

Improving Wildlife Habitat on your Small Farm

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SPEAKERS

Christa Hartsook, Adam Janke

C Christa Hartsook 00:00

Welcome to the small farms podcast, a production of the small farms program at Iowa State University Extension and Outreach. In this episode, I will be interviewing Adam Janke, an assistant professor in the Department of Natural Resource Ecology and Management at Iowa State University to talk about how small acreage owners can improve wildlife habitats on their land. I'm Christa Hartsook, small farms program coordinator, and we hope you enjoy the show. Adam, welcome. Thanks for being here.

A Adam Janke 00:26

Yeah, thanks for having me on.

C Christa Hartsook 00:28

Perfect, let's just jump right in how should acreage owners plan for their habitat improvement,

A Adam Janke 00:34

Any sort of wildlife habitats, improvement decisions are sort of driven by what the landowner wants to see on the land. So we have a huge diversity of wildlife here in Iowa. And we have everything from birds that like gravel, parking lots, to birds that like mature closed canopy, forested ecosystems, okay, in everything in between. So I probably won't advocate for the restoration of lots of gravel parking lots in Iowa. We seem to be doing fine with those. But some of the things that landowners tend to be interested in are sort of conspicuous critters that, for example, gamebirds, pheasants, quail and turkeys in managing for birds like that, particularly pheasants and quail. Depending on where you are in the state can be a matter of creating weedy habitats or grassy habitats, quail really need shrubby areas. So cutting timber along the edges of woodlots can help to create shrubby habitat, creating brush piles, grass fields, things

like that. And then wild turkeys, of course, they like wooded areas where there's a lot of oak trees producing acorns that they can eat throughout the year. So encouraging the growth of oak trees and things like that.

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Christa Hartsook 01:57

Okay. So is it important, Adam to first really take stock of what you have on your acreage?

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Adam Janke 02:03

Yeah, I think it can be to know what you have, and where some areas for improvement may be. If you say it and to sort of be able to set realistic goals, yes, because I get a lot of people in that say they live in Northern Iowa, or even North Central Iowa, like here around Ames. And they say I want to have quail on my land, I used to have quail on my lands, well, that's a hard sell. Because quail are mostly a southern bird, they're really hit hard by winters. And it's sort of an unrealistic expectation in some parts of our state, the southern third of the state, it's a very real expectation. And so we want to kind of you want to know what's possible on your land, and I can help with that in my website, and then also, you want to sort of know what you have on your land and, and we can sort of diagnose what may be missing? Or what could maybe be improved to attract this species you're most interested in.

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Christa Hartsook 02:57

Okay? Are there some basic forages are plants you know, that we really could plant to improve for any kind of species that we wanted to attract?

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Adam Janke 03:07

Yeah, there are in, there's sort of two sides of the coin. Here, one could be thinking about wildlife in your production practices. So for example, if you're farming grain or cutting hay, or managing a pasture, there's ways we can manage all those systems that can be better for wildlife. In a lot of cases, they don't affect profitability. And in some cases, you may make some concessions to say, have a slightly lower stocking rate of livestock to have more grass cover for birds, or something like that. But things like delayed hay cuttings can help wildlife a lot. Leaving a few rows of corn, or beans along cover along the woodlot edge or along the grass field edge can do a lot to get pheasants and quail through the winter. Okay. And then. And then the other side of the coin is planting things for wildlife habitat. And of course, lots of people are interested in things like food plots. And we, I don't have any reservations with food plots, you can get a lot of different mixes and targeting different species. But you do want to make sure you have the cover first, because you could have the best food pot in the world. And if there's no place for them to hide from predators or sleep at night, the wildlife won't be there. Yep, so experiment is the biggest thing. I've certainly don't have all the answers and I run in I learned something new every day, every time I talk to a landowner or producer about what they're doing on their land and how they're seeing wildlife respond to certain cropping practices or

where they're cutting firewood or not cutting firewood or where they mowed or didn't mow, things like that. And so experiment, pay close attention. spend lots of time out there and you'll know you'll kind of learn what's working for wildlife,

C Christa Hartsook 04:59

sure, sure makes sense. What about mowing ditches? Adam? You know, we like to see nicely manicured acres and small farms. How does that impact wildlife?

