

## WILDLIFE

# Review of grazing practices could benefit wildlife

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**In his 1933** book *Game Management*, Aldo Leopold stated “game can be restored by the creative use of the same tools which have heretofore

destroyed it – ax, plow, cow, fire and gun.” People have recognized for many years that grazing management is not always beneficial to wildlife. Statements such as “if pastures are in good shape for cattle, then they’re good for wildlife,” are incorrectly used to justify management decisions favoring cattle. Wildlife are often at the losing end of this battle even when landowners try to manage simultaneously for cattle and wildlife, primarily because the two have different needs.

Make no mistake, grazing is a critical component of wildlife habitat management in the Southern Great Plains. The disturbance it provides can create or help maintain plant diversity and structure, necessary habitat components for most species of wildlife. If wildlife is deemed an important component of an operation, the key is to apply grazing with wildlife habitat needs in mind.

Grazing management for cattle attempts to maintain high quality,



*A “messy” landscape is beneficial to wildlife and can be created by applying grazing and prescribed fire with wildlife habitat needs in mind.*

high volume, somewhat uniform grass production to optimize animal performance and production. Cattle producers target grasses and attempt to eliminate bare ground and reduce forbs and brush in favor of homogeneous, grass-dominated pastures. Often, areas less suitable for cattle grazing are where management for wildlife occurs. If prescribed fire is used, the objectives are usually to improve forage quality for cattle and control brush with grazing commonly

deferred following the fire.

Improper cattle stocking rate is a major contributor to poor habitat quality for most species of wildlife. Overstocking cattle for prolonged periods of time negatively affects wildlife by reducing nesting cover, plant diversity, and screening cover required for feeding and security. Having too many cattle is detrimental to long-term cattle production and simply removes too many herbaceous plants and/or the specific plants ►

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critical to quality habitat for most wildlife species. As a rule-of-thumb for wildlife in the Southern Great Plains, moderate cattle stocking rates are best in areas receiving more than or equal to 30 inches of rain and light cattle stocking rates are best in areas with less than 30 inches. This allows for greater flexibility with grazing management decisions and creates an opportunity to use prescribed fire, another critical component of wildlife habitat management in the Southern Great Plains.

Some factors correlated to grazing management can also be detrimental

to wildlife. Conversion of native range to introduced pastures such as bermudagrass, tall fescue and many varieties of Old World Bluestem have eliminated many acres of wildlife habitat. Overuse of herbicides for forb and brush control to increase forage volume for cattle has also eliminated many acres of habitat for wildlife. Often these practices are understandable but incorrectly justified in order to meet mortgage payments or to produce food and fiber for mankind. However, there are many acres where these practices are not justified for production purposes but are applied

for aesthetics. In these situations, there is room for modification to better meet the needs of wildlife.

Management for most wildlife species should include the use of prescribed fire along with a grazing management plan that includes strategic (temporal and spatial) distribution of cattle stocked at a light to moderate rate. These practices require a little more thought and planning to implement but can greatly increase patchiness and diversify plant communities and structure required to create and maintain quality habitat for wildlife. ■