



MANAGING OLD-FIELD HABITATS FOR WILDLIFE



Figure 1. Tall fescue was removed from this field using 12 oz/ac of Plateau herbicide in November. Broomsedge and other desirable plants were released from the seedbank.



Figure 2. This field was successfully planted with 3.5 lbs/ac of NWSG and forbs. Low seeding rates help maintain adequate bare ground for bobwhite broods.

Old-Field Habitat Management

Plant communities often found in fallow fields and forest openings are commonly referred to as old-field or early successional habitat. Quality early successional plant communities, made up of native warm-season grasses (NWSG), desirable forbs, or broad-leafed herbaceous plants and shrubs, have a vegetation structure that is open at ground level allowing small wildlife to move about easily. Maintaining a desirable balance of grasses, forbs, and shrubs in old-field habitats can only be accomplished through active habitat management.

Management Practices

Prescribed burning and disking are the most commonly recommended management practices for improving old-field habitats for wildlife. Prescribed burning enhances ground level vegetation structure, improves native browse, and stimulates desirable plants. Disking incorporates thatch, reduces ground level vegetation density, and stimulates desirable forbs. The effects of disking and burning vary greatly based on the timing and frequency of disturbance. Mowing (or bushhogging) is the least desirable practice for managing old-field habitats because it creates dense thatch at the ground level, reduces cover, and is not effective in controlling tree saplings. Selective herbicides may be particularly useful for controlling undesirable plants in early successional habitats.

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Figure 3. Dormant season prescribed burning helps rejuvenate old-fields and improves habitat for many species of wildlife.



Figure 4. Native plum thickets provide valuable cover for small game and should be protected from burning. Disked fire brakes provide excellent brood-rearing habitat during the next growing season.



Figure 5. Burning in September is an effective technique for killing woody saplings and stimulating desirable legumes in the seedbank.

Management Recommendations

Burning during the spring (March) on a 2 – 3 year rotation will increase the density of native warm-season grasses where they are sparse. Burning during the growing season (September) or spraying selective herbicides may be necessary in some years to control woody saplings. Disking areas during the fall/winter (October – February) on a 3-year rotation will improve brood-rearing and feeding cover for upland gamebirds. Desirable shrubs, such as plums and blackberry briars, provide important cover and should be protected. Breaking fields into smaller management units will create a diverse array of cover types for a variety of wildlife.



Figure 6. Prescribed fire, strip disking, and selective herbicides have been used to maintain a desirable balance of NWSG, forbs, and shrubs in this field.