A Adam Janke 05:08

Yeah. Well, I don't like to see nicely manicured, either to the wildlife. And this is something I heard the other day as an expression that I love. And I'm going to probably say it a lot is we like were wild we like to have, we'd like to see wildlife. But we don't like to see where wildlife live. And I thought that was a perfect expression because it is true that wildlife need idle areas, or they need weedy areas or they need grass areas or something like that. And it's not going to be, we're not going to have wildlife in our finely manicured lawns. Or in this case in roadside ditches. I personally think that leaving cover and roadside ditches is the prettiest thing we can do in the landscape. Because sort of to a trained eye I can I appreciate the aesthetic value of our natural plant communities. And also the I know that there's wildlife in there and that personally, to me, as a wildlife biologist, and a passionate person about wildlife is better to me than a finely manicured lawn, where I know there's nothing living so. So that's that's sort of my opinion, different people have different opinions on the matter for sure. But I always tell people, particularly early summer, the best thing you can do for wildlife, is to stay off the tractor. Yes, let them finish their nesting season. There's lots of little ones, particularly in late May and June. Deer fawns and other small critters that can't get away from equipment in the longer we can let that stuff sit, the better. And then sparing stuff, even this time of year. Don't forget, we have lots of critters that have to make it through the winter, and habitat gets really lean this time of year and through until March when things start growing again. So the more we can leave, the better. Now I'm that's not to say we shouldn't manage noxious weeds or we shouldn't, you know, cut hay at the right time for forage production and things like that. I recognize that. But any areas where what we like to call recreational mowing, yes, don't mow recreationally when it wouldn't be ideal. So the wildlife would appreciate. And I think you'll see more wildlife. And that's an enriching thing. I think. So.

C Christa Hartsook 07:25

Adam, we're coming up on kind of the hardest time of the year for wildlife and critters that are outside in general, should we be supplemental feeding that?

A Adam Janke 07:34

Yeah, that's a question we get a lot. And it depends on the species, we have some species that we worry about supplemental feeding with. And this is particularly true of areas outside the backyard. So I really want to discourage people from feeding deer, we have some pretty real concerns about some emerging diseases with deer in any way that they congregate. That sort

of artificially high densities of deer is a potential increased risk of disease transmission. And that's true of any wildlife species. But we really are worried about it with deer. And then there's also things that can build up on the feed anybody that feeds livestock, of course, is aware of problems with aflatoxins are mild toxins on the grain. And that affects wildlife all the same that it does domestic animals so so we don't want to put the wildlife in an increased danger by feeding them. So the other side of that is backyard feeding everybody or I don't know, I won't speak for everybody. But I love to feed birds in the backyard. And lots of people enjoy that it is a fun thing to do during long winter days to see see the life out your window. And so I don't have any reservations about that, I would encourage people to do a few things with that. One, if deer congregating around the feeder. Try to discourage that because we do want to keep deer from congregating in of course, you don't want to share your bird feeder with dairy. And then the other thing is just to pay attention to the hygiene of those feeders because we don't want the grains to get moldy. And we also have research actually here from Iowa State that shows that sort of dirty bird feeders can spread disease, okay. And so you want to bring them in once a month or so and wash them down just like you would your own dishes, soapy water, clean them up and then put them back out there for the wildlife. That'll be that'll be fun and safe for everybody involved in can do some good too for a lot of critters trying to get through the winter.

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Christa Hartsook 09:37

You bet Adam I know, I know we talked about, you know, maybe delaying your hay cutting some of those other kinds of management strategies. We did not talk about pesticide and herbicide applications. How are those impacting wildlife in Iowa?

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Adam Janke 09:50

The impacts of pesticides on wildlife are kind of hard to track. I would say the the biggest concern we would maybe have is there are indirect effects on wildlife. Most of these things are tested. And I'm not familiar with any of that if, for example, you spray it directly on wildlife, you're going to be really concerned if you're staying within label and things like that. But, of course, we use herbicides and pesticides to manage the things that wildlife eat in a lot of cases, sure, weeds and fields, weeds along the edges of fields. And then of course, insects, lots of wildlife eat insects. And so when we're thinking about using pesticides on the farm, I would I guess I would just emphasize that you want to try to keep that stuff in the field, really pay attention to drift. Don't hang the boom over the fence row to knock a few weeds back if you if they're not really problematic, noxious weeds, because that can be really good wildlife habitat. A lot of people sort of lament the loss of weedy crop fields, of course, not producers, but wildlife really did well in pre well dirty fields essentially. And so if if wildlife habitat is one of your priorities, then I always recommend don't use herbicide on on the crop as long as the crop can get going. You know, you don't have to worry about reducing yields slightly or anything like that. If wildlife are really your priority, don't don't spray that stuff. Any more than you absolutely have to. And then in production operations, just be careful fall label and try to keep out of our natural areas essentially. Sure, sure.

