



Hoosier National Forest Highlights



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Developing Prime Habitat for Quail and other Forest Wildlife

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“We call them covey headquarters,” said Steve Harriss, Wildlife Biologist on the Hoosier National Forest. “They’re ideal for quail and other birds and small mammals.” Harriss acknowledged that people have been putting in brush piles for wildlife for years, but these are brushpiles with a twist. “We have a structured way we develop these piles,” said Harriss. He explained they start the piles with large logs at the base. This allows plenty of room for animals to get under the pile for cover.

Then we start piling brush on top of the larger structure. Harriss talked about an example of a project the Forest has been working on near the crossroads community of Spurgeons Corner west of Columbus, Indiana. Harriss said the Hoosier worked with the Indiana Department of Natural Resources Division of Fish and Wildlife and the National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTF) last winter to build 12-14 covey headquarters.

Harriss grins when talking about the project. He said the partners included local people from the Dogwood Drummers Chapter of the NWTF which is from the Columbus area. They had 17-18 volunteers of all ages who have helped. Harriss said there was a lot of timber down in the area, plus they feathered the edges back from the edge of the woods to promote better wildlife habitat.

The field was about 80 acres in size and naturally had a lot of warm season grasses and native wildflowers like blazing star. Harriss said they wanted to encourage the native ground cover. But they tilled around where the covey headquarters would be and built each one to be 12 foot by 12 foot at the base and most were 6 to 8 foot tall. Harriss said the piles should provide lots of cover for birds and small mammals like rabbits. “These provide great protection from birds of prey, and we space the covey headquarters all around the field so the quail and other mammals can easily dart over to take cover in one of them,” said Harriss.

Harriss said the second phase of building the covey headquarters was planting shrubs so there are thickets of shrubs between the brush piles. “With the help of volunteers from the NWTF and the boy scouts we’ve planted over a thousand shrubs in that one tract alone. He said they planted dogwood and native plum.” A boy scout troop from Trafalgar has come out two different years during the Hoosier’s Take Pride in America

event to plant shrubs and work on the brush piles. Harriss said the boys have been a big help too and each year about 18 boys and their leaders have come out to help. He noted that turkey and other wildlife will benefit from the food source provided by the shrubs.

The Indiana DNR has also been a crucial partner. They've done a lot of the chainsaw work and helped with several parts of the project. It was their no-till drill that was used to put in partridge pea, which as a legume will benefit the area. Other understory plants like asters and milkweeds were also planted. Harriss said the IDNR has said with the increase in plant diversity, and adding the plums and dogwood, they see real benefit in improving the habitat for local wildlife species. By tilling around the brush piles, the area will be safe from future prescribed burns, which will further encourage the warm season grasses.

Harriss said the last portion of the project is to put in informational kiosks at the parking area. These signs will help people who come to the site to hunt, view wildlife, or hike, understand what the project was about and where the boundaries are. He noted, "In response to neighbors concerns, we are installing an informational kiosk with maps showing property lines."

From covey headquarters to the legumes which will improve the soil, these areas will benefit the wildlife species who thrive on early successional (young forest) habitat for years to come.

For more information contact Steve Harriss, Wildlife Biologist for the Hoosier National Forest at the Bedford office, 812-276-4759 or email scharriss@fs.fed.us.



Three brush piles are visible along the edge of the wooded cover as volunteers from the Dogwood Drummers Chapter of the National Wild Turkey Federation work to add more brush to the piles.



Another view of a volunteer adding brush to the piles with the warm season grass field in the background



Volunteers on the left side of the picture add brush to the piles while the two men on the right plant dogwood and plum trees around the brush piles.