

# CLEARCUTTING FOR WILDLIFE

**CLEARCUTS DO NOT HAVE TO BE A BAD THING FOR WILDLIFE.  
WITH THE RIGHT DESIGN, LOCATION AND MANAGEMENT,  
CLEARCUTS CAN PROVIDE QUALITY HABITAT AND HUNTING OPPORTUNITIES.**

## By Dave Edwards

Clearcuts are bad, right? Not always. Clearcuts may not be the most aesthetically pleasing habitat to look at, but they can certainly provide quality wildlife habitat if designed and managed properly. As a wildlife biologist for Westervelt Wildlife Services, where we own and manage hunting leases on over 950,000 acres of intensively managed timberland, you can imagine the number of calls I receive each year from hunting clubs concerned about clearcutting and how it is going to ruin their hunting. In an attempt to calm these concerns, I often start off by explaining that clearcuts are simply an unavoidable part of timber management — which is the primary use of the land. This answer never seems to be what the hunting club member wants to hear. However, once I begin explaining how clearcuts can actually enhance their hunting opportunities, I have their attention, and they are willing to listen.

Proper forest management, even intensive timber production strategies, can provide quality wildlife habitat. In fact, little or no timber management has detrimental effects on the wildlife

*The wildlife clearcut shown above features a hub-and-spoke arrangement of shooting lanes radiating from a central point, which is also the location of a tri-pod stand. Note that some of the spokes are planted food plots and others are not. Also note that this property is dominated by mature hardwoods with little to no understory vegetation — this wildlife clearcut is playing an important role by adding dense cover and natural forage that are in short supply on this land. All of the photographs used to illustrate this article were taken on the ground in the clearcut shown above.*

value of a property. The key in balancing timber management and wildlife value is to maintain good habitat diversity both in species composition and ages as well as good habitat *interspersation* — how habitats are situated next to each other. Thus, if one of your property management goals is to optimize the wildlife value, clearcuts larger than 50 acres are less desirable. They result in less habitat diversity and interspersation and often contain what I consider to be wasted space. By “wasted space” I mean that most wildlife species, particularly game species like deer, turkey, and quail, are edge-oriented and will primarily use the perimeters

of large clearcuts. Large clearcuts have lots of edge, but the middle of these clearcuts receives less use by wildlife and therefore is wasted space. This space could be put to better use by a landowner primarily interested in managing wildlife.

A similar example I often see is having too much commercial agriculture, which can have the same effect on wildlife value. Although large clearcuts and large agricultural fields provide a tremendous amount of wildlife value, both usually have wasted space that is inefficient use of your property from a wildlife standpoint.

Small clearcuts, on the other hand, are quite beneficial for wildlife and can provide exceptional bedding, nesting, escape, loafing and foraging habitat for deer, turkeys and other wildlife. Incorporating small wildlife clearcuts across the landscape is a particularly useful method for enhancing the wildlife value on properties where early successional habitat is limited — this is the youngest stage of habitat before tree encroachment and is exemplified by old fields, pastures, etc. Examples of properties that would benefit from wildlife clearcuts are those that are predominately mature bottomland hardwood forests, mature pine forest, mature mixed pine/hardwood, or properties with little or no “open” land. These properties are often very pleasing to the eye, but they offer deer and other wildlife little in the way of quality food and cover.

### **What are Wildlife Clearcuts?**

Everyone knows what a normal clearcut is, but what is a wildlife clearcut? Wildlife clearcuts are relatively small, irregularly shaped, and range from 1 to 20 acres. They are strategically located and designed to enhance the wildlife value and hunting opportunities. Wildlife clearcuts are most effective on properties with little habitat diversity and are primarily composed of mature forests or where neighboring properties exhibit these habitat characteristics. Mature forests normally lack year-round quality food and cover for wildlife. As a forest matures to canopy closure, insufficient levels of sunlight reach the forest floor to stimulate plant germination. These areas are easily identified because the understory or the forest floor,



*For the first 1 to 3 years, wildlife clearcuts will provide good hunting, as the cut will offer quality native browse as well as cover. Early on, you can create shooting lanes or firebreaks in these cuts, and these can be maintained (below) while the rest of the cut reverts to forested habitat.*



the part we are most concerned about when managing game species, will often have a park-like appearance. I often work with recreational landowners whose properties are primarily composed of beautiful mature bottomland hardwoods along a river system. These properties are gorgeous, but other than providing acorns during the fall, mature hardwood forests often lack quality browse and cover habitat needed by wildlife. In this situation, installing a patchwork of wildlife clearcuts not only ensures ade-

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One goal of a wildlife clearcut is to influence deer movements to benefit hunters. Designs that create coves or pockets of open woods between clearcut areas (as shown above) may direct deer traffic between the two cut areas.

quate food and cover but also will increase the quality and abundance of wildlife using the property. Wildlife abundance and diversity are directly related to habitat diversity and interspersed. Therefore, landowners interested in managing their property for wildlife should strive to maintain diverse habitat types that are irregularly shaped, which means increased edge and interspersed.

