season grasses, and you plant a mixture of clover, alfalfa, and other legumes. Or, you could thin the trees along your woodland border to



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provide more sun for your neighbor's wildflowers.

If you do not know who your neighbors are, you can find out by consulting a county plat book, available through your local library, county courthouse, township government office, or Michigan State University Extension office. Sometimes landowners may have little or no interest in wildlife. Yet other neighbors may be public land managers who are keenly interested in helping you develop plans that support their interests. If your property borders a township park, state wildlife or recreation area, or state or federal forest, a management plan for

wildlife may exist. In that event, you might be able to tailor your goals to complement a plan already in effect.

In summary, few landowners are able to improve wildlife habitat without in some way affecting nearby property owners. Sharing information and ideas may be mutually rewarding and create partnerships that can last a lifetime. Whenever you combine efforts with neighbors, you increase the benefits to wildlife.



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**FOR ADDITIONAL
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Private Land Partnerships: This partnership was formed between both private and public organizations in order to address private lands wildlife issues. Individuals share resources, information, and expertise. This landowner's guide has been a combined effort between these groups working towards one goal: Natural Resources Education. We hope this manual provides you with the knowledge and the motivation to make positive changes for our environment.

FOR ADDITIONAL ASSISTANCE: *CONTACT YOUR LOCAL CONSERVATION DISTRICT*