



# Hoosier National Forest Highlights



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## The Value of Early Successional Habitat on the Hoosier



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### Grown up Fields or Habitat?

Having grown up on a farm in western Kentucky, I remember as a kid driving by overgrown fields and thinking, “Why doesn’t someone clean up that mess?” You know, those fields that look like they have been let go and overcome with shrubs and tall vegetation that are just ugly to many rural people. Years later with a college degree and working as a wildlife technician for the Hoosier National Forest, I have spent the last year and a half working in those same kinds of places.

I now know that these areas are important habitat for various wildlife species. These areas are referred to as early successional or disturbance-dependent habitat. Succession, as the name implies, is the predictable progression of plant composition from bare ground or grassy fields, to shrubby habitat, to ultimately mature forest. To halt these changes, a disturbance is needed to set the progression back to an earlier stage. Prescribed fire and brush-hogging are two examples used to manage this habitat on the Hoosier. Of course natural disturbances like wild fire alter succession but they are unpredictable in size and timing.

Large grassland habitat	Large shrubland habitat
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### Importance of Successional Habitat Management

Most people are aware that our country has seen dwindling areas of forest due to changes in land use but most are not aware that early successional habitat has dwindled even more than forest land. Studies have shown with the decline of early successional habitat, species that rely heavily upon such habitat have also declined.

Let's consider birds for instance. There are 131 species of birds that have been observed on the Hoosier's Tell City Ranger District. Approximately 46 percent (60 bird species) require some kind of early successional habitat. Thirty four of those species require large grassy, shrubby patches of 12 acres or larger. The following chart describes this disturbance-dependent habitat and lists bird species requiring them.

Habitat Types	Associated Bird Species
Group #1 Large areas with grass-herbaceous dominated ground conditions or those conditions that occur early after disturbance	-Savannah Sparrow -Redwinged Black Bird -Northern Bobwhite -Henslow's Sparrow
Group #2 Large patches (>12 acres) with shrub-scrub, early succession and forest edge conditions generally more than 3 years after disturbance	-American Woodcock -Blue-winged Warbler -Common Yellow Throat -Field Sparrow -Morning Dove -Ruffed Grouse -Wild Turkey
Group #3 Disturbance maintained woodland, principally open oak woodland and savanna communities	-American Goldfinch -American Kestrel -Baltimore Oriole -Eastern Bluebird -Loggerhead Shrike -Northern Flicker
Group #4 Small (<10 acre) disturbances within	-Cerulean Warbler -American Warbler

forests and also some larger patches	-American Redstart -Indigo Bunting -Wood Thrush -Worm-eating Warbler
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### **Benefits for Humans**

Early successional habitat benefits hunters and wildlife observers as well. Hunters benefit greatly from open areas where they can find game animals such as deer, turkey, and rabbit. Wildlife observers benefit by having areas where they can more easily see a variety of wildlife including butterflies and song birds.

### **Working Together for Habitat**

The Hoosier benefits from working with its partners, the Indiana Department of Natural Resources, National Wild Turkey Federation, and Quail Unlimited to develop and maintain wildlife habitats on the Forest.

So the next time you drive by an overgrown field, take a minute to appreciate it. It is more than weeds and shrubs. It is a complex ecosystem that many birds and animals require, and a place where you may be able to hunt and observe nature and wildlife at its best.

For more information on openings contact Chuck Boswell at [cboswell@fs.fed.us](mailto:cboswell@fs.fed.us) or call 812-547-9229.