Habitat stewardship tips for Washington's small woodlands

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Habitat diversity is the goal

Maintain and enhance the various habitat types on your property. This will provide the best opportunities for a diversity of wildlife species.

Protect existing habitat features

Locate and protect unique habitats

These habitats can include wetlands, springs, seeps, hardwood stands, and riparian zones.

Wildlife trees

Locate the best quality snags and live trees with dead tops, cavities, and feeding excavations. Protect those standing dead trees in decay states providing cavity habitats. Retain broken and multiple-topped trees. Retain no-cut buffer patches around the best snags when harvesting to mitigate safety hazards from the snags falling

Down logs

Retain and protect all larger down logs, especially those in advanced decay. If these logs are in the way during harvesting or other forest management activities, move them to a safe place. Avoid crushing these logs.

Understory shrubs and low trees

Retain species with high wildlife value such as cascara, huckleberry, elderberry, wild rose, etc. Emphasize trees and shrubs that bear fruit for wildlife.

Gather firewood by cutting small-diameter green trees

Thin small diameter trees for firewood and allow them to cure for at least a year before burning. This will provide a supply of firewood while leaving snags, cavity trees, and down logs for wildlife.

Wildlife habitat enhancements

Create snags during thinning and harvests

Mechanical harvesters can snip stems off eight to 15 feet above the ground with little effort. These short snags become cavity habitat in a few years. Thinning crews can make short snags out of four- to six-inch trees. Snags can also be created by girdling or topping.

Create habitat piles

Stack larger branches and stems into crisscross piles with stems and branches that are at least four inches in diameter. Use larger material piled at least four to six layers deep to form the core of the habitat pile, and cover this with a one- to two-foot thick "roof" of smaller diameter branches.

Create openings in stands with uniform canopies

Patch cuts approximately 100 to 200 feet across will allow sun to reach the ground and provide low plants for wildlife. Protect these patches from encroachment by invasive weeds.

Plant native shrubs

Identify preferred species of fruit-bearing shrubs such as elderberry, serviceberry, and chokecherry, and plant these in openings or along forest edges. These shrubs may need protection from deer browse until they become established.

Plant seed mixes on disturbed sites

Apply seed mixes to skid trails and landings to provide forage for wildlife, reduce erosion, and suppress invasive weeds.

Provide water

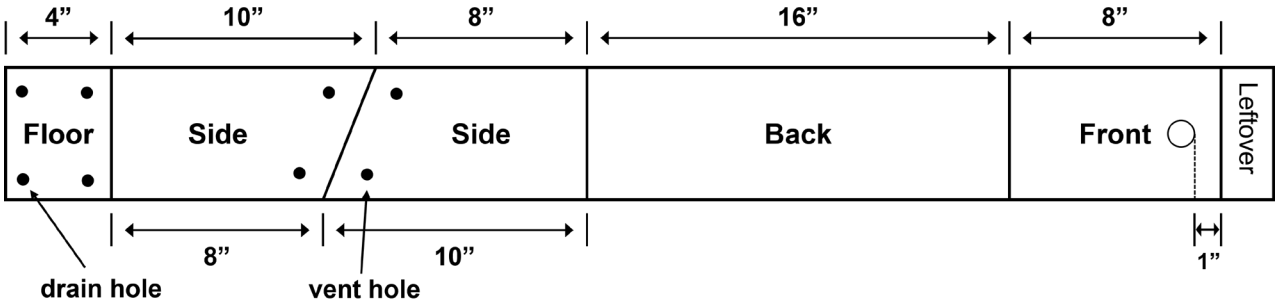
If no streams, springs, or ponds are nearby, create open water sources. Even puddles and bird baths will provide essential water for many species. Keep the water source clean and filled.

Install nest boxes

Nest boxes can provide supplemental cavity habitat for nesting birds and small mammals such as squirrels and chipmunks. Birds such as chickadees and wrens will use boxes installed within the forest canopy. Bluebirds and swallows will use boxes around the edges of openings.

Simple nest box design

1. Cut a four-foot length of a 1-inch by 6-inch (nominal size) board into pieces as shown below. Simply expand these proportions to make boxes for larger species like owls or squirrels.



2. Make the roof separately from a 7.5-inch length of a 1-inch by 8-inch board and apply caulk where the roof meets the back.