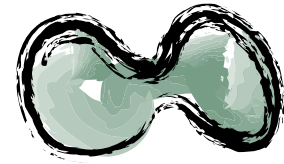
The types of habitats that should be maintained vary according to the species of interest as well as habitats on neighboring properties. For example, the landscape for deer and turkeys should include a mix of mature forest (mature bottomland, mature pine, mature pine/hardwood), mid-aged forest (10- to 20-year-old hardwoods, pines, or mixed forest), and open land (agriculture, pasture, improved pasture, clearcut, managed roadsides). Hence, timber harvest and/or wildlife clearcuts are invaluable tools for the wildlife manager and play a significant role in achieving desired habitat types, diversity and interspersed.

*“Wildlife clearcuts will be the most productive for hunting if they are strategically installed to link or create natural travel corridors.”*

Because each property is unique, the size and shape of a wildlife clearcut is often dictated by the specific needs and physical characteristics of the property. Characteristics such as topography, wetlands, roads and other land features are constraints that play a role in the size and shape of a wildlife clearcut. On properties larger than 500 acres composed of mature habitats and low habitat diversity, clearcuts of 10 to 20 acres in size may be needed to effectively enhance the wildlife value. Another option on a large property would be to install several smaller clearcuts of 2 to 5 acres in size. Again, characteristics of the property may dictate which strategy is employed. On properties smaller than 500 acres, installing a few relatively small wildlife clearcuts may be all that is needed to significantly enhance wildlife value. Each property is different and will require specific approaches to achieve the desired results.

Wildlife clearcuts do not necessarily have to be true “clearcuts.” I often recommend leaving many mature trees in the cut area. These are called seed-tree or shelterwood cuts and are gaining in popularity on federal lands. This method is not only more visibly pleasing but the remaining trees provide seed sources for the regeneration of future trees. Additionally, mature trees left in the cut will provide shade which will conserve soil moisture and often increase plant productivity and diversity. From a deer-hunting standpoint, leaving several mature hardwoods in the cut offers the best of all worlds — a clearcut with attractive and preferred deer browse, mature oak trees that will drop acorns, and adequate cover where deer will feel comfortable — and a place to hang a treestand!

## Clearcut Designs that will Enhance Wildlife Habitat and Hunting Opportunities



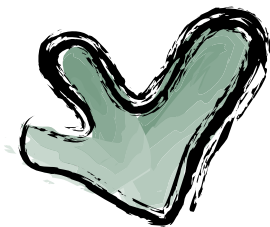
**BOW TIE**



**BOTTLENECK**



**FUNNEL**



**MODIFIED RABBIT EARS**



**HORSESHOE**

Remember, one of the primary objectives behind installing wildlife clearcuts is to increase and enhance the food and cover on a property. To do this you simply need to remove enough trees and woody underbrush to allow abundant sunlight to reach the forest floor. Although Mother Nature will normally do the rest, we often influence the results through various habitat management strategies. These strategies vary depending on the habitat type and target wildlife species for the area. For example, if you were primarily interested in managing the area for quail, fire and selective herbicides that promote native warm-season grasses and other desirable weeds would be applied. If our target species were deer and turkeys, we would use a selective herbicide(s) that would kill undesirable hardwoods and promote quality escape, loafing, bedding, and nesting habitat and quality food sources such as legumes.

If you plan to replant the area in trees, another management strategy that will prolong the effectiveness of a wildlife clearcut is to leave the area alone for a couple of years, then set it back with herbicide and/or fire to begin implementing your desired management. Planting fewer trees per acre will also prolong the wildlife value of these areas. Under normal forestry practices, a clearcut will be prepared for replanting by applying herbicide, burning, roller chopping, and so on, immediately so the next crop of trees can be planted. If pines are planted, within 3 to 5 years the crowns will start reaching canopy closure, and the wildlife value will diminish until the stand is thinned, usually around year 12 to 18. By delaying the “site prep” by 2 years, you have added 2 additional years of quality browse, cover, and hunting opportunities. The key is to allow the site to remain natural as long as possible,

but not so long that you will have a hard time “reclaiming” it from naturally regenerating trees that are getting too big.

