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## Purdue University Forestry and Natural Resources

# Hoosier Farmland Wildlife Notes: warm season grasses, why all the fuss?

by Brian J. MacGowan

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Many wildlife professionals are encouraging landowners to include planting warm season grasses in their wildlife management plans. The purpose of this publication is to describe the many benefits of warm season grasses, especially their benefits to wildlife.

### What are warm season grasses?

Grasses are frequently categorized into two groups – cool season and warm season grasses. Cool season grasses, such as fescue, Kentucky bluegrass, and bromegrass, set seed in late-spring and early-summer. Warm season grasses, often called native prairie grasses, set seed in late-summer and early-fall. Therefore, warm season grasses, such as big bluestem, little bluestem, Indian grass, side oats grama, and switchgrass, are most vigorous during the hot summer months when cool season grasses have already reached maturity.

### What are the benefits of warm season grasses?

- Are native to Indiana
- Can improve soil organic matter
- Deep root systems (4-8 feet) stabilize soil
- Grow well on poor soils and do not require fertilizers or mowing
- Provide high-quality wildlife habitat
- Provides quality pasture forage late in the summer
- Can help reduce soil erosion
- Improves the aesthetic quality of your land

### Wildlife benefits of warm season grasses

Warm season grasses provide good cover for a variety of wildlife species. Most warm season grasses are bunch grasses rather than sod grasses. The clumps of grass are ideal sites for nests, the spaces among clumps allow small ground-dwelling wildlife to move freely yet still provide

good overhead cover. Warm season grasses do not lodge (bend over) easily. Thus, they provide ideal nesting and winter cover for many ground-nesting birds such as ring-necked pheasant and bobwhite quail.

While they provide excellent cover, warm season grasses provide little food for wildlife. However, adding native forbs (non-woody plants that are not grasses or sedges) will enhance the food value of any planting. Often these forbs have showy flowers that bloom throughout the spring, summer, or fall.

### Establishing warm season grasses

One drawback to planting warm season grasses can be the difficulty in establishment. Warm season grasses can become established a year after planting, but it can take 2 or 3 years in some cases, especially when planting into established vegetation rather than a tilled field. This can be problematic since landowners often desire immediate results and plantings will look “weedy” before the warm season grasses become established. Also, most stands of warm season grasses are planted with a special no-till drill. These drills have a special agitator in the seed box that is required because warm season grass seed is extremely lightweight and fluffy.

These issues have become less problematic in recent years. As more people plant warm season grasses, we have simply become better at establishing them. Second, the availability of warm season grass drills continues to increase. In addition to the IDNR, you can borrow/rent a warm season grass no-till drill from many SWCD offices, Pheasant Forever or Quail Unlimited chapters, or RC&D offices.

**Table 1. Summary of programs that provide assistance for establishing warm season grasses and other conservation practices (adapted from NRCS Wildlife Habitat Management Institute – *Technical Notes*).**

Program	Land Eligibility	Available Assistance	Contact
Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP)	Potential fish & wildlife habitats; no cropping history required.	Up to 75% cost-share for establishing conservation practices under 5-10 year contracts	NRCS local office or IDNR District Wildlife Biologist
Conservation Reserve Program and (CRP)	Highly erodible land, wetland, certain other lands with cropping history. Streamside areas in pasture land.	50% cost-share for establishing permanent cover and conservation practices, and annual rental payments, for land enrolled in 10- to 15-year contracts. Additional financial incentives are available for some practices (i.e., Continuous CRP).	NRCS or FSA local office
Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)	Cropland, grazing land & other agricultural land in need of treatment.	Up to 75% cost-share for conservation practices in accordance with 5- to 10-year contracts. Incentive payments for certain management practices.	NRCS local office
Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP)	Previously degraded wetland and adjacent upland buffer, with limited amount and 100% cost-share on restoration under of natural wetland, and existing or restorable riparian areas.	75% cost-share for wetland restoration under 10-year contracts and 30-year easements, permanent easements. Payments for purchase of 30-year or permanent conservation easements.	NRCS local office
Wildlife Habitat Cost Share Program	Minimum of 10 ac. of land not part of a shooting preserve.	Up to 90% cost-share for establishing conservation practices.	IDNR District Wildlife Biologist
Game Bird Habitat Stamp Program	Minimum of 10 ac. of land not part of a shooting preserve.	Up to \$100/ac for establishing conservation practices for a minimum of 3 years on 5 to 40-ac parcels.	IDNR District Wildlife Biologist
Partners for Fish & Wildlife Program (PFW)	Most degraded fish and/or wildlife habitat.	Up to 100% financial and technical assistance to restore wildlife habitat under minimum 10-year cooperative agreements.	USFWS, Bloomington Field Office

**Additional Information**

For additional information on assistance with conservation planning, cost-share opportunities, and wildlife incentive programs, contact your county Extension Office, IDNR, Division of Fish & Wildlife (317) 232-4080, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (812) 334-4261, local USDA Service Center, or visit [www.agriculture.purdue.edu/fnr/](http://www.agriculture.purdue.edu/fnr/).

**Related Publications**

Langell G., Montgomery B., and Stonebraker R. 1998. *Establishing Warm-Season Grasses in Indiana*, IDNR, Division of Fish & Wildlife.  
 NRCS Wildlife Habitat Management Institute – Technical Notes.  
[www.ag.iastate.edu/centers/whmi/technotes.htm](http://www.ag.iastate.edu/centers/whmi/technotes.htm)

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