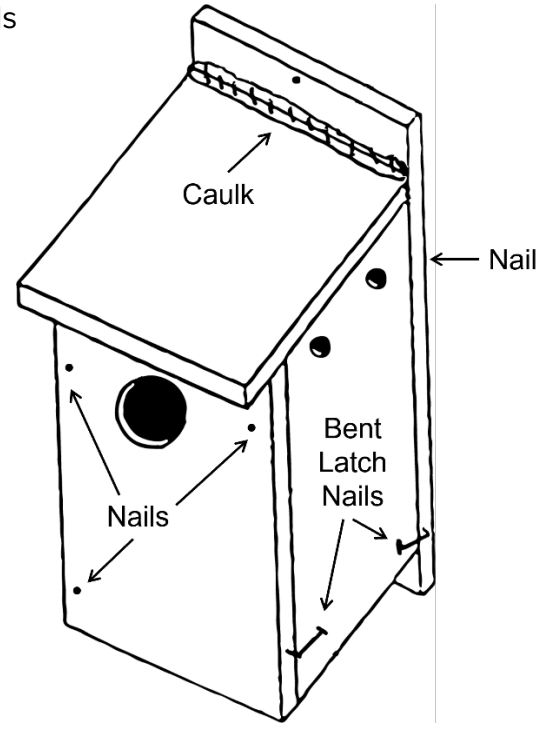
3. The entrance hole should be one and an eighth to one and a half inches in diameter for small birds and three inches for the larger squirrel or owl box. The hole can be on the side for squirrels..

4. Hinge the side or front with nails or screws to open for cleaning and latch it with bent nails (see image below).

5. Roughen the inside of the door to help babies climb out. Place a layer of wood chips or dry leaves in larger boxes.

6. Small boxes can be hung at eye level. Squirrel or owl boxes should be at least ten feet up on trees. Use aluminum nails

7. Check and clean the box annually.



How to construct a habitat pile

Pile sizing and spacing

Habitat piles provide habitat for birds, small mammals, reptiles, and amphibians. These are especially important in winter, so piles need to be adequately sized. Piles should be six to 20 feet wide and four to eight feet tall. For a hand-constructed wildlife pile you will need approximately 15 to 18 four- to eight-inch diameter logs and 60 to 80 branches with or without foliage. Install or maintain at least one pile per acre, preferably in clusters of three to five within 100 feet of each other.

Construction steps

1. Put the larger logs on the bottom leaving space in the center. Arrange some logs in piles of three to create small tunnels between them.

2. Arrange the central logs to create an open "cave" in the center for larger animals.

3. Provide space between logs and branches for wildlife to hide.

4. Wedge one larger branch upwards as a perch.

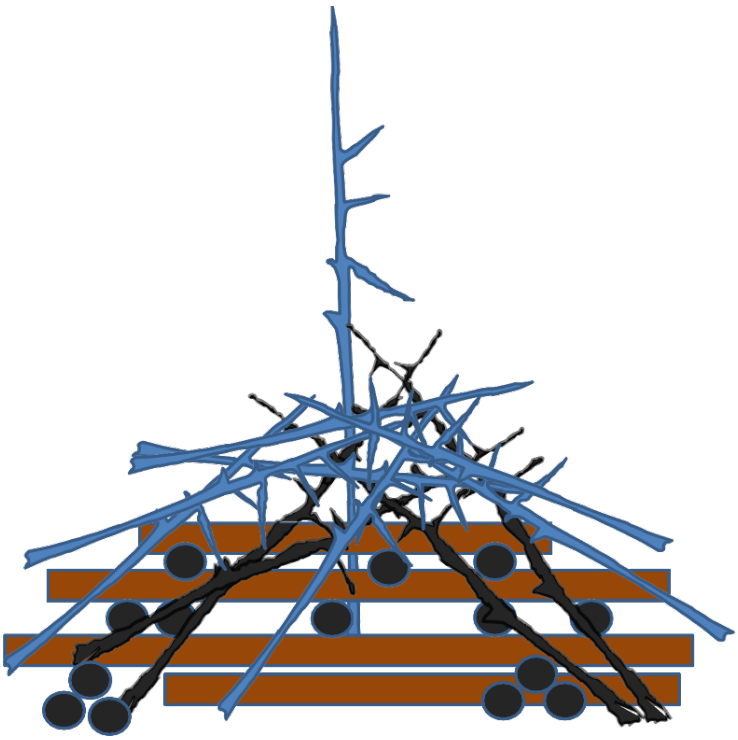
5. Cover the outside of the pile with at least three layers of branches. Avoid using too much super fine material that will collapse. If the top layer is dense enough, it can provide cover from snow and rain.

6. The pile should be six to 20 feet wide and four to eight feet tall.

Habitat pile diagrams

This diagram shows a top view of a constructed habitat:

This diagram shows a side view of a constructed habitat pile with a perch:



Large log surrogates

Linear piles of small-diameter logs can serve as surrogates for large logs. Use five to 11 pieces, with or without branches. This creates a concentration of decaying wood acting in a similar manner to a big, rotting log. This is good for the soil and provides good habitat for insects, amphibians, reptiles, and small mammals.