Brush Piles and Rows for Wildlife Management

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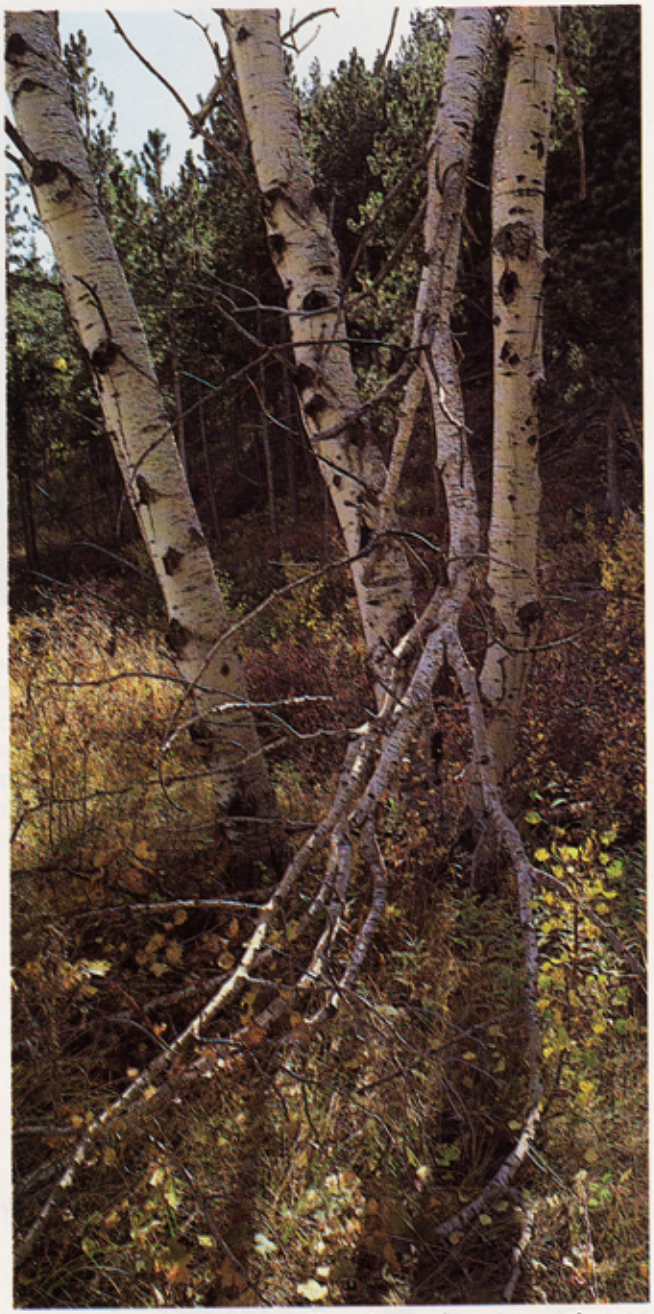
Cover is one of three necessary components needed for wildlife survival. While shrubs and trees make ideal wildlife cover, they are often unavailable in many areas, require many years to become established once planted, and may not provide "optimum" habitat for ground-nesting and ground-dwelling wildlife species, even upon maturation. One alternative to provide wildlife cover is construction of brush piles or brush rows.

Brush piles for wildlife cover are an attractive option for a number of reasons. They can be constructed quickly and easily at minimal cost and provide immediate nest, escape, and winter cover for wildlife. Ideally, both permanent wildlife plantings and brush piles should be used in conjunction with one another. In the period before shrubs and trees reach optimum height for wildlife use, constructed brush piles serve a dual purpose. They act as a windbreak and trap moisture-bearing snow for the developing shrubs and trees while providing cover for wildlife. With proper location, brush piles can attract a number of wildlife species including rabbits, ground-dwelling game bird species, and many species of songbirds.

Placement and Construction

Placement, height, density of the center, and loose edges are key components to proper brush pile construction. Optimum locations for brush piles and brush rows include areas near wildlife feeding sites, along field edges, randomly scattered in overgrown or fallow fields, along upper slopes of draws and ravines, and adjacent to cultivated lands in proximity to other cover. While certain species of wildlife such as cottontail rabbits utilize much smaller brush piles, a brush pile approximately 20 feet in diameter and three to eight feet high will benefit the greatest number of wildlife species. If a lack of suitable materials or ground space prohibit construction of this optimum-sized brush pile, a smaller one can be developed. It is better to have smaller brush piles available to wildlife than none at all.



The typical woodlot offers plenty of raw material for brush piles.

This brush pile is barely big enough for a cottontail but offers cover for a variety of mice, reptiles, and invertebrates.

Brush piles can be constructed from a number of materials. Logs can be criss-crossed on the ground to serve as a base for the pile (figure 5). Old stumps serve the same purpose with branches stacked against them (figure 3). Used tires, rock piles, old culvert sections, drain tile, or woven fence wire can also be utilized as a suitable base for a brush pile. Once the base of the brush pile is established, other logs, trimmed branches, or even discarded Christmas trees can be stacked against the base, stump side toward the center. Breaking and bending lower branches of a tree to the ground is another quick and relatively easy way to construct a brush pile (figure 4).

