



# Wild Know-How

Spring 2018

A Private Lands Newsletter from the Division of Wildlife



## Creating Pollinator Habitat on Your Property: A Landowner Perspective

**By Michael Hensley**  
**Green River Project Director,**  
**The Nature Conservancy**

In 2012, I purchased a home with 18 acres in Hart County, and quickly sized up the land. Other than the home site, the land was an even split between 6 acres of what I'd call "sinkhole woods" and 6 acres of old fescue pasture that wasn't much to look at and seemed to exclaim "You're going to spend LOTS of time mowing me each summer!"

I enjoy watching any kind of wildlife, and wanted a few acres to exer-

cise my bird dogs. I needed to figure out how to transform those 6 acres of old fescue pasture into something less onerous to manage. I decided to plant a diverse mix of native grasses and wildflowers, something that would be good quail and songbird habitat; visually spectacular; would attract butterflies and hummingbirds, and would reduce summer mowing drudgery. Fortunately, I had two amazing resources close by: Chris Mason, my local KDFWR Private Lands Biologist, and Round-

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**KENTUCKY**  
**QUAIL**  
**PROJECT**



### SPRING CHECKLIST

#### March - Mid April

- Prescribe burn in preparation to eradicate fescue.
- Strip disk to promote bare ground and new forb growth.
- Sow clover or lespedeza.
- Sow cool season grasses.
- Apply lime and fertilizer per soil test to wildlife food plots.



*"A true conservationist is a man who knows that the world is not given by his fathers but borrowed from his children."*

— John James Audubon



# Improving Older Native Grass Stands For Wildlife Part I

**David Howell, Wildlife Biologist  
and Thomas Young, Private Lands  
Biologist, KDFWR**

**O**k! I get it, you're really confused now. The Biologist said to plant some Native Warm Season Grasses (NWSG) and wildflowers a few years ago. "Going to be great for wildlife, small game, quail, rabbits and deer!" Now the biologist came back several years later, said to kill the NWSG, thin it out, spray it, disc it, and maybe even burn it. What gives? Many older stands (10+ years since planting) of NWSG can experience a decline in plant species diversity and wildlife productivity. A thick stand of NWSG may be good for cattle and grazing, but it has little value for wildlife because the lack of food. This can be especially true if there have been infrequent management activities since the initial planting. Often times,

more than one habitat management activity will be needed to restore better wildlife habitat conditions.

Let us review a combination of 2 spring/summer management activities that can help benefit older NWSG stands. While controlled burning is an excellent management practice, it has been my experience that burning alone will not be enough to create better wildlife habitat conditions on older established NWSG stands. It is very important that you consider dividing your grassland acres into blocks, always leaving  $\frac{1}{2}$  or  $\frac{2}{3}$  of the overall acreage undisturbed for winter cover and food.

**Prescribed Fire:** Typically, if used by itself for thinning NWSG, burning during the growing season is recommended (late July-middle September). The stress on the root systems prior to winter thins the stand for the next growing season. Establishing fire

breaks, a prescribed burn plan, and all other safety related items and equipment should be covered before this option is used.

**Spring Herbicide Treatment Following a Burn:** Another technique for thinning old, rank NWSG stands involves use of a selective herbicide that only kills grass. The benefit of this approach is that forbs/legumes/wildflowers are not killed by the herbicide application. The most success I have observed with this technique is spraying the selective grass herbicide during the spring following a controlled burn. The burn may have occurred in late summer/early fall of the previous year or in the winter/early spring of the same year. One herbicide used has the active ingredient "clethodim" and goes by various product names (Intensity, Select, Clethodim 2E). The spring following a fall or winter burn, wait until the NWSG stand is between 18 and 24 inches high and then apply clethodim at the rate of 16 ounces per acre. Use a spray mix of granular ammonium sulfate at the rate of 17 pounds per 100 gallons of water or a liquid ammonium sulfate at 2 gallons per 100 gallons of water, add the clethodim at 16 ounces per acre, and lastly a surfactant. With clethodim, you need 1 quart of surfactant per acre sprayed, which is more than most herbicides, but is necessary to work properly.