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Christa Hartsook 10:10

Right. Are there immediate things Adam that you know, a small farmer or an acreage owner

could do to help improve wildlife habitat or production on their small farm?

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Adam Janke 11:48

Yeah, there's everybody can do something in little little actions can sum two big impacts on for wildlife on on every farm. So things like we've been talking about like leaving leaving weedy areas or leaving grass areas, or thinning the edges of woodlots to try to create shrubby grassy cover instead of just the tall trees. Those can be those can be really good approaches that people can take. The other thing that's really worth mentioning and talking about is all the technical expertise that's available. And the cost share support that's available for people to do stuff like this. So in Iowa, we have, of course, the Natural Resource Conservation Service in every county or at least access to those folks in every county. And they have all sorts of cost share programs available to find wildlife, find areas for wildlife habitat on the farm. Some of these are just one time cost share through for example, Environmental Quality Incentives, Program equip. You can do things like I've been talking about, like edge feathering. You can exclude livestock from water areas, or you can improve your pasture for for forage and for wildlife. Or plant field buffers and all sorts of things that folks can get cost share support to do. And then of course, through the CRP program, Conservation Reserve Program. There's also lots of sort of larger field programs for folks that have larger land areas that could enroll their land and get in have some really nice wildlife habitat, and also sort of keep that revenue stream on the land. So that's a really good option. And then another option that you have here in Iowa, that's exciting is that we have private lands wildlife biologist with the Iowa Department of Natural Resources. And these folks are really knowledgeable experts in their field and they know all the cost share programs, and they know all the land rental programs. They they have the sort of the keys that gets you into those programs. And they know wildlife for sure. And so they can they can come to your land, tell you some projects that you could do, where there's cost, share support where there isn't and they can really be an important key in making really good wildlife habitat on your land. And if you want to find those folks, they're on Iowa Department of Natural Resource website. We call them private lands, wildlife biologists. And then Pheasants Forever has private lands, wildlife biologists throughout the state as well. All to help private landowners make better wildlife habitat on their land.

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Christa Hartsook 14:35

Perfect, some great resources out there for people. Adam, if people are looking for more information specifically from you, and Iowa State University where can we send them?

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Adam Janke 14:44

Yeah, they should. They can find our website. It's if you Googled wildlife extension at Iowa State I hope you would find it. It should, It should be on there but if not, you can certainly go to the Ag and Natural Resources Extension page and you'll find it link to our website or you can remember this wildlife.extension.iastate.edu can get you to the website. And we've got resources on there for for private landowners and my contact informations on there. I, I love this stuff. So I'm always excited to talk about wildlife habitat to to landowners and producers.

C Christa Hartsook 15:22

Great. Anything else, Adam that we need to know?

A Adam Janke 15:25

I don't know, I guess I would just sort of reemphasize this experimentation thing. Wildlife Science and wildlife management is a tricky trade. Things that work in one farm don't work on the other, and vice versa. But it's also a really rewarding thing. You do a little bit of work and all of a sudden you hear Bobwhites whistling in the back 40 That you never heard for years or something like that, or you see pheasants crowing or see a migratory bird or white tailed deer, whatever it is that you're excited about. So I just encourage people to tinker, you're never going to do something that doesn't help some wildlife species except perhaps building a concrete parking lot or something or

C Christa Hartsook 16:14

building that gravel parking lot

A Adam Janke 16:15

ripping out ripping out a fence row or something like that would hurt wildlife, but, you know, anything in sort of natural areas that you do is going to benefit somebody in and you'll learn from that and it'll be a lot of fun to help.

C Christa Hartsook 16:26

Okay, thanks for being on the show today, Adam we really appreciate it.

A Adam Janke 16:29

Yeah, thanks for having me. I really enjoyed it.