

# WOODY HABITAT FOR PHEASANTS AND DEER

ANDY LINDBLOOM | SENIOR BIG GAME BIOLOGIST

ALEX SOLEM | SENIOR UPLAND GAME AND FURBEARER BIOLOGIST

In South Dakota, where winter storms can bring extreme snow and sub-zero temperatures, providing high-quality winter habitat is essential for pheasant survival. Emergent wetlands, specifically cattail sloughs, are one of the preferred winter habitats for many wildlife species, including pheasants, by providing protection from inclement weather and escape cover. However, dense woody habitat can also provide shelter when those wetlands are filled with snow or not present within the local landscape. Well-designed shelterbelts, particularly those with dense, low-growing shrubs, provide a warm and secure habitat for pheasants during the winter if they are designed properly.

Woody habitat should be at least eight rows wide; narrow woody habitat (< 8 rows) may be attractive to pheasants but does not provide adequate protection during harsh winter storms. To maximize effectiveness, these areas should feature thick shrubs and other low-growing species that, unlike tall, deciduous trees, maintain their dense structure near the ground where birds need it most. Woody habitat should be placed in proximity to food sources to minimize the distance traveled for pheasants to feed. Placing food plots on the windward side of these plantings allows the woody habitat to act as snow catches, preventing the important food source from becoming snow covered.

Woody habitat is not always a necessary addition to a pheasant's habitat in the local area. Consulting with a South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks (GFP) Private Lands Habitat Biologist is very helpful as they will conduct an assessment of the available habitat on your property and surrounding properties. That assessment will determine if woody habitat is a limiting factor. If it is, they will also discuss and determine the appropriate location to maximize the winter habitat potential of the woody planting(s). In general, positioning of woody habitat should consider the prevailing wind to break the strongest, and coldest of winter winds.

Just as woody habitat plays a critical role in pheasant survival during harsh winters, it is equally important for big-game

species. Deer rely on many of the same woody features for food, thermal protection, and security, though their needs and patterns of use differ throughout the year.

White-tailed deer and mule deer, native to South Dakota, inhabit landscapes from open prairies to dense forests. While both white-tailed and mule deer species rely on woody habitats comprised of coniferous and deciduous trees and shrubs, the importance of this habitat varies by species, region, and season. In South Dakota, woody habitat such as the Black Hills or river bottomlands, act as biodiversity hotspots. Riparian zones, in particular, serve as the "baseline" of the ecosystem. Planted windbreaks in agricultural areas and natural river breaks provide essential habitat in otherwise open landscapes. Deer utilize woody habitat for three primary reasons: forage, thermal regulation, and security. Both deer species utilize woody habitat as browse, mainly feeding on twigs, buds, and some bark. In the Missouri River breaks, shrubs can comprise up to 88% of a mule deer's winter diet, which provides vital energy when other food sources are scarce. Thermal cover of evergreens and thickets act as insulators against extreme weather events. Woody habitat helps deer stay cool in the heat of summer and warm in the frigid days of winter. Dense woody habitat on the landscape creates bedding areas and travel corridors as well as escape cover. To benefit deer populations, landowners should prioritize plantings to provide adequate forage, thermal and escape cover. Strategic placement of woody habitat corridors that connect bedding and foraging areas can significantly reduce deer stress and exposure to predation and harsh environmental conditions.

Whether your primary desire is pheasants or deer, or maybe both, woody habitat is no doubt an important habitat factor to consider with your property's habitat management. The Department's woody habitat program continues to support landowners who invest in long-term habitat improvements across the state to benefit all wildlife species. Through this program, landowners can receive 75 percent cost-share, up to 20,000 dollars, for establishing new woody habitat plantings. GFP also offers 90 percent reimbursement for adding rows to

existing or new CRP plantings when needed to meet the program's eight-row minimum standard. For landowners who enroll their property in a public hunting access program for at least five years at the time of planting, we will provide full reimbursement of eligible project costs. Shelterbelt renovation projects, such as removing old, declining belts and replanting new designs that meet GFP woody habitat standards are eligible for 75 percent cost-share up to 30,000 dollars, including both equipment and planting expenses. In addition to this shelterbelt planting option, cost-share for planting shrub clumps in

riparian areas is also offered at similar cost share rates. GFP cost-share cannot be applied to trees funded through any other program or partner.

**Reach out to your closest Private Lands Habitat Biologist, which can be found on page 14, if you're interested in learning more about the woody habitat program.**

## SIGN UP FOR PRAIRIE DOG CONTROL PROGRAMS ENROLLMENT ENDS AUGUST 15

MIKE KLOSOWSKI | REGIONAL SUPERVISOR

Another winter has come and gone in South Dakota—well, for the most part. South Dakota Game, Fish & Parks (GFP) staff and contractors have wrapped up another season of reducing forage damage caused by prairie dogs. Open winters like this are highly conducive to bait and poison applications using oats and zinc phosphide. These dry, open conditions reduce natural food availability, often making the treated oats a more attractive food source.

In 2025, GFP once again treated a large number of acres, exceeding the past decade's average of 9,800 acres and aligning more closely with the early 2000s, when more than 16,000 acres were treated annually. To ensure producers' needs are met, GFP again hired additional bait applicators. Workload was created through the web-based prairie dog request-for-assistance hub on the GFP website.

In 2005, the South Dakota Legislature passed legislation directing GFP to assist with prairie dog-related forage damage, with certain limitations. Generally speaking, there is a three-part test to determine whether a landowner qualifies for assistance in reducing prairie dog colony acreage.

**First**, prairie dogs must originate from public lands. This includes both state-owned or managed properties and federally owned or managed lands (with the exception of Bureau of Land Management properties, where no collaboration or buffer poisoning occurs from the property line).

**Second**, the colony size on private land must exceed 10 acres. As prairie dogs expand from public land, the colony must grow beyond 10 acres on the affected private property.

**Third**, the colony must be located within one mile of the public land from which the prairie dogs originated. Producers who meet these requirements should visit the GFP website at [gfp.sd.gov](http://gfp.sd.gov) and submit the required information. Once eligibility is confirmed, staff will contact producers who submitted a request and meet the criteria. The deadline to apply is August 15.

**Lastly**, producers who do not meet the eligibility requirements for the GFP prairie dog program can still contact GFP for technical assistance or reach out to the South Dakota Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources at 605-773-5559.