Life on Woody’s Stewardship Farm: Winter Habitat

By: Woody Woodruff

Winter can seem lifeless and dull without the green plants growing, the song birds singing and the animals chasing each other in a daily pattern of competition, communication, and cooperation. During cold weather I spend most of my spare time gathering firewood for the wood stove in a seasonal tradition of staying warm. Staying warm is a survival necessity in the Midwest, and the fate of many species that live in this region is tied to the need to stay warm.

A couple of weekends ago, I spent time watching three pairs of northern harriers circling my prairie and a farm field over and over. I used to think this type of sighting was something out of the ordinary. Occasionally I would see either the blueish-grey and white male or the brown and white female hawk in a solitary glide over an open field or along a roadside ditch as I drove from town to town. I was somewhat amazed at the fact that here were six birds, three males and three females, circling a snow covered, 100-acre field for days on end. Why so many raptors in one small place? The answer has become obvious to me - habitat. Habitat is food and shelter and winter survival. On a cold winter’s day with six inches of snow, finding something to eat for a hawk can be a challenge. It is the same for field mice. A field of cover crop residue or a meadow of prairie grass is a good place to raise a litter. The mice can stay relatively warm with the ground cover insulating their dens. And the needed food is close at hand from seeds that litter the ground. So why am I not over run with a plague of mice? Good winter habitats for the mice attract the hawks, fox, and owls looking for a good winter meal.
I have always believed that land management is an art as well as a science. It might sound funny that I include art. I feel there must be an understanding of the study of ecology and the components of a dynamic habitat, but one also needs the ability to visualize what that habitat will look like in the end. Read More

Cover Crop Cost? There's An NRCS App For That!

Planting cover crops is a hot trend but farmers who haven't tried it yet have one question: "What’s it going to cost me?" USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) developed a simple digital tool to answer that question. It's called the Cover Crop Economic Decision Support Tool. It helps farmers, landowners and others make informed decisions when considering adding cover crops to their production system. And it's free.

"The tool offers a partial budget analysis," explains Ivan Dozier, Illinois NRCS State Conservationist. "It focuses only on operational changes farmers make—actual costs and benefits farmers see when they add in cover crops. We focus on benefits and costs we can easily express in dollars," Dozier adds.

Benefits & Costs To Measure

- Direct nutrient credits
- Input reductions
- Yield increases & decreases
- Seed & establishment costs
- Erosion reductions
- Grazing opportunities
- Overall soil fertility levels
- Water storage & infiltration improvements

The tool's analysis depends on data users enter. Users can run "what if" scenarios if they want to evaluate a range of values. The tool offers results in both dollars and graphs, showing short-and long-term benefits. Read More
Conservation Cropping Seminars Reach Hundreds of Illinois Farmers

For the past two years Illinois Stewardship Alliance has served on the Illinois Conservation Cropping Systems Partnership Team, which plays host to three annual Regional Conservation Cropping Seminars. The partners are focused on ways to improve soil health, share resources and technical expertise, and help more farmers make wise choices for Illinois. This year's Conservation Cropping Seminars were well attended at all three regional locations. With about 500 farmers and agriculturalists and some 70 students, the attendees came from 63 different counties in Illinois. In fact, after just two years, these Conservation Cropping Seminars have reached farmers in 90 out of 102 counties in Illinois. This year's seminars were held at the Sycamore Farm Bureau Center, Lakeland College in Mattoon, and Western Illinois University in Macomb. The speakers ranged from cutting edge university researchers from Purdue, Illinois State University, Western Illinois University, University of Illinois, and the University of Missouri, as well as local and mid-western conservation minded farmers working on innovations in reduced tillage, nutrient management, and cover crop management.

The 2016 Conservation Cropping Seminars will be held three consecutive days in January:

Champaign on the 26th
Edwardsville on the 27th
Milan on the 28th.
We will be hosting some of the most recognized national speakers in the field of Conservation Cropping at next year’s event. So go ahead and mark the dates down on your calendar for the seminar closest to you.

**Featured Cover Crop: Buckwheat**

Buckwheat is a fast-growing, warm-season, broad-leaved annual which can smother weeds, protect the soil surface and provide habitat for pollinating and other beneficial insects. It is a good nectar source for bees. Buckwheat seed can germinate within days of planting. Not requiring much water and tolerating poor fertility, buckwheat will grow in less-than-ideal places in your garden, but it does not like shade. Since buckwheat is a succulent, it decomposes rapidly and improves short-term soil-tilth and better prepares garden beds for fall crops. It is efficient at taking up phosphorus from the soil and storing it in its tissues. Buckwheat is nearly three times as effective as barley in extracting phosphorus, and more than 10 times more effective than rye.

**How to Grow**
You need to plant buckwheat in the spring after the last frost, or in summer. Scatter seed over your garden bed at a rate of about three ounces per 100 square feet or 20 to 40 lbs./acre. Till in or shred the buckwheat several weeks after it flowers, but before seeds form, about 30-40 days.