Using the above techniques can be effective in the management of older NWSG, but continued periodic disturbance will always be necessary. Keep in mind that every NWSG stand will have different plant compositions, potential invasive species or other factors that require different management strategies. Regardless, to improve your grasslands on your property, consider implementing one of these disturbance techniques in the spring/summer.

Stay tuned for Part II in this series, which will be published in the Fall 2018 Newsletter.

# It's Time to Maintain your Nest Boxes

**Kate Slankard, Avian Biologist,  
KDFWR and Jim Barnard, Foreman,  
KDFWR**

## **Nest Boxes can Boost Bird Diversity**

**I**nstalling nest boxes is an effective way to boost songbird numbers and diversity on your property. Nest boxes can fill the need that exists when natural sites, such as old snags, are not readily available. Many landowners install nest boxes with Eastern Bluebirds in mind, but these boxes can be used by many native bird species, depending on habitat types available (e.g. House Wren, Carolina Wren, Tree Swallow, Carolina Chickadee, Tufted Titmouse and Prothonotary Warbler). Nest boxes are most suitable where there is some undeveloped habitat available, such as a grassland, shrubland or wooded edge. Installing nest boxes in urban areas is generally not recommended since they may attract exotic species like House Sparrows and European Starlings. If you are just getting started with installing nest boxes on your property, construction plans can be found here: <http://www.nabluebirdsociety.org/nestbox-plans/>.

## **Maintenance is Key**

If you already have nest boxes on your property, February is a good time to think about maintenance. Some



songbird species (e.g. Eastern Bluebird) use nest boxes during the coldest nights of winter for communal roosting (many bluebirds will pack into one box for warmth to sleep). Then, in March, Eastern Bluebirds and Tree Swallows will begin building nests in nest boxes, so be careful not to disturb them during this time.

**1. Clean.** Cleaning out nest boxes once annually can reduce mites and bacteria for next year's brood. Cleaning also prevents the nest box from filling up with material, extends the life of the box, and it is a rewarding way to see if the nest box is being used successfully. Simply scrape out the box with a putty knife or other implement. If desired, and weather permits, you can rinse out the inside with a 10% bleach solution. Allow the interior to dry before closing.

**2. Inspect.** Specifically look for: loose fitting access doors, loose screws, nails, overall structural integrity of the box, and signs of leaks in the interior of the box (moisture or new water stains). Access doors should shut tightly, so predators cannot reach in and grab the eggs or young.

**3. Repair/Replace.** Tighten loose screws and nails. If a nail or screw needs replacing, use exterior-grade replacements. If a board is cracked through, patch or replace the board. Roof boards are usually the first to go, and can be patched with sheet metal or stiff UV-resistant plastic if not replaced. Nest boxes should be replaced when they cannot be securely repaired. Even if you're not going to immediately replace a failing box, go ahead and take it down. Attracting birds to unsafe or leaky boxes may result in nest failures.

**4. Tips.** Scrap wood is good for nest box materials, but be sure not to use pressure-treated wood, which can result in poor "indoor" air quality for the birds. If you elect to paint or varnish a nest box, use a non-toxic paint or sealer and only apply the finish to the outside surfaces.

Providing safe and comfortable nesting locations for your feathered friends is extremely rewarding, and with just a little thoughtful maintenance and husbandry, your nest boxes can provide years of enjoyment.



# Kentucky's New Burn Boss Program

**Chris Minor, Fire Manager  
The Nature Conservancy**

**B**y now, you may have heard a lot of buzz about prescribed fire, especially messages about benefits of controlled burning for wildlife and plants. If you have some interest in burning your land, you may have reached out to a local biologist or forester and found out just how complicated and risky burning the “back forty” is. This may have led to feelings that you do not have the necessary training, experience, time, or you are just not comfortable taking it on yourself. This is all entirely understandable as there are many associated laws, regulations, and steps towards implementing a controlled burn correctly and legally, designed to keep you and our forests safe and healthy.

An effort originating through Kentucky's Prescribed Fire Council (KPFC) has given better clarity around prescribed fire. By promoting a partner initiative aimed at making this necessary management tool, once mostly used by state and federal agencies, a feasible option for private contractors, farmers, and other private landowners. The passing of House Bill 208 provides such a platform. Now you, your neighbor, your local fire department, or a nearby contractor, can take trainings developed by KPFC to meet the necessary experience requirements to become a Kentucky Burn Boss.

