

CU IN THE WOODS

WINTER ACTIVITIES FOR THE BOBWHITE MANAGER

By W. Cory Heaton

The cold gloomy days of winter have arrived once again. Winter can be tough for any species of wildlife, but this is especially true for bobwhites. This is the time of year when one can really evaluate the success of their management program. Did we make enough cover to protect the birds from the elements? How about the influx of avian predators? Have our management practices created a sufficient feed supply to carry the birds through the winter? There are lots of what-ifs, but this is a great time of year to survey your habitat and identify the areas that need improvement.

Winter has always been an active time of year for habitat management activities. Tree plantings and prescribed burning are in full force, but what else can a manager do during the winter? Winter is a great time for early successional habitat management. Prescribed burning is commonly used to accomplish this task, but managers could also utilize disking or mowing to accomplish similar results. Disking is the most unique of early successful habitat management practices. Unlike burning or mowing, disking actually turns the soil over and can help to move seed stocks up or down in the soil profile. The vegetation response to disking may look much different than that observed following a prescribed burn of similar timing.

Winter disking allows the manager to promote vegetation production that is dominated by annual grasses and forbs. Species like partridge pea and ragweed are familiar to every bobwhite manager, and these species respond favorably to winter disking. Winter disking promotes favorable habitat

for bobwhites and many other early successional species. In addition, the practice incorporates plant material into the soil. This plant matter begins to break down and nutrients are released back into the soil. Organic matter additions to the soil improve not only soil fertility, but also the soil's ability to retain moisture. The soil moisture holding ability greatly influences the ability of plants to survive and be productive during the hot and dry summer months. The nutritional quality and quantity of vegetation is greatly determined by soil fertility and moisture, and disking can create excellent cover and abundant food resources throughout the growing season and hopefully throughout the dormant season.

I am often asked how and when to disk. Disking intensity is really up to the manager. Light disking is all that is required for the sake of promoting annual grasses and forbs. By light, I mean making one to three passes that are between three to six inches deep. Some sites will require much more intensive disking. This is especially true for sites dominated by fescue. In these areas you may have to disk as if you were prepping the soil for planting. It has been my observation that disking every other year in the winter provides favorable vegetation response for the bobwhite manager. Managers should look at developing a rotation that allows them to disk a portion of their habitat every two to three years. I tend to avoid going three years between disking as this can lead to some encroachment issues with woody species. I am always amazed at how fast trees can grow. Under ideal growing conditions, trees may become too

large for the operation of a disk in three years. Remember the main goal of early successional habitat management is not to let the land turn back into a forest. Disking activities should never remove all the habitat in a single year. Winter cover and feed availability are critical to the success of bobwhite management. The last thing we want to do is disk all of the available early successional habitat in the winter. I suggest developing a rotation that allows a quarter to a third of the habitat to be disked each year. This way you maintain the majority of the habitat each winter.

Another valuable practice for bobwhite managers is to establish cover crops in their food plots. Small grains like wheat, rye, and oats work exceptionally well for this. Ideally, one would want to plant small grains October through mid-November, but we can get satisfactory results from small grains planted in January. These cover crops offer forage value to deer and turkey during the winter, but they also provide valuable seed sources and bugging habitat at the beginning of the nesting season. The main purpose of cover crop plantings is to improve soil conditions for our wildlife plantings. The idea is to produce a lot of biomass that can later be planted into or disked into the soil. As discussed earlier, this biomass greatly improves the ability of the soil to retain moisture and may serve as a slow release fertilizer as nutrients are made available through the bacterial breakdown of the organic matter. The benefits of cover crops definitely outweigh the cost associated with their establishment. Managers with growing season food plots will notice a big difference in the quality of forage produced following cover crops. The Natural Resources

Conservation Service (NRCS) (see link below) has been very active in the field of cover crops in recent years. Bobwhite managers could learn a lot about the topic by visiting their website.

Don't let the cold gloomy days of winter keep you inside. Get out there and take a serious look at the fruits of your management activities. Identify those areas where improvements are needed and make a plan to address the issues. Grab the jumper cables and get that tractor fired up. I know it can be a lot of fun once that tractor is dragging the disk right, but don't get too carried away. Remember, we only want to disturb a quarter or third of the habitat on any given year. If your management plans include food plots, consider planting cover crops to improve the soils and enhance future food plot plantings. I will close by reminding everyone to take good notes on their management activities and observations. No two properties are the same, and as such, responses to management activities may vary from site to site. Having good notes will allow you to identify what seems to be working best on your property.

Links to additional resources-
NRCS Northern Bobwhite Project-
<https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/national/plantsanimals/fishwildlife/?cid=nrcseprd1299624>

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