

MICHIGAN WILDLIFE COOPERATIVES

Program Report



*A collaborative
effort bringing
neighbors
together to
manage
the habitat
and wildlife
they revere*

2015-2020

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Letter from Coordinators Morgan Jennings

For the past six years, the Michigan Wildlife Cooperatives (MWC) program has been working alongside partners in wildlife conservation to create, expand and maintain cooperatives on private land throughout the entire state of Michigan – a state that is 72% privately owned. No region of the state was left untouched. From the southernmost border to the Upper Peninsula, Michigan proved to be a catalyst in the national cooperative management effort.

My experience with cooperatives began as a student intern with QDMA. Shadowing Anna Mitterling, the first MWC coordinator, I attended my first meeting where I met cooperative leaders and members, listened to their stories and absorbed the reasoning of their annual goals. I will carry that memory with me forever. It was the day I learned that wildlife management was science paired with people and people paired with the landscape.

It has been an honor to coordinate the program from 2018 until 2020. In my time here, I have met some of the state's most dedicated conservationists that range from upland bird hunters to the deep-woods whitetail pursuers. Each may seek a reward in harvest, but their joy comes in the form of community, friendship and boots-on-the-ground management.

My sincerest thank you goes to Michigan United Conservation Clubs, Michigan Department of Natural Resources, Quality Deer Management Association and Pheasants Forever for their partnership for the duration of the program. I have appreciated your support and you sharing your expertise with our many cooperatives.

My biggest thank you goes to the countless cooperative leaders and members. I want all of you to know that you made this my "dream job." For two years, I was able to work among friends to improve private land management across the entire state of Michigan.

If I leave you with anything, please know that the work you do is recognized. You are among Michigan's most valued conservationists. We see you and feel your passion for wildlife, habitat and hunting. I am confident that you will all continue to share your knowledge, work hard and improve the landscape for wildlife and people alike.

This report is for you. I hope it represents your accomplishments and serves as a reminder to anyone interested in wildlife cooperatives of what is possible when you take action with knowledge and other like-minded people. As leaders and members, you should take pride in the collective accomplishments.

Yours in Conservation,

Morgan Jennings





Letter from Coordinators Anna Mitterling

Cooperatives are how I was introduced to hunting. The first time I shot a gun, the first deer blind I sat in and the first deer I harvested, all took place on cooperative acreage. The members of cooperatives welcomed me into the hunting family. When I started working with deer cooperatives in graduate school, I was a sociologist looking to understand interactions among people.

What I learned was the people I was observing were incredibly passionate about managing deer. They worked hard: they invested significant time and money into habitat work, cooperative meetings, local QDMA branches and much more. I graduated, not just a sociologist, but a hunter, biologist, visionary and someone filled with a passion to support and equip the development and enhancement of more cooperatives because I believed they could change the way we manage wildlife.

When I started developing the Michigan Wildlife Cooperatives program, I was living the dream. I was able to get up each day working alongside people filled with passion doing what I could to help them succeed – to support and cheer on a group of people who inspired me with their drive. I met PF members around the state who were full of equal passion to once again pursue pheasants. They worked tirelessly to accomplish a seemingly-impossible task. I learned of the great value and beauty stands of native grasses behold. Along with this growth of knowledge, my friendships grew as well.

I have watched these friends work hard through great highs and deep lows – in their personal lives as well as collectively in challenges around increasing the quality and abundance of our pursuits. This work of managing natural resources, I have learned, has less to do with the resources themselves and more to do with us. We found common ground and became united where we agreed. Joined together, we can fight the good fight and leave a legacy for generations to see.

Yours in Conservation,

Anna Mitterling



What Is a Wildlife Cooperative?

