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## Protecting Wildlife Habitat on Ranchettes

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## Protecting wildlife habitat on ranchettes

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**Key words** : ranchette, habitat fragmentation, exurbanization

**Introduction** Grassland habitat is rapidly being lost world-wide (White & Vanasselt 2001). In western North America, one of the primary contributors to this loss is conversion of large ranches into small ranchettes (1.5-75 acres) (*i.e.* Gori & Engquist 2003). Many ranchette owners are not aware of the impacts their new home may have on the land and its inhabitants, or what steps they can take to mitigate for those impacts.

**Materials and methods** Audubon, with funding from USDA-NRCS, has developed an educational program to assist newcomers and others who wish to maintain or enhance wildlife habitat on their property. On a nationwide level, country home and ranchette owners can access information through Audubon's website: <http://ranchettes.audubonathome.org/>. Three western states, Arizona, Colorado and Wyoming, are establishing pilot projects to address issues in their regions. Arizona's "Living Gently on the Land" webpages include practical tips for the ranchette owner such as how to build a wild-life friendly fence, frequently-asked-questions, a directory of resources, and guidelines for co-existing with our wild neighbors. We are working with partners to develop regional guides such as *Rural Living in Santa Cruz Co.* and hosting workshops to enhance and protect wildlife habitat. In Colorado, we are helping existing communities of ranchette owners organize "co-ops" among neighbors to manage their lands cooperatively for the benefit of wildlife, and are conducting on-the-ground workshops to provide guidance on how to improve land management or create a habitat stewardship committee. We have created informational materials including a 90-page guidebook entitled *Colorado Wildscapes: Bringing Conservation Home*. Audubon Wyoming has been addressing fragmentation by helping landowners make healthy decisions on their properties through education. We provide landowners with practical science-based solutions in three ways, an easy to read quarterly magazine, small acreage workshops held throughout the state, and by issuing informational literature directly to owners of subdivided rural properties.

**Results and discussion** Response from ranchette owners has been gratifying and underscored the need for even more information to be compiled and made readily available. Conversion of ranches to ranchettes is continuing at a pace that threatens to outstrip our ability to reach compatible landowners.

**Conclusions** Many ranchette owners are willing to provide or protect habitat for wildlife, once they understand the issues and have access to appropriate tools with which to develop management plans. However, continued educational efforts and increased collaboration with other NGOs, academic institutions, federal and state agencies, and other policy makers will be necessary to accomplish large scale habitat protection.

### References

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