

Waterfowl Habitat Tip: Fall Mowing and Disking

By Houston Havens

Have you ever had good intentions that just never seemed to be put into action? Or, worse yet, have you ever put a “good” plan into action and ended up with little or no results? This is too often the case in waterfowl habitat management. Other activities usually take up much of our time during the spring and summer seasons, and the best intentions of planning ahead for duck season can be easily forgotten. If you find yourself in any of these situations this fall, I have good news! It’s not too late to do some effective management that can benefit your waterfowl habitat, both during duck season and next spring and summer. Fall mowing and disking are easy ways to get your habitat management back on track, and they may help you harvest a few more ducks this year.

One of the most common problems with a “duck hole” that has been neglected during the summer growing season is the dense stand of undesirable vegetation that can result. Undesirable broad-leaved plants (i.e., cocklebur, coffee weed, perennial smartweed, etc.) may take over a wetland, making it inaccessible to waterfowl. To combat this problem, we recommend mowing areas of dense vegetation during the fall. “Spot mow” dense areas, especially where broad-leaved plants are dominant. Leave grassy areas standing, as these grasses (i.e., wild millet, sprangletop, panic grasses) will provide excellent natural food for waterfowl when flooded. A good rule of thumb for identifying beneficial waterfowl food sources in the fall is to look for areas of grassy vegetation that are golden-brown in color. Mowed areas will provide openings for waterfowl to land, allowing them to filter into the rest of the wetland. However, remember that it’s best **not** to mow the entire impoundment. We recommend mowing approximately 30-50% of the area that will be flooded. Remember that the intent of spot mowing is to provide access for waterfowl to other areas of the impoundment where there may be abundant natural waterfowl foods. Another important benefit of fall mowing is the accumulation of a litter layer (i.e., dead leaves, stalks, etc.) that, when flooded, will attract a host of aquatic invertebrates. These invertebrates are an important food source for ducks late in the winter when birds are preparing for spring migration.

Fall disking may also be used to promote natural grasses by clearing areas of dense vegetation and setting back plant succession. As with spot mowing, it is best **not** to disk the entire unit. We recommend disking approximately 30% of the area undisked, thus leaving some natural food and cover for waterfowl to utilize. The main purpose of disking in the fall and flooding is to set up the impoundment for the following spring and summer growing season. Where possible, maintaining water levels on a disked impoundment throughout the winter and into the spring will also help control unwanted plants. Then, when water is slowly drained during the spring and summer, natural “moist-soil” plants should begin to germinate on the existing mud flats. These natural plants (grasses, sedges, etc.) are an excellent waterfowl food source, and the best thing about them is they are free and very attractive to ducks! It is important

to note that **natural** vegetation (i.e., wild millet, smartweed, sedges, sprangletop) may be legally manipulated for waterfowl hunting, while manipulating unharvested **planted** vegetation (i.e. corn, milo, Japanese millet, browntop millet) and subsequently hunting over these crops is illegal.

Fall mowing and fall disking can be used separately or together to better manage your waterfowl habitat complex and provide a diversity of habitat types for waterfowl. Remember that the key to waterfowl habitat management is to try different strategies and take good notes to determine what works best for you. For more information on waterfowl habitat management, contact the MDWFP at 601-432-2199. We offer free technical guidance to landowners statewide who are interested in improving or developing waterfowl habitat.

Photo: Fall disking in a moist-soil impoundment. Photo by Heath Hagy.