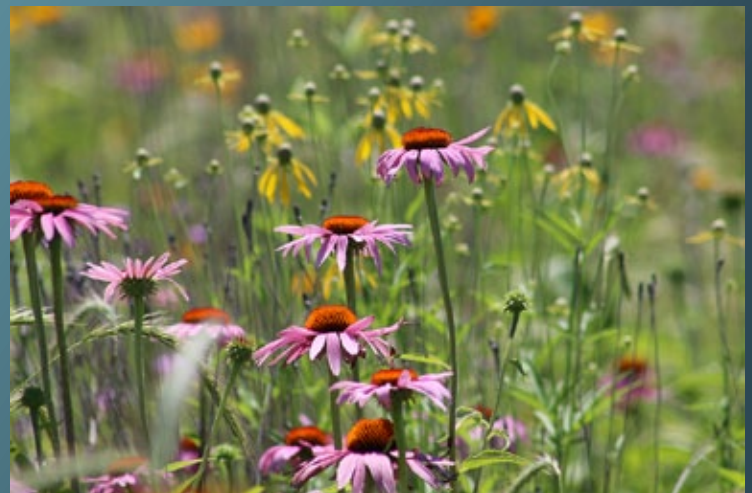
A wildlife cooperative is a group of landowners and/or hunters that work collaboratively to manage a species and its habitat. While cooperatives can take many forms, the core principle of working with like-minded individuals to accomplish wildlife habitat improvement and hunting goals remains the same.

The creation of cooperatives is not a new concept in Michigan. The oldest and longest-running cooperative known to the program is approximately 20 years old. These groups have no acreage or member requirement as long as they include two or more individuals to make it a truly collaborative effort.

Cooperatives function on landscape-level management instead of parcel management. Parcel management occurs when one landowner creates a plan for their individual property without considering what is in the surrounding area. This includes forests, water sources, grasslands, agricultural fields, food plots and other managed sites. By not considering the surrounding area, landowners are not maximizing the potential wildlife habitat benefit.

Landscape-level management takes a zoomed-out approach. This technique allows landowners to take inventory of their own property while also using what is known about neighboring land to help make management decisions. If those properties link through a cooperative, landowners and hunters do not have access to hunt other private lands, but they do have the ability to share information and essentially ground-truth those areas. This open conversation and sharing of information are some of the many benefits of being involved with a cooperative.

While most groups focused on either deer or pheasants, wildlife cooperatives belong to the members that set goals together. This means that they can be as specific or broad as people want them to be. One important cooperative note is that the groups should be fluid. Goals can change on an annual basis and should be re-evaluated when discussing accomplishments, challenges and ideas for the group. Trust among members is the glue that binds cooperatives together.



OUR HISTORY

Where did we start?



The first Deer Rendezvous, which became an annual event, was held. This event was held for cooperative members and QDMA branch leaders to discuss habitat management and hunting techniques, successes, challenges and goal-setting for the upcoming year.



The cooperatives program hosted the first Pheasant Rendezvous, which became an annual event, to unite grassland enthusiasts for a day of education and field tours with some of Michigan's leading biologists and organization leaders. This event was held for cooperative and Pheasants Forever members.

STORY

Where have we gone?



2017

The cooperatives program hosted a Joint Partner Habitat Day. This event was created to highlight the interconnectedness between conservation organizations and habitat management. Partners included Michigan United Conservation Clubs, Michigan DNR, QDMA, Pheasants Forever, US Fish & Wildlife Service, National Wild Turkey Federation and Farm Bill Biologists.

2018

The program reaches 283,000 acres

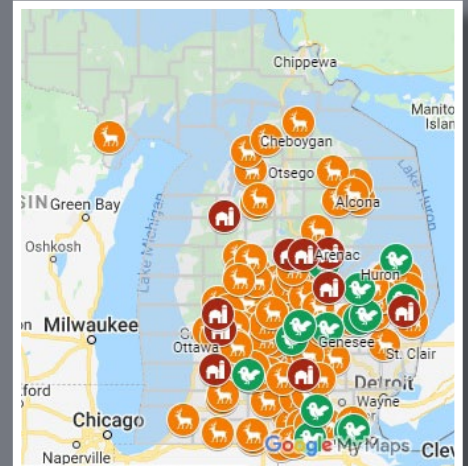
2019

The program reaches 318,000 acres

The program hosted the first training to equip various wildlife professionals with the tools to create and maintain wildlife cooperatives. Cooperatives work closely with biologists and other managers, which is why fostering this relationship plays a significant role in the success of a stewardship group.

