

Creating Year-Round Micro Environments for Wildlife Success

By: Jared Parks



Maryland isn't known for its winter weather. Generally, if people associate any weather with the area, it would probably be the 3-H's: hazy, hot, and humid. In actuality, the mid-Atlantic states are the most balanced weather-wise of any in the eastern part of the country. We can expect 4 distinct seasons with the severity of each varying greatly from year to year, and though we may be most familiar with summer days in the mid to upper 90's, we are no strangers to cold snaps and large coastal snowstorms.

Habitat restoration is a land conservation tool used to protect and support breeding habitat for birds and other wildlife. Once you have a population it is worth considering how to manage for its survival throughout the year.

This isn't an altogether simple situation as the complexity of any ecosystem (biodiversity) depends on a broad mosaic of macro and micro habitats.

You can think of it by way of an analogy to the human environment. Human macro-environments can be separated

into different types: industrial, commercial, residential, agricultural, leisure, etc. To be functional, each one must be comprised of the micro-environments (rooms and utilities) that we find necessary to accomplish the goals of that place. A suitable residence has features such as shelter, food, sanitation, entertainment, electricity, and water. Similarly, retail stores have showrooms, stockrooms, breakrooms, bathrooms, etc. A functional habitat is no different.

A mown lawn, a plantation forest, and an agricultural field are all habitats that lack the diversity of micro-habitats (rooms) necessary for a complete ecosystem.

Each may provide one or more of the attributes needed by wildlife, but they all lack the full array of attributes necessary for year-round survival. How, then, do we manage landscapes to provide a full range of 'rooms' for the critters who could call it home?

There is no question that the structure created by leaving at least a portion of the meadow untouched until early spring is necessary for wildlife habitat. Structure along the edges is equally important. The accompanying pictures of our small meadow ($\frac{1}{2}$ acre) and its surrounding edges clearly show how the standing structure in winter provides necessary habitat and available food for wildlife.



Though snow is not the only reason to leave meadows at least partially un-mowed in the winter, it is the most important. Without the structure from the old, standing vegetation, birds would have nowhere to go and nothing to eat. This photo shows an uncut meadow with about 10 inches of snow.



This photo shows the clear difference between the structure of a traditional lawn or mowed meadow (left) and a meadow unmowed through winter (right).



Without the structure created by the standing vegetation, the snow would cover the area like a lawn with no access to the ground. After the recent large snow, I flushed scores of birds from these hollows all around the meadow.



Brush piles provide great structure along the edges of meadows. Like the standing old vegetation in the meadow, brush piles have cavities (right) where wildlife can go to get under the snow and away from predators.



Meadows don't grow uniformly. In areas with plants like old field aster (left), the woody-like stems create so much structure that birds and other creatures can access the ground through the cavities.



Fallen timber creates some of the most productive habitat and sources of food in the forest.