

Wildlife Issues



Native Warm-Season Grasses: The Cover You've Been Missing?

By John Gruchy and Rick Hamrick

WILDLIFE DO NOT EAT the leaves, and seeds have the nutritional value of sawdust; so why would anybody want to establish native warm-season grasses for wildlife? The answer is simple...cover. Indeed, native warm-season grasses (NWSG) are commonly recommended to improve habitat for many species of upland wildlife because they provide excellent nesting, brood-rearing, and winter cover.

NWSG, such as big and little bluestem, indiangrass, switchgrass, sideoats grama, eastern gamagrass, and broomsedge, were once common in the prairies and upland forests of Mississippi. Over time, native grasslands have been reduced by changes in land use. Though rare, remnant prairies containing NWSG and forbs (broadleaf herbaceous plants) still occur in parts of the state, and NWSG and forbs often emerge from the seedbank following habitat manipulations in upland forests. Of course, broomsedge is quite common throughout most of the Magnolia State.

Often referred to as bunchgrasses, NWSG tend to grow in clumps with bare ground between each plant. The resulting plant

community is open at ground level, with a canopy of vegetation at about waist level, allowing small wildlife to move about easily. Many non-native grasses, such as tall fescue, bermudagrass, and bahiagrass, form a dense thatch at ground level – a quail chick or a young rabbit trying to cross a ber-

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mudagrass field would be like a person trying to walk through a dense cut-over.

During summer, NWSG fields provide excellent nesting and brood-rearing habitat for bobwhites, rabbits, and songbirds, as well as good fawning cover for deer. These fields hold abundant insects, the primary food item of young quail. Chicks can forage easily under the grass canopy, well hidden from predators and the hot summer sun. During winter, unmowed NWSG fields with adequate brushy cover

help bobwhites avoid predation by migratory hawks. Additionally, deer often bed in the safety of tall grasses and bask in the mid-day sun on cold winter days.

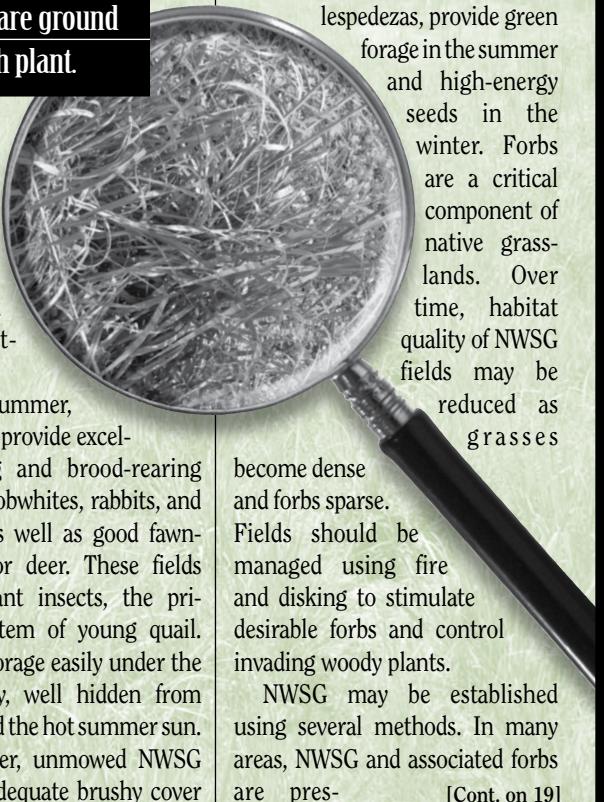
NWSG themselves do not provide a good food resource for wildlife, though several species may provide excellent livestock forage. Thus the importance of forbs! Desirable forbs, such as ragweed, partridge pea, pokeberry, stick-tights, beggar's-ticks, and native

lespedezas, provide green forage in the summer and high-energy seeds in the winter. Forbs are a critical component of native grasslands. Over time, habitat quality of NWSG fields may be reduced as grasses

become dense and forbs sparse. Fields should be managed using fire and disking to stimulate desirable forbs and control invading woody plants.

NWSG may be established using several methods. In many areas, NWSG and associated forbs are pres-

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NATIVE WARM-SEASON GRASSES

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This may be accomplished by thinning and burning in upland forests, allowing agricultural fields to fallow, or by using herbicides to kill non-native grasses. Results may vary depending on local seedbanks. NWSG may also be planted from seed. Native grass seed is very fluffy and may be broadcast into a properly prepared seedbed using a carrier (such as fertilizer that does not contain nitrogen) or drilled using no-till planting equipment specifically designed

for NWSG. When selecting a NWSG mixture for planting, be sure to consider your objectives. If your objective is quail or rabbits, keep the seeding rate low (2-4 lbs/acre), and be sure to add some forbs to the mix. A guide to establishing and managing NWSG for wildlife entitled "Native Warm-Season Grass Restoration in Mississippi" (Publication 2435) is available on the Mississippi State University Extension Service Website at www.msucares.com/pubs/index.html. For more information about establishing NWSG on your property contact John Gruchy at 662-274-1050 or Rick Hamrick at 662-320-9375. **WI**