2020

Program reaches 352,000 acres



The program concludes with more than 356,500 acres enrolled and 6,000 active participants



The first Habitat Series was hosted in collaboration with Pheasants Forever, Farm Bill Biologists, Michigan DNR and Conservation Districts. This series was designed to provide landowners with information about how to plant, manage and fund grassland habitats on private land.



Cooperative Accomplishments

CO-OPS HAVE MENTORED 499 YOUTH AND 516 NEW ADULT HUNTERS

How many acres have been directly impacted by habitat improvement projects since the start of the cooperative?

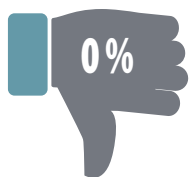
46,890 acres

Top 5 most significant impacts a co-op has had on your outdoor experience

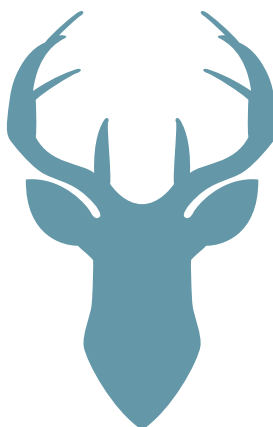
1. Getting to know your neighbors
2. Improved habitat
3. More fun
4. Overall wildlife benefit
5. More balanced deer herd



Are you more satisfied with your hunting/conservation experience because you are a co-op member?



~18,000lbs of Wild Game has been donated by Cooperatives



Habitat Projects

Food Plots 98.6%

TSI 85.5%

Edge Cover/Screens 58%

Grassland Restoration 56.5%

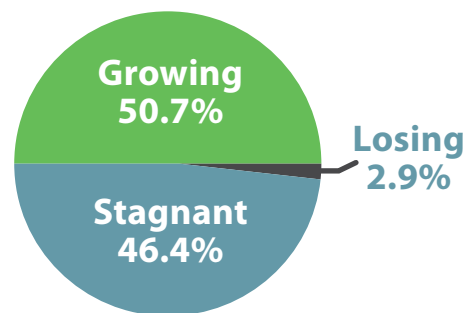
Cover Crops 50.7%


Early Successional 47.8%

Winter Cover 47.8%

Wetland Restoration 18.8%

Are cooperatives losing acres, growing or stagnant?



A close-up photograph of two monarch butterflies on a cluster of small purple flowers. The butterfly in the upper left is shown in profile, facing right, with its wings partially spread. The butterfly in the lower right is shown from a dorsal view, with its wings fully spread, displaying the characteristic orange and black pattern with white spots along the edges. The background is a soft, out-of-focus green.

“The co-op program has helped us improve our habitat: we share more information with neighbors, we have better ideas about herd management, set goals for our camps and the co-ops, and we have increased our time spent in the great outdoors with family and friends.”

-2020 survey respondent

QDMA

Josh Hillyard, *Regional Director*



The Quality Deer Management Association (QDMA) was a proud partner organization in the Michigan Wildlife Cooperative program. The program was extremely successful in beginning to transform the landscape of deer and wildlife management at the local level for groups of private landowners looking to make a difference in the health and quality of the wildlife in their area. QDMA's members, volunteers, branches and staff were and will continue to be strong proponents of the program and do what we can to ensure the success of these groups moving forward in some capacity. Michigan cooperatives and the total acreage enrolled in these programs make up a significant amount of formal deer cooperatives throughout the country and has played a vital role in helping QDMA reach their national goals in regards to cooperative programs.

