The best way to manage for wildlife is to promote a diverse landscape of native plants. However, a significant portion of land in the United States has been converted to introduced forages and crops for livestock and human consumption. Most crop and introduced forage systems are predominantly monocultures and only fulfill one aspect of wildlife habitat for a limited time during the year. One way to increase plant diversity to benefit wildlife in these systems is to plant cover crops. Cover crops can be used to provide food or shelter during a time of year that the primary crop is not present.

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A warm-season cover crop like sunn hemp provides food and shelter for wildlife and pollinators in a field that is usually planted to wheat during the cool-season.
Introduced warm-season perennial grasses, such as bermudagrass, and crops usually only provide cover if little else is available, and they only provide some food for a limited number of bird and mammal species. The value of wildlife habitat these systems provide is even less during the dormant season. In introduced warm-season perennial grasses or crops, a cool-season cover crop with cereal grains and legumes such as peas, clovers and vetches can be planted. Most of these plants provide food for deer and can provide food and possibly shelter for some species of birds during adverse winter weather.

In cool-season crop or grazing systems, such as wheat or rye, food is usually the only part of habitat filled for mammals and birds. When these plants are dormant during the summer, the seeds are eaten by birds. To increase diversity and improve habitat value, warm-season cover crops with sorghums, millets, sunflowers and warm-season legumes such as cowpeas and sunn hemp can be planted. Sorghums, millets and sunflowers are excellent seed producers for birds, and deer like to eat cowpeas and sunn hemp. Additionally, many of these cover crop species provide excellent shelter during summer months.

Cover crops can also benefit pollinators. Many native pollinator species, such as bees, wasps, butterflies, moths and hummingbirds, are important for our food production. Cover crops can improve habitat for these species to thrive and increase. Many legumes and forbs are excellent pollinator plants. Try to plant cover crop mixes that have plants flowering at different times throughout the season to provide an extended food source.

Many local seed companies now offer seed mixes designed for wildlife species that can be used as a cover crop. Check with your local seed company to see what they offer or how you can make your own mix.

Monoculture systems provide limited habitat for wildlife species for only a short time of the year. Wildlife need habitat year-round, and cover crops can help provide seasonal habitat where it is otherwise lacking. Cover crops can add diversity to a system to benefit wildlife species in addition to extending the grazing season and improving soil health.

Cover crops can be used to provide food or shelter during a time of year that the primary crop is not present.