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Farm Field Edges a Key to Good Wildlife Habitat

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Edge-- the transition zone between two different types of vegetation-- can be a key to good wildlife habitat on the farm. How good it can be depends on the diversity and quality of the plants that offer food and cover. Just as importantly, those plants need to create a gradual transition from the tall forest trees to the relatively short crop or grass field next to it. Most transitions are abrupt--but the direct change from low ground cover in a crop field to tall trees doesn't help wildlife. What many species like is a wider, more gradual border area. At least 30 feet, but preferably a wider zone of grasses, weeds, shrubs, vines and small trees offer the berries, seeds, browse, and insects helpful to wildlife. Northern bobwhite quail is among the species that relies heavily on edge habitat. You might think the heavier the grass cover for quail to nest, the better, they could hide from predators. But that's not the case. Bobwhite nests are usually found in sparse vegetation, near the edge of a patch of grass. Their small size gives quail limited mobility, so they avoid heavy matted vegetation like brome grass, timothy and native warm season grasses like switchgrass. You're more likely to find quail nests in shorter native grasses with forbs, moderately grazed pastures, idle land, weedy food plots and brushy fence rows and hedgerows. They've been known to nest in no-till fields.

Shelterbelts or other woody cover with a shrubby understory, cattail wetlands, and dense stands of native grasses all give good winter cover for pheasant. Pheasants will spend most of their time within the first 150 feet of the edge of these good patches of cover and move into adjacent crop fields to eat. Waste grain can serve as an abundant source of winter food; leave rows of corn or sorghum along field edges for a more reliable food supply.

A big source of food for quail and pheasant during the summer months are insects. Be careful of spraying pesticides. Heavy spraying of herbicides actually reduces insect populations just as much as insecticide use, because it destroys the weeds that are the habitat for the insects.

The transition edge can be converted from no transition by planting shrubs or small trees. Another option is to encourage the area to revert naturally to native plants. Stop grazing, mowing or cropping the area and the natural process will probably work in short order. A light disking or other periodic disturbance will help weeds and other native species to come along more quickly. If the trees in the forest are close to one another, the edge can be improved by thinning the tree stand. Consider a commercial timber sale, or cutting trees for firewood. Thinning the stand near the edge allows sunlight to reach the forest understory. The sunlight then promotes more growth of plants that offer food and cover for wildlife.

An option or addition to creating edge on the outside of large tracts of forests is to create small openings within the forest. Ungrazed clearings in a forest diversify the habitat, and offer woodland birds such as wild turkeys the annual weeds, grasses and seedlings that poults need. With selective thinning, good fruit and nut producing trees, den trees, and snags can be left for more food and cover for wildlife. It's a good idea to have five to ten acres of small clearings for every 100 acres of forest, with clearings ranging from one to three acres.

For more information about improving wildlife habitat, visit the Newkirk NRCS/Kay County Conservation District office, 5501 N Pleasant View Ave, Newkirk or call (580) 362-3362 or 362-2438.

Photo caption (Field Border) Field borders should offer a transition through stages of vegetation from grasses and native broadleaf plants to shrubs and trees for wildlife cover, movement and food. Photo provided by NRCS

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