**Rotations**
Buckwheat is used most commonly as a mid-summer cover crop to suppress weeds and replace bare fallow. In the Northeast and Midwest, it is often planted after harvest of early vegetable crops, then followed by a fall vegetable, winter grain, or cool-season cover crop. Planted later, winter killed residue provides decent soil cover and is easy to no-till into. In many areas, it can be planted following harvest of winter wheat or canola.
BENEFITS
Quick cover.
Few cover crops establish as rapidly and as easily as buckwheat. Its rounded pyramid-shaped seeds germinate in just three to five days. Leaves up to 3 inches wide can develop within two weeks to create a relatively dense, soil shading canopy. Buckwheat typically produces only 2 to 3 tons of dry matter per acre, but it does so quickly—just six to eight weeks. Buckwheat residue also decomposes quickly, releasing nutrients to the next crop.

Weed suppressor
Buckwheat's strong weed suppressing ability makes it ideal for smothering warm-season annual weeds. It's also planted after intensive, weed-weakening tillage to crowd out perennials.

Upcoming Events!

3/21 - Illinois Farmers Market Association Conference - Chicago
The Illinois Farmers Market Association Statewide Conferences are geared towards farmers market managers, farmers, vendors, and friends of the market with workshops covering topics such as: farmers market best practices, marketing tips and management ideas, updates on new food safety rules, networking opportunities, idea sharing, and more. Learn More

3/21 - Home-scale Mushroom Cultivation - Angelic Organics Farm - 1pm - 5pm
Learn to grow your own mushrooms at home, using simple equipment and materials. After an overview of mycology, we'll get hands-on experience with inoculating shiitake mushrooms in different growing mediums. You'll leave with the knowledge and skills you need to start growing mushrooms for your family, plus a mini-mushroom kit to take home. Learn More

3/22 - Oak Tree Organics Farm Tour - Ashland - 2pm
Getting antsy for the upcoming farmer’s market season and the vibrant fresh greens telling us that spring is here? Come tour Oak Tree Farm with Slow Food Springfield and the University of Illinois Extension, and see firsthand how farmers are busy like the bees this time of year starting seeds and planting in greenhouses. For more information about the tour, please contact Marnie Record at 864-704-5783. To reserve your space on the tour, go to: www.slowfoodspringfield.org

3/24 - Illinois Farmers Market Association Conference - Springfield
The Illinois Farmers Market Association Statewide Conferences are geared towards farmers market managers, farmers, vendors, and friends of the market with workshops covering topics such as: farmers market best practices, marketing tips and management ideas, updates on new food safety rules, networking opportunities, idea sharing, and more. Extend your conference stay and attend the Legislative Reception and Dinner at Driftwood Cocktail and Eatery that evening, and join Illinois Stewardship Alliance for their Local Food Lobby Day on the following day, Wednesday, March 25th. Learn More

3/25 - Illinois Stewardship Alliance Local Food Lobby Day - Springfield - 10:30am-4pm
Learn More

3/28 - Putting Small Acres to Work - Kankakee - 9am-3:30pm
Do you have a few extra acres you'd like to put to good use? Whether it's an old farmstead, a fallow green space, or a great big yard you'd rather not mow, you probably have some ideas about what it could become. How to get started is the question. "Putting Small Acres to Work" will take place on March 28th at Kankakee Community College in Kankakee from 9:00 a.m.-3:30 p.m. Register online at http://web.extension.illinois.edu/gkw or contact U of I Extension, Kankakee office, at 815-933-8337. Pre-registration is required to attend. The cost is $20 per person (includes lunch and materials).
3/29 - Small Engine Maintenance - Richland Community College - 1-4pm
Learn how your farm equipment really works! Join us Sunday, March 29, from 1:00 p.m. - 4:00 p.m and learn how your farm equipment really works. You will learn about their operation and maintenance from the experts at Richland Community College in Decatur, IL. $50/person. Learn More

4/18 - Get Your Goat - Angelic Organics Farm - 9am-12pm
Thinking about starting your own small herd of goats? Come learn the basics of different breeds, housing, feed requirements, breeding, pregnancy and birth at this hands-on workshop. In this class, we'll learn how to trim hooves, what to look for when purchasing your first goat, and the basics of milking and processing milk. Learn More

4/18- Farm Dreams: Assessing Risks & Resources to Start a Small Farm or Market Garden - Angelic Organics Farm - 1:30-5:30pm
Have you ever dreamed of starting your own sustainable farm? In this interactive workshop, we'll learn about sustainable farming in the region, take part in a series of self-assessments, and be better prepared to decide whether to pursue a farming business. We'll hear about regional training opportunities through the Collaborative Regional Alliance for Farmer Training (CRAFT), university extension, small business development centers, and others. Includes a presentation of farming enterprises, a tour of Angelic Organics farm, and an opportunity to ask questions about the development of successful local farms. Taught by Janet Gamble of Turtle Creek Gardens. Learn More

For a complete listing of upcoming events, please checkout our Events Calendar on the ISA website.

Have an event that should be included in our line-up? Email Molly at molly@ilstewards.org

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Spread the word!
When you send this email to a friend, like us on Facebook, follow us on Twitter, or connect with us on LinkedIn, you are helping to increase awareness about local food causes in your community. Be a part of the movement and spread the word!