### **Enhancing Hunting Opportunities**

Although the primary goal of installing wildlife clearcuts is to create better habitat that will attract, hold, and meet the needs of wildlife on your property, these cuts will enhance hunting opportunities as well. Have you ever hunted in a large, breathtaking, beautiful mature hardwood forest? Sure you have. Where did you hunt? In the middle of the stand of woods? Probably not, unless you found a thicket created by a blow-down or other structure such as a creek bottom. Chances are that you found the most sign and hunted near the edges that tied into other habitats. Deer hunting is somewhat like bass fishing. Where do you find bass? Near cover or structure. Vast mature hardwood forests often have little structure or cover, just like a large, open lake. Installing wildlife clearcuts will provide the needed structure and cover to hold deer and provide great places to hunt. Most of us have sunk Christmas trees or created brush piles in a favorite lake. Installing wildlife clearcuts serves the same purpose for deer and other wildlife.

So where do you install wildlife clearcuts, and how do you design them to enhance hunting opportunities? Because every property is unique, this is not an easy question to answer without seeing the property. However, wildlife clearcuts will be the most productive for hunting if they are strategically installed to link or create natural travel corridors. Depending on their size and purpose, I often install wildlife clearcuts where I want deer

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to bed. This is often determined by food sources such as agricultural fields, food plots and mast crops. Other factors to consider are predominant winds in the area, topography, other existing thickets or bedding areas, and the location of likely hunter-access routes. Because hunters will be situated between the food source and the wildlife clearcuts, you obviously don't want to install a clearcut south of a food source if your predominant winds during hunting season will be out of the north. This would send their scent directly into the bedding area. Although every situation is different, I generally install wildlife clearcuts 200 to 300 yards from destination areas such as agricultural fields or food plots. This gives you plenty of room to catch deer traveling between the two. While I wouldn't consider these true wildlife clearcuts, I often create bedding areas or thickets where they are needed by cutting trees out of very small areas – about the size of a house – with a chainsaw. This is also a good way to harvest firewood. Generally speaking, you may only have to cut five or six mature trees to create a desirable thicket to hold deer. This strategy creates a hole in the tree canopy that will result in a thick understory. Although there will be some food value, this method is mostly used to enhance hunting opportunities by creating structure or bedding areas within a block of woods.


The design, or layout, of a wildlife clearcut can enhance hunting opportunities as well. For the first 1 to 3 years, the clearcuts themselves will provide good hunting. The cut will have quality native browse and some cover. Position deer stands along the edge or use a tripod. However, as the wildlife clearcuts get too thick, you will not be able to see deer. Therefore, when designing the wildlife clearcuts, keep the long-term picture in mind. What



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will the area look like in 10 years?

There are several wildlife clearcut designs that will enhance hunting opportunities. Some designs form long edges deer will travel along, some create coves or pockets of open woods between clearcut areas that deer will traverse, while other designs may direct deer traffic between two cut areas. If wildlife clearcuts are large enough and the situation allows for it, I have had great success installing hub-and-spoke food plots or “senderos” in the cuts. Regardless of the design or shape, try to maintain a few shooting lanes or fire breaks open along the edges. As the cuts mature, these will be great places to observe or harvest deer. Not all designs will work for every property. Again, characteristics and constraints of your property will dictate the appropriate design and size.

Quality Deer Management is more than simply managing the deer population by harvesting an adequate number of does and allowing bucks to mature. It is a philosophy and management strategy that requires maintaining and enhancing the habitat as well, which will result in a healthier, better quality deer herd. Wildlife clearcuts are one of the tools you can use to enhance the wildlife value and hunting opportunities of your property. If your property has good habitat diversity and interspersed, wildlife clearcuts may not be needed. However, if your property is a monoculture of even-aged pines or mature hardwoods, wildlife clearcuts can provide much needed food, cover and hunting structure – not to mention some extra money generated from the timber sale. 

**About the Author:** *Dave Edwards Jr. graduated from the University of Florida with a bachelor's degree in Wildlife Ecology, and he has a Master's in Wildlife Management from Mississippi State University. He is currently a project manager for Westervelt Wildlife Services and previously worked for the Florida Fish & Wildlife Commission. Dave is a Sponsor Member of QDMA.*