

Early Successional Habitat - Old Field Management



Management Techniques and Guidelines

Since most old field species require a short, woody component, establishing or maintaining this habitat element is important. A minimum range of 10-30% shrub (and young trees) crown cover is a good amount to strive for in your old field. This will make the habitat suitable for species such as brown thrasher, field sparrow and many others. This may be done by allowing some areas to become shrubby by brush hogging less acreage or by maintaining the field as is and incorporating some adjacent even-aged forest management. It is also important to maintain herbaceous

habitat including bare ground, grasses and forbs. These are productive habitats (insects, nectar, and fruits) that are critical to many species (e.g. courtship areas for woodcock).

Generally, managing an old field habitat is about increasing plant species diversity and structure (different heights of vegetation) within the field so that you have a mosaic of different habitats.

Brush hogging should not take place on the entire field at once if possible. The objective is to leave some areas undisturbed each year so that they continue to provide cover and food through the next year(s). This is particularly important for late nesting species (e.g. goldfinch), migrating birds and pollinators that may be active late in the summer.

Mowing or brush hogging in old fields is usually scheduled every 2-5 years depending on site conditions and prescriptions for different parts of the field. Since each site is variable, monitor your site to determine if the current schedule is meeting the plan objectives. Mowing, brush hogging or other disturbance practices within the old field can be used to select for the best habitat.

Learn to determine what the valuable shrubs and trees are for wildlife and select out the less desirables. Examples of valuable shrubs for wildlife include serviceberry, elderberry, alder, viburnums, willows, dogwoods, hazelnut, etc.

If the site is currently a mix of tall growing tree species, shrubs and herbaceous areas, the old field habitat can be improved through selective tree removal (i.e., selectively targeting tall growing tree species for removal, while leaving behind desirable shrub species). This method helps establish the preferred habitat and also makes the habitat more stable over time by selecting for shrubs. Girdled trees will become snags which are dead or partially dead trees. These can provide perches for hawks, roosting sites for bats (under exfoliating bark) and cavity sites for birds such as kestrels. Brush piles will provide shelter for small mammals and other prey species. If incorporating cut-back borders in

the forest around fields as part of the management plan avoid narrow linear strips and consolidate cutting into blocks. Strips 150 feet wide or more are recommended to support shrubland birds.

Mowing or brush hogging or tree cutting must occur outside the primary nesting season which is June 1-August 15.

Mowing Patterns

- The field is mowed in a random mosaic pattern around existing shrubs and obstacles.
- The field is broken up into sections that will be mowed on a rotation.
- Mow around wet areas and rocks to allow shrubs to establish.
- The field is mowed in the above pattern
 - Annually
 - Every 2 years
 - Every 3 years
 - Every ____ Years
- Minimum mower deck height will be 4-6 inches (cool season grasses)
- Minimum mower deck height 6 inches or greater (warm season grasses)
- Where wood turtles, rat snakes or other reptiles of concern are known to occur, mow after October 1st with a mower height of 6 inches or greater.
- Selective tree removal
 - cut
 - girdled
 - herbicide
- Construct brush piles with the cut trees.
 - In field
 - Edge of field
 - In adjacent woodland
- Cut-back borders
 - Length _____ & Width_____

Maintenance

The shrubland wildlife habitat benefits of old fields decline over time as trees grow tall and shade out grasses, forbs and shrubs. Continue to monitor the site and remove trees that are making the habitat less suitable. Also, monitor for invasive plant species that can thrive in old fields. Learn how to identify these species and control them where possible. Any land use or use of fertilizers, pesticides and other chemicals shall not compromise the intended purpose of this practice which is improved early successional habitat. Be sure to follow all label requirements when using herbicides.