A qualified Kentucky Burn Boss may receive exemption from statewide fire season hazard restrictions, allowing them to implement a controlled burn during the most lucrative seasons and



## SPRING & SUMMER CHECKLIST

### April - May

- \_\_\_ Begin preparation of dove fields.
- \_\_\_ Plant tree and shrub seedlings.
- \_\_\_ Spray herbicide to eradicate fescue.
- \_\_\_ Conduct timber stand improvements and create brush piles.
- \_\_\_ Establish wildlife mineral licks.

### May - June

- \_\_\_ Plant annual grain food plots/ dove fields (do not plant in same location as last year).
- \_\_\_ Sow warm season grasses and wildflowers.
- \_\_\_ Hinge-cut cedar trees for living brush piles.

### July - August

- \_\_\_ Create wildlife waterholes when the soil is dry enough.
- \_\_\_ Perform exotic/invasive species removal.
- \_\_\_ Mark trees for Timber Stand Improvement.
- \_\_\_ Manipulate dove fields for season opener.
- \_\_\_ Plant winter wheat in late August.

time, spring and fall between 6:00 am and 6:00 pm, in the absence of a county burn ban or other restrictions mandated due to drought. Without this qualification, landowners may still burn their property but are limited to more strict guidelines. Landowners can implement controlled burns when strictly adhering to KRS 149.400. Prescribed Fire Burn

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## “Pollinator,” continued

stone Native Seed, a locally owned and operated company that is renowned for their expertise in establishing these types of native pollinator and wildlife habitats. Both Chris and Roundstone gave me excellent guidance and professional assistance.

There are some great cost-share programs available to help folks create habitat like this on their own property but I chose to tackle the project without applying for program assistance. I did some work myself (especially site prep) and I hired Roundstone to plant the first few acres of native seed, and then I planted the last couple of acres on my own. What did I learn?

**1.** Consult with your local experts with KDFWR and NRCS and ask for their guidance. You can't go wrong by learning before you leap.

**2.** Good site prep means everything. That means having clean, weed-free ground into which to plant the native seed. You'll likely need to mow and apply herbicide at least once or twice to eliminate undesirable existing vegetation. Don't skimp on this step, or your



effort and cost to “go native” could fail due to competition from fescue, Johnson grass, and sericea lespedeza.

**3.** Did I make any mistakes along the way? Yes! My biggest mistake was to think my site prep would be better if I tilled a small half-acre field before I completed a broadcast seeding of native seed. That tillage stirred up a witches brew of Johnson grass and sericea lespedeza seeds, which I had to deal with afterwards. Just complete your herbicide treatments and try to leave the soil surface as undisturbed

as possible. The native seed just needs good soil contact; no need to till.

**4.** Your work will be front-loaded into year one and two as you get rid of bad stuff and introduce the good stuff. In the years since, I have thoroughly enjoyed my pollinator plantings. Annually, about all I do now is spot-treat for undesirable weeds once or twice with a backpack sprayer, and bush-hog or burn the little fields every couple of years. Today, those fields are stunningly beautiful, chock-full of wildlife and butterflies, and relatively labor-free!

## “Burn Boss,” continued

Bosses will have a much larger window of opportunity to burn.

Becoming a Kentucky Burn Boss will take some time and effort. For those of you having no previous wildland fire training, you will need to complete the KPFC's one day Landowner / Burn Crew Member training,

participate on some prescribed burns, complete the 3-4 day Kentucky Burn Boss Workshop, and gain more fire experience. It is very involved but once qualified, maintaining those qualifications is much easier.

Our hope is many of you will take advantage of this very new program either directly through taking the trainings and experience require-

ments yourself, or indirectly by hiring a qualified contractor. This program has great potential to improve habitat for our rare and declining wildlife and ecosystems across the Commonwealth.

The inaugural Kentucky Burn Boss Workshop is planned for this fall. Go to [www.kyfire.org](http://www.kyfire.org) to learn more about prescribed fire and to keep tabs on training dates.



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### PRIVATE LANDS BIOLOGISTS

