



# The Habitat Corner

Growing up on a farm in Haywood County, Lois Morrison learned the value of hard work and what it takes to turn a dream into reality. When Lois decided she wanted to begin phasing out of active farming, her 312-acre farm



was primarily geared towards row crop production. Now it is her wildlife dream that also compensates her with a steady income from much of the retired cropland.

Through the USDA's Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), Lois first converted the fields directly behind her house to a mixture of native grasses and broadleaf plants (forbs) in 1996. Pleased with positive results but wanting to see more songbirds and wetland wildlife, Lois most recently enlisted TWRA biologist Chris Hunter and Haywood County soil conservationist Leslie McCool to complete her long range plan. Following Chris' detailed plan, a zone of trees and shrubs were planted on the field edges along a tributary of Sugar Creek to protect the stream banks and provide wildlife travel corridors. A 10-acre shallow water area was created to attract wetland wildlife. Still other fields were planted to native grasses and forbs, and management practices such as strip disking and herbicide application have been utilized to maintain the stands. Native shrub thickets and hedgerows were strategically placed to improve protective and escape cover.

The CRP's Native Grasses, Riparian Forest Buffer, and Shallow Water Area practices not only reimbursed Lois for most of the cover establishment costs, they also compensate her with an annual rental payment on the former cropland acres. TWRA's Farm Wildlife Habitat Program was used to "fill in the program gaps" and cost-shared additional shrubs in open areas and create a small opening within the woodland.

Prior to beginning this process the property held some deer and a few turkeys, but since the programs have been implemented quail, turkey, waterfowl, and non-game animals such as frogs and toads have increased dramatically. In fact, Chris Hunter has been monitoring the wetland area for frogs and toads over the last two years. During the first year before the wetland was restored, no frogs or toads were heard on the site. After implementation, up to 5 species have been heard at one time. This success story materialized by combining a landowner with a zeal for wildlife with the technical advice, cost-share and payments available through the CRP, and other programs assistance to make it happen.

## HABITAT TIPS

When planting native grasses specifically for wildlife, use a high diversity mixture with several species of native grasses, forbs and legumes. Do not overplant your mixture, as dense stands are not better habitat since quail and other small animals need some bare ground to move about and feed. Other than some minimal lanes for walking or hunting, **do not mow your stand**. Weeds will be present but certain weeds such as goldenrod and ragweed provide seed and additional cover for wildlife. Lastly, stay on top of the management of your habitat. See details on managing native grass stands at [http://www.utextension.utk.edu/publications/pbfiles/PB1752\\_C6.pdf](http://www.utextension.utk.edu/publications/pbfiles/PB1752_C6.pdf).

## HABITAT PROGRAM OPPORTUNITIES

There are many programs available through USDA to properly manage your farm for a variety of species. While not all land qualifies, CRP practices such as CP9 Shallow Water Areas, CP22 Riparian Forest Buffers, and CP29 Marginal Pastureland Wildlife Habitat Buffers are offered on a continuous enrollment basis. Programs such as the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program take applications continually.

## ASK THE BIOLOGIST

- Q: I am interested in managing my farm for wetland wildlife. Should I protect, enhance or create a wetland?
- A: Wetlands should be preserved whenever possible. Natural wetlands are hard to duplicate because of the complex nature and should be protected whenever possible. Enhancement efforts can be done to improve wetland functions with practices such as removing invasive plants and adding nesting habitat. Creating wetlands can also help wildlife in areas where wetlands do not exist. A host of information is available on TWRA's and other web sites, and a site visit and management plan provided by a TWRA or NRCS wildlife biologist can help you identify realistic expectations for the wildlife you can expect to manage on your property, and can offer strategies to save time and money in your plan implementation.

## *"Helping Landowners and Wildlife Through Habitat Enhancement"*

The Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency has Private Lands Biologists that will assist you in developing a management plan for your property and a strategy to implement it. See [www.TWRPrivatelands.org](http://www.TWRPrivatelands.org) for who to contact for technical assistance and other useful information on habitat management and programs.