QDMA Branches and the Michigan Wildlife Cooperatives program were able to work together to help have a greater impact on QDMA's mission and goals at a grassroots level. Through joint efforts on venison donation initiatives, mentored hunting programs, educational events like "Deer Rendezvous" and our "Joint Partner Habitat Day" and more, we have been able to have a tremendous impact on both hunters and wildlife. However, maybe the most important work we have partnered on has been helping the Michigan Department of Natural Resources educate hunters at a local level on diseases such as chronic wasting disease (CWD) and bovine tuberculosis (bTB) and meet specific disease testing goals. Branches and Co-Ops have worked together to educate hunters on the importance of getting their deer tested for CWD and bTB, working together with local wildlife biologists to meet antlerless harvest goals, providing quality habitat, collecting and dropping off samples for testing and much more. All partners should be extremely proud of what this program has been able to accomplish. We hope to be able to reinstate the Michigan Wildlife Cooperative coordinator position in the near future if funding becomes available for this vital program.

Michigan United Conservation Clubs

Amy Trotter, *Executive Director*



Since 2014, MUCC has been proud to host the Michigan Wildlife Cooperatives program — a unique private lands outreach program that focused on facilitating, creating and connecting neighbors to work together on behalf of wildlife. This program helps MUCC fulfill its mission: uniting citizens to conserve, protect and enhance Michigan's natural resources and our outdoor heritage.

This Wildlife Cooperative Program has created a stewardship link between people and the land, water and wildlife using a regional cooperative approach. Each year, the coordinator has worked to build a stewardship ethic and a sense of responsibility towards the resource through neighborhood, hands-on projects. Educational workshops hosted by MWC drive a sense of ownership in our natural resources and help community members, and communities as a whole, better respect the value of local natural resources. These landowners also learn to make informed decisions about wise, sustainable use of those resources.

The impact of this program has been significant. With more than 120 private landowner cooperatives throughout the state spanning more than 350,000 acres, the partners and MUCC have connected with an acreage the same size as the Michigan State Game Area system. Private land management, especially in Southern Michigan, is of critical importance to a diverse set of wildlife species and habitat types.

MUCC appreciates the significant financial support from our partners through the life of this program. We will continue to host resources online for private landowners and cooperatives, but the best way to remain connected is by joining MUCC!

Pheasants Forever

Bill Vander Zouwen, *Regional Representative*



A significant component of the Michigan Pheasant Restoration Initiative 10-year plan has been the idea of using Landowner Cooperatives to encourage landowner neighbors to work together to produce a landscape that has suitable habitat to sustain wild pheasant populations. This goal of creating landscapes that help wild pheasant populations flourish is also the primary goal of Pheasants Forever. As a partner and co-chair of the MPRI Steering Committee, Pheasants Forever contributed funds each year for 6 years toward a coordinator position to serve as a catalyst for initiating and sustaining Landowner Cooperatives.

We are thankful for the efforts of Coordinators Anna Mitterling and Morgan Jennings to get the word out on Cooperatives and work with partners and local farm bill biologists to connect interested landowners with incentive programs and professionals. We also appreciated the Coordinators participating in Pheasants Forever chapter meetings, regional meetings, and state conventions to explain the program and encourage new Cooperatives. Educational events including Pheasant Rendezvous, prescribed fire training and local meetings about state and federal habitat programs were valuable for landowners interested in establishing wildlife habitat. Anna and Morgan regularly contributed to planning efforts in the MPRI Steering Committee as well. Pheasants Forever staff and volunteers helped with many of these endeavors including meetings, landowner contacts, and pheasant surveys.

The keys to landowner cooperatives, whether part of an official program or not, appears to be landowner interest in seeing wildlife on their property, landowner interest in communicating with and assisting their neighbors, financial incentives to convert cropland into wildlife habitat, and professional staff to work closely with interested landowners. Pheasants Forever hopes that the examples of the last 10 years will inspire landowners to continue to provide habitat across landscapes for the benefit of wildlife and all of us who enjoy their presence. Thanks goes to MUCC, MDNR, QDMA and Conservation Districts for partnering with us in this program.

