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Tree rows provide good wind breaks when full grown. On top of that, they can also later be used to build brush piles for wildlife habitat.

<u>Nick White / Wind Break Award</u> Tree rows make good cover

BY RYAN CARLSON Property owner Alice Jo Taylor of Hanston, Kansas and operator Nick White of Windom planted tree rows to protect against the Kansas winds.

White says Taylor, his grandmother, took part of the ground where his house is located out of the CRP program allowing him to plant the trees. White said the decision came after he and his wife decided the trees were needed to stave off the hard Kansas winds. "We planted around 600," said White.

Planting trees isn't an easy process. Spray paint was used to mark where the rows were to be planted. White used an auger and skid steer to create holes for the trees ahead of time and to loosen the soil. Afterwards the trees were mowed to keep down weeds and so that other individuals can see them. "It's a lot of trees to try and take care of," said White.

There's no guarantee that trees will survive after planting. Nature and the elements can make getting rows started a difficult task. White said the drought recently experienced by Kansas killed many of the trees. In fact, it took three times of planting to get the current tree row started. "It's been quite a battle but the last few years we have been getting some rain so they've been doing pretty good," said White.

White said his family has been in the area for a long time. Taylor's brother and father farmed the area for years, but today all of the fields have been converted into CRP ground.

All in all, White said the trees have thrived. He said some of them are

Benefits of Cover Crops

As many within the agricultural community are coming to realize, cover crops can dramatically improve soil health and prevent erosion and runoff while providing benefits like increased field productivity or added livestock forage. It's easy to see the overall environmental benefits that reduced erosion and runoff can have for aquatic species or the effect that healthy soils have for soil fauna, but perhaps lost in that discussion are some other important and immediate benefits that cover crops can have for our wildlife.

When I speak with people to help them make wildlife management plans, I often use two words repeatedly: "diversity" and "interspersion." Generally speaking, the more diversity of habitat types provided and the more interspersed those habitats are, the more potential a property has for wildlife. For example, if I was referring to a quail habitat plan, I'd discuss nesting, brood-rearing, and escape cover, and if a person was standing at the edge of one habitat type, they should be no more than about 40 yards from the other two habitat types. That same philosophy holds true from a broad-scale perspective as well. At the landscapescale, diversity and interspersion of habitat still play a critical role in creating healthy wildlife populations. Providing diversity, in this context, ensures that wildlife have ample choices to locate their required resources. Cover crops contribute to habitat diversity. That's the overarching principle behind nearly any other statement I can make about their benefits. By ensuring that fields have green cover, even in idle years, it allows the ground to be used by wildlife. For the most part, unless weeds are allowed to grow, fallow fields present no benefits to wildlife (from insects to deer). However, by adding any kind of cover, you'll make a tract of ground more suitable to wildlife. Cover crops like clovers, vetch species, and peas can provide great habitat for native pollinator species. This has important advantages for agriculture and the ecosystem. Bee populations have been rapidly declining across the country. This decline has the potential to adversely affect agricultural production, since many commodity crops are pollinated by bees. Many of the common species used as cover crops are selected by deer. Studies done on deer feeding habits in Kansas have revealed that white-tailed deer diets are comprised of about 50 percent farm crops. In the fall, winter, and early spring, that percentage is much higher. I'm sure there are farmers reading this thinking of all the deer they've seen grazing their wheat or alfalfa in the fall and winter. That's because of the nutritious forages available at that time of year. By adding cover crops to your cropland rotation, you have the opportunity to shift grazing impacts away from commodity crops. Finally, cover crops can provide important habitat for birds. Rye, triticale, and wheat will all provide nesting habitat if allowed to grow over 14 inches tall before termination. Moreover, cover cropped fields can provide brood-rearing habitat (our most limiting habitat component for birds in the state) for foraging chicks. As I alluded to previously, insects are attracted to diversity. A field with a single cover crop will have more insects than one with nothing growing. Adding cover crop species will also increase insect numbers and diversity. This is great for young birds that require insects as their main food source in the spring. Please contact your Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) office or conservation district office located at your local county U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Service Center (listed in the telephone book under United States Government or on the internet at offices.usda.gov) for assistance. More information is also available on the Kansas Web site at www.ks.nrcs. usda.gov. Follow us on Twitter @NRCS Kansas. USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.

already up to his waist in height. White's not done planting trees. He and his wife plan to plant a row of hedge and ceders along a part of their property that had railroad tracks in the past. "It's elevated and will be a good north wind block some day," said White.

White says the trees are much to his liking. He is an outdoorsman and enjoys hunting. The trees provide great cover for wildlife, privacy and stop the wind. "The trees make you feel a bit more cozy," said White.

How to create Brush piles for bird habitats

BY ZAC EDDY

A few weeks ago, I watched a brush saw clear dozens of six-foot tall elm trees from the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) field across the road from my house. I hoped the landowner would take advantage of the opportunity to provide multiple benefits from the effort and expense. Too often, trees cleared from pastures and CRP are left haphazardly across the field, or pushed into large, dense piles. Whether in piles or not, the trees are generally left to be burned with a follow-up fire.

When trees are piled for burning, it is done with a bulldozer. Gamebrids won't use them because the piles are too dense to allow birds to flush from within. Instead, the piles become dens for mesocarnivores—predators like skunks and raccoons.

With little extra effort, brush piles can be created that will provide escape and thermal cover for pheasants and quail. These structures can quickly enhance quail habitat. The brush piles produce a required element of quail habitat, without planting native shrubs that may take years to establish.

Instead of creating large piles, stack the trees in a couple of levels. If selectively cutting trees or thinning dense stands, they should be felled so the crowns fall next to each other to create the piles. By stacking trees next to each other, not pushed into thick piles, they are open enough that predators won't be as inclined to make dens under them and they are loose enough to allow birds to flush from inside the pile if needed.

The goal is to create artificial shrub thickets in areas where shrubs like sandhill plum or fragrant sumac are needed. The piles should be too thick to walk through but thin enough so that a softball easily bounces through the branches, before hitting the ground—like a Plinko board on The Price is Right gameshow.

Piles should be constructed to dimensions of 30 feet by 50 feet by 4-8 feet tall. Any type of tree can be used to create these piles. Cedars are too thick to be used right after cutting and piling, but make great long lasting artificial thickets after they have dried out. Deciduous trees, like elms, hedge, and locust provide great protective cover right away.

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