Some sort of base for the brush pile creates openings in the interior allowing wildlife species to move inside the brush pile. Over time, the pile will begin to sag and require additional branches to maintain effectiveness.

"Living" brush piles can be constructed using one or a number of trees. Both deciduous and coniferous trees can be used for this purpose. Living brush piles are created by cutting a live tree (or trees) one-half to two-thirds through the trunk, then pushing the tree over on its side. Leaving a portion of the trunk and bark intact allows the tree to continue growing while enhancing the cover value of the brush pile. Remember to cut the tree trunk two to three feet

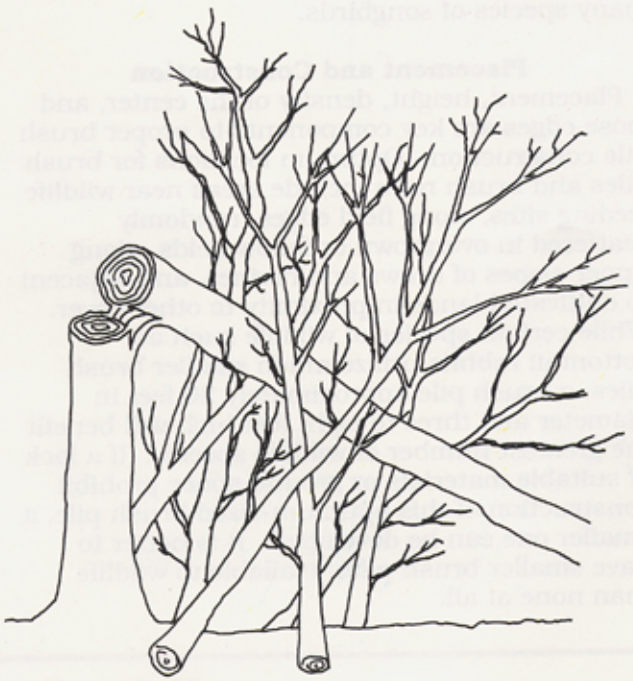


Figure 1. Creating a "living" brush pile by half-cutting a tree and piling brush against the resulting structure.

Figure 2. Creating a "living" brush pile by half-cutting several trees in a concentrated area.

Figure 3. Stacking branches against an old stump to construct a brush pile.

above the ground, to provide a suitable base for the brush pile. Several trees in a concentrated area can be cut in this manner and felled in sequence to form a criss-cross living brush pile (figure 2). Living brush piles are normally not as dense as traditional brush piles. Stacking additional branches against the felled tree(s) can increase the cover density as illustrated in (figure 1).

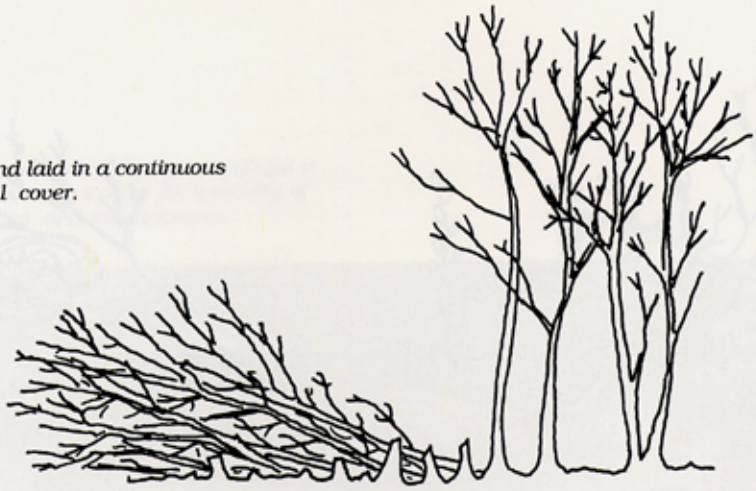
Once established, a brush pile can be further enhanced for wildlife by planting wildlife foods around adjacent edges. This technique provides a food source for wildlife as well as additional cover. Climbing vines and similar plants such as Japanese honeysuckle, raspberry, and climbing roses can be planted and allowed to grow over the brush pile, further enhancing its sheltering ability. Moisture collected from trapped snow and precipitation will enhance the growing conditions for these plants.

Conclusion

Proper placement, construction, and maintenance of brush piles can prove beneficial to wildlife species, complement other habitat features, and provide the landowner with greater opportunities to view and enjoy wildlife. The minimal costs involved in constructing brush piles for wildlife makes them affordable for any landowner, and the beneficial effects to wildlife

Figure 4. Breaking and bending the lower branches of a standing tree to create brush pile habitat.

Figure 5. Creating a brush pile base by criss-crossing logs on the ground.



Fence row saplings cut and laid in a continuous windrow offer exceptional cover.

are well worth the minimal amount of time and effort needed for brush pile construction. Yet each year, farm and ranch owners burn or otherwise destroy countless potential brush piles or brush pile materials during "clean up" operations. If you plan to discard brush pile materials, contact your local scout or sportsman's group first to see if they wish to use the materials for brush pile construction in another location.

If you would like further information or assistance with design and placement of brush piles on your property, contact the Game and Fish Department representative in your area.

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This publication is one in a series of habitat extension bulletins produced by the Wyoming Game and Fish Department. Call 1-800-842-1934 for additional information or assistance.