Michigan Department of Natural Resources



Mike Parker, *Wildlife Division Conservation Partners Program Specialist*

Aldo Leopold, often recognized as the father of modern wildlife management, noted in the 1930s that “the future of wildlife management in the United States rests with private landowners.” Leopold’s recognition holds true to this day in Michigan where the majority of our landscape resides in private land ownership. Given the large home ranges of many popular game species, including deer and pheasants, most landowners need to look beyond their own property boundaries when planning management activities. Because animals will move on and off individual properties, neighbors voluntarily working together to inventory the land and address habitat deficiencies with proper management techniques can make a big difference for healthy wildlife populations and the ensuing recreational opportunities.

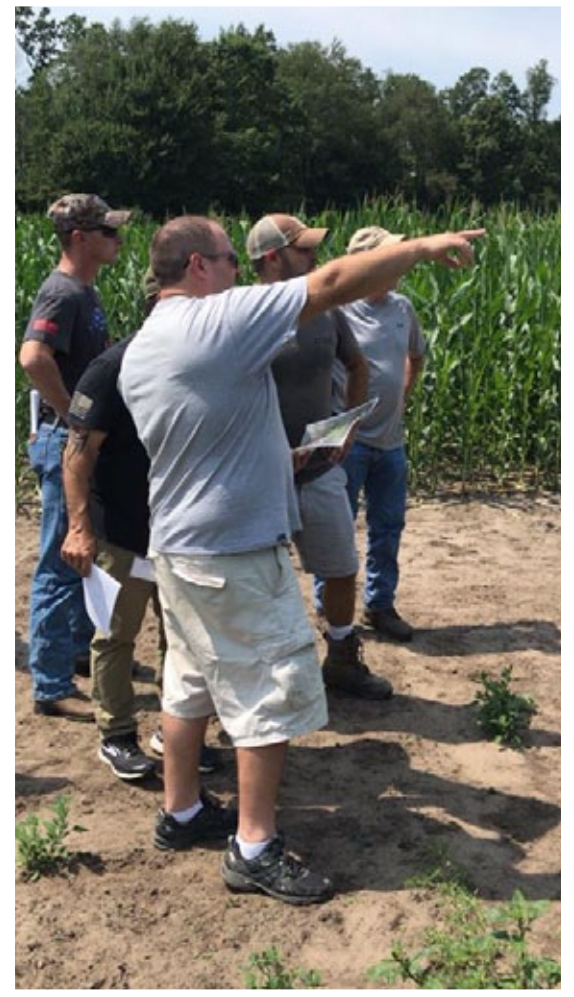
Recognizing the need to think beyond our own boundaries and providing tools to foster cooperation are at the heart of the Michigan Wildlife Cooperatives program. Hosting annual outreach events including the Pheasant Rendezvous, Deer Rendezvous and habitat series workshops increase opportunities to explore learning about wildlife habitat needs, land management options and partner programs available to assist landowners. Annually attended by hundreds of participants, these events facilitate cooperation between neighbors and partners, share knowledge, and build relationships which help increase both the scale of habitat improvements and satisfaction for cooperative members. Working together, the DNR, PF, QDMA and landowner cooperatives are making a difference for wildlife!

A multi-organizational approach to managing private lands for wildlife.

Social Engagement

When it comes to private land, it is easy to be caught up in your section of property even when like-minded conservationists may surround you. Cooperatives help open that door. Outdoor enthusiasts innately crave the “hunting camp” mentality, where sharing hunting stories and experiences are welcomed — and both have been proven to increase satisfaction with the hunting experience.

Having an organized cooperative allows these conversations to occur and facilitates discussion oriented around how to improve hunting conditions in your area. Every hunter in the field counts, and when they are enjoying their time, they are more likely to return. They may even introduce a new hunter.



Cooperative members host casual and educational meetings, interact more frequently with wildlife professionals, talk regularly with others on the phone and social media, and make friends with the same passions. This consistent engagement encourages members to build relationships and trust among the group. People working together in this capacity increase the benefit to landowners, habitat and wildlife, alike.

