

Wildlife and habitat on the

By Rex Lockman

The Small Acreage Issue Team chose these three property improvement projects in part because they offer different ecological sites found in many Wyoming locations.

With these different ecological sites comes a diversity of wildlife. We're going to discuss which wildlife species are indigenous to each area and examine the four major components of habitat – food, space, cover, and water.

The Adams' property in the Pole Mountain region between Laramie and Cheyenne has diverse habitats. These include shrub (sage)/grass, aspen groves, riparian areas, and dense conifer stands. Wildlife is abundant. The diversity of vegetation and ecosystems on this property allow several wildlife species to live there year-round while others use it seasonally. While some species use all of the habitat types, others may only use one.

Wildlife includes deer, elk, moose, ground squirrels, tree squirrels, marmots, rabbits, skunks, raptors, and a variety of song birds. Dense conifer stands provide excellent shelter from the heat in the summer and from snow and wind in the winter. Old, dead trees, referred to as snags, provide cavities for birds and small mammals to use them for nesting.

The shrub/grass habitat provides food for all species. Deer and moose are considered



Riparian areas on the Adams' property provide water for many species of wildlife and insects.

browsers and use the bitterbrush and sagebrush, while elk, considered grazers, use the grasses. Rabbits, squirrels, and birds use the shrubs for cover and protection for ground nests.

The riparian area provides water for wildlife. Moose use this area for food and eat willows and aquatic plants. Willows also provide nesting habitat for a variety of birds. The abundance of water and vegetation supports insects that provide food for birds. The supplemental soil moisture in the draws supports aspen stands and also produces lush grass, which the elk eat. Elk will also eat the green and soft bark of aspen in the spring. The aspen also make great nesting and perching areas for birds.

The property just west of Wheatland is a sub-irrigated grass/shrub habitat type. Wildlife includes deer, antelope, rabbits, skunks, ground squirrels, raptors, pheasants, and a variety of song birds. Grass over most of this property grows tall because of the shallow water table. Tall grass and various shrubs provide deer and antelope cover from the summer heat and provide areas for ground-nesting birds to hide nests. Forbs, or flowering plants, mixed with grass attract insects, which are an important component to chick survival for many birds. During wet springs, flowing water is available for wildlife.

The Brown's property north of Evansville is a shrub/short grass prairie habitat. Wildlife includes antelope, mule deer, rabbits, ground squirrels, skunks, and a variety of grassland song birds. Sagebrush provides cover for ground-nesting birds and food for antelope and deer. No natural water source is



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available and this forces some wildlife to leave the area to search for water.

Each property's habitats or micro-ecosystems are unique but are still representative of many small-acreage ranches across Wyoming. Wildlife must be taken into consideration when moving to a rural acreage. Seeing deer outside the kitchen window while drinking a morning cup of coffee that first year will be wonderful. About the second year, after replacing the spruce tree for the third time from deer rubbing their antlers on it, patience may start to run out.

Learning about the species and how to live with them will make rural life more enjoyable. The first step is to get acquainted with the wildlife on a property and determine their habitat needs.

- Will they only use it seasonally or will they be year-round residents?
- Do you want to enhance the current habitat to draw more wildlife or could that cause problems?
- If you are going to alter the natural vegetation in the area, will these new plants attract new wildlife and what effect will all of this have on the current ecosystem?



Grass drawing from a shallow water table grows tall and provides cover at the Wheatland property site.



Antelope are only one of the many species of wildlife on the Brown property near Evansville.

- Large trees on grasslands create excellent perches for hawks and owls, which will prey on rabbits and even house cats.
- Do you leave your cat or dog food outside, which could attract skunks or even bears?
- How much fencing will be required around the garden to keep out deer, rabbits, and ground squirrels?

This may seem overwhelming, but if carefully planned, living with wildlife can be very enjoyable.

Rex Lockman sees the wild side of Wyoming as the wildlife and range specialist with the Laramie County Conservation District. He can be reached at (307) 772-2600 or at [rlockman@lccdn.net.org](mailto:rlockman@lccdn.net).

CONSIDER WILDLIFE WHEN ENHANCING PROPERTY

The easiest way to enhance property for wildlife is to be a good steward of the land by controlling invasive weeds and not overgrazing or overmowing.

Enhancing property for wildlife can be simple or detailed, depending on its size, the ecosystem, and the condition of the habitat.

Water is a limiting factor in most of Wyoming and providing it can be an easy enhancement to keep wildlife on a property.

Landscaping around the house with trees and shrubs can be used to draw wildlife. When selecting plants, berry-producing shrubs will draw a variety of birds, while junipers and spruce trees will provide winter protection for non-migratory birds. Remember, though, deer and antelope may use and abuse these trees and shrubs as well.

For help in plant selection, contact your local University of Wyoming Extension educator, conservation district, or Wyoming Game and Fish Department office. They can also provide recommendations for dealing with animals like ground squirrels, skunks, rabbits, and pocket gophers.

Remember, you are the newcomer to the wildlife's territory. See if you can develop a plan that allows you to co-exist and minimize frustration.