The cooperatives program hosted multiple annual events alongside partners to increase this member participation and inform them of new, innovative management techniques and financial assistance opportunities. Those events included the Deer Rendezvous, Pheasant Rendezvous, Joint Partner Habitat Day and the Habitat Series. These events influenced over 2,300 individuals.





Shared Resources

"We are in our thirteenth year and our memberships hunting has vastly improved over the years. We are looking to grow and increase the age group of our deer harvest. Our members have expressed their need for further education. MUCC and QDMA will be key originations in helping fulfill our membership's request for more education on deer related topics."
-2020 survey respondent

Once some relationships have been established within a cooperative, neighbors may be more likely to share resources. For example, if a farmer has a tillage tool or planter they may be willing to let others in the cooperative use it. Another option would be to chip in with a couple of neighbors and rent needed equipment. Cooperative members can also work on each other's habitat projects, increasing the enjoyment of work by sharing it with others.

Cooperatives rely on collaboration. The opportunity to share resources (machinery, labor or knowledge) increases the potential for reaching maximum habitat and/or hunting benefit without an individual being concerned about not having what they need. From a landscape-level perspective, landowners and wildlife in the surrounding project area will benefit.

An adequate number of boots on the ground to make private land management a priority in Michigan is the key to successfully managing a large percentage of the state's resources. This often happens directly through the state's wildlife agency, federal agencies, nonprofit organizations, national affiliated organizations and partnerships fostered between each.

The cooperatives program also hosted a list of professional resources that can be found at the local, state and federal level to assist landowners. Cooperatives work closely with the following:

- Natural Resources Conservation Service (Farm Bill Programs)
- Conservation Districts
- Private habitat consultants
- Michigan DNR
- Conservation organizations
- Foresters
- Agricultural consultants
- University Extension offices
- Farm Service Agency
- Farm Bill Biologists
- Hunter Access Program

Each of these resources is available to the public and a good choice for landowners that are interested in creating a wildlife management plan and implementing it. The success that comes from these resources being utilized among cooperative members is something that can be shared. Opportunity is made equal through cooperative efforts.





Starting a Wildlife Cooperative

Step 1

- Determine your goals as an individual - Why do you want to start a cooperative?
- Talk to a few neighbors about your goals and get a feel for community interest.
- Schedule a public informational meeting and invite your neighbors.
- Research wildlife cooperative benefits and resources through Michigan United Conservation Clubs and other organizations.


Step 2

- Identify your location on the statewide cooperative map and connect with other cooperative leaders.
- Host the meeting and establish a leadership group (formal or informal)
- Have a large plat map that committed individuals can mark their properties on.
- Create goals/guidelines for your cooperative with the leadership group based on member interests
 - Habitat and harvest management
 - Data collection
 - Membership goals
 - Acreage goals (define a boundary area)
 - Meeting objectives and frequency

Step 3

- Once confident in the goals and guidelines, make a plan for the following year — How are you going to reach the cooperative goals?
 - Pre- and post-season meetings
 - Habitat days or educational workshops
 - Newsletters and email blasts
 - Social media sites
- Annually re-evaluate group goals, challenges and successes.

Enjoy the outdoors and the people it brings together.
Share your success and recruit a new cooperative!



"[These are] things that keep people interested and engaged. Browse survey, TSI, Grassland and bedding, fawn recruitment. Our co-op has signed up over 100 new QDMA members and 30 new Rack Pack members. We have had a disabled veterans hunt. We have annual youth deer pole, buck pole, 3-D shoot, coyote hunt, and banquet. And this year we have paid for NASP to be put into our local school. These are just a few ways we can positively impact our local community's."

- 2020 survey respondent

Importance

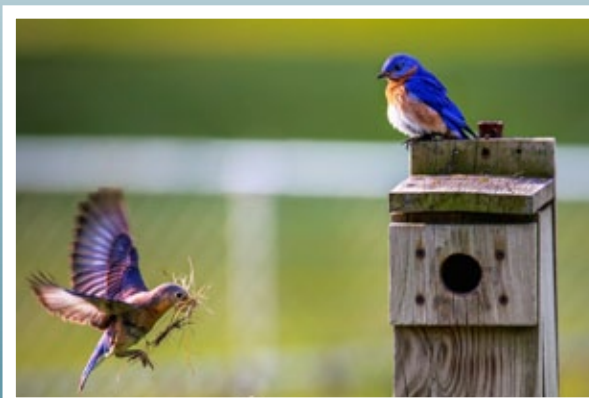
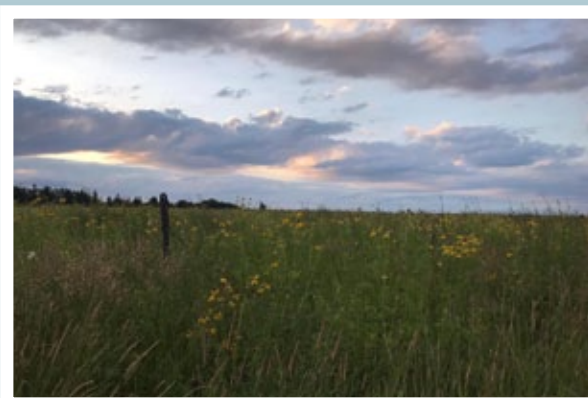
Michigan is 72% privately owned. This significant amount of acreage is viewed as an integral part of the state's wildlife management. Threatened and endangered species along with game species use these lands as part of their home range. Without proper management, these species could face detrimental impacts depending on the decisions that landowners make. The wildlife cooperatives program focused on private land habitat management to improve the overall health of the ecosystem and the wildlife that uses it as part of their home range.

Increasing the number of pheasants and improving the age structure of whitetails were some examples of the most common goals of landowners participating in a cooperative.

For all of these participants, no matter what their personal goals, the habitat was the common denominator.

Without adequate habitat of quality and quantity, the landscape will not support wildlife from a conservation perspective. To get baseline information on habitat, landowners have utilized surveys supported by the cooperatives program. These surveys include deer browse surveys, pheasant crow count surveys and habitat evaluation surveys to determine what the current habitat offers wildlife and what could be improved.

Based on the cooperative's programs five years of action, an average of 14,000 acres of habitat were restored or improved each year. The 6,000 enrollees made these improvements. At the time of this writing, there are more than 350,000 acres enrolled in habitat management. Projects include early-successional habitat, grassland restoration, timber stand improvement, cover crops, tree plantings, field borders and wetland restoration.



Habitat Evaluation

Deer Browse Surveys

Deer browse surveys are used to identify the browse impact deer are having on a property. This survey type takes place in early spring after the snow melts but before green-up. Ranging from no browse to severe browse, these surveys can indicate if the current habitat is nutritionally supporting the deer herd. This information can be used to determine if habitat projects will increase the forage available to deer or if harvest goals need to be adjusted to change the deer density. Often times it is a combination of both. Browse surveys can be conducted on an annual basis or whenever a landowner wants to see if their management has had an impact.



Pheasant Crow Count Surveys

Pheasant crow count surveys take place in the spring. The idea is to follow a mapped area specific to the cooperative over consecutive years. Cooperative members take note of the weather conditions during the survey and count the number of male pheasants they hear at each map location. This information can be used to assist the tracking of pheasant populations on a landscape level.



Habitat Evaluation Surveys

Habitat evaluation surveys are a way for landowners to estimate the quality and quantity of viable grassland habitat on their property. These surveys are generally conducted by cooperative members with the assistance of Farm Bill Biologists. The evaluation is split into three parts: native grass nesting and brood rearing, cool-season grass nesting and brood-rearing, and switchgrass winter cover. Each section is categorized as a poor, fair or excellent quality based on the amount of cover per square foot.







