THE HOLY HOMESTEAD

WILDLIFE HABITAT STARTER KIT

A Faith-Based Guide to Managing Land for God's Creatures

Habitat Assessment • Food Plots • Tracking • Predator Management

"For every beast of the forest is mine, and the cattle upon a thousand hills."
— Psalm 50:10-11 (KJV)

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Created with AI assistance and reviewed by the author.

A Word From Jamie

Hey friend — I'm Jamie Dingus from The Holy Homestead. I've spent years managing land on my homestead — building food plots, running trail cameras, managing timber stand improvement, trapping predators, and trying to figure out why the deer weren't showing up where I thought they should be. I made a lot of expensive mistakes learning this stuff.

This kit is what I wish I'd had when I started. It's not theory out of a textbook — it's real-world habitat management in plain language for people who actually want to get out there and do the work. You don't need 500 acres to make a difference. Knowledge and intentional action is what separates good habitat from great habitat.

> *"A righteous man regardeth the life of his beast: but the tender mercies of the wicked are cruel."*
>
> **— Proverbs 12:10 (KJV)**

Every deer you hold on your property, every turkey that nests successfully, every songbird that raises a brood in your hedgerow — that's stewardship. That's worship through work.

— Jamie Dingus, The Holy Homestead

Biblical Foundation for Land Stewardship

> *"And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth."*
>
> **— Genesis 1:26 (KJV)**

Dominion With Responsibility

Dominion was never about exploitation — it was always about stewardship. A king who rules his kingdom well cultivates it, defends it, and passes it to the next generation in better shape than he found it. That's the model. When you manage your land for wildlife, you're exercising dominion the way God intended.

> *"For every beast of the forest is mine, and the cattle upon a thousand hills. I know all the fowls of the mountains: and the wild beasts of the field are mine."*
>
> **— Psalm 50:10-11 (KJV)**

The deer in your timber, the turkeys on your food plot — they're His. We're managers, not owners. That perspective changes how you approach every land management decision.

> *"The earth is the LORD's, and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein."*
>
> **— Psalm 24:1 (KJV)**

The 5 Essential Habitat Elements

Every wildlife species needs these five things to survive. Your job as a land manager is to ensure your property provides all five in adequate quantity and quality.

1. Food — Year-Round Nutrition

Wildlife need food that carries them through every season. The properties that consistently hold the most wildlife have diverse, year-round food sources.

- Hard mast: acorns, hickory nuts, beechnuts — critical fall/winter energy
  → *One mature white oak produces 10,000–20,000 acorns per year. Protect your oaks.*
- Soft mast: berries, persimmons, crabapples, wild plums — summer and fall nutrition
- Native wildflowers for pollinators: milkweed, coneflower, black-eyed Susan
- Warm-season native grasses: switchgrass, big bluestem, little bluestem
- Food plots: brassicas, turnips, winter rye, clover — fill gaps when natural food is scarce

Jamie's Tip:

The single best free habitat improvement on most properties is to stop mowing fencerows and field edges. Let them grow up. Ragweed, pokeweed, goldenrod — landowners call these weeds. Wildlife call them groceries.

2. Water

In our area of Southwest Virginia, EHD (Epizootic Hemorrhagic Disease) is carried by midges that breed in the cracked mud around shallow open ponds — so I'm cautious about creating traditional ponds. What I am a strong believer in is reliable water sources: natural stream crossings, waterholes in shaded locations, and areas where groundwater is accessible. Water security matters — just be strategic about the form it takes.

- Natural stream crossings and spring seeps — most reliable year-round water sources
- Shaded waterholes rather than open sunny ponds — reduces EHD midge pressure
- Seasonal wet areas and natural drainages that hold water after rains

Important:

In areas with EHD pressure, open shallow ponds with exposed mud edges can concentrate the midges that carry the disease. Consult your state wildlife agency about EHD risk in your county before investing in pond construction.

3. Cover — Security and Shelter

Cover is where wildlife feel safe. If your property doesn't have thick secure cover, deer and turkey will use it for food but bed and loaf somewhere else.

- Escape cover: dense thickets, brush piles, tall native grasses

- Thermal cover: evergreens, dense hardwood stands for temperature regulation
- Bedding areas: secluded, secure locations where deer spend 90% of their daylight hours

4. Space — Territory Requirements

Species	Typical Home Range	What This Means for You
White-tailed Deer	0.5–1 square mile	Your property is part of a larger system. Manage cooperatively with neighbors when possible.
Wild Turkey	1–2 square miles	Turkeys range widely. Focus on nesting cover and brood habitat on your acreage.
Bobwhite Quail	10–40 acres	CAN be managed on small properties — requires intensive habitat work.
Cottontail Rabbit	1–15 acres	Brush piles and edge cover. Small investments make big rabbit populations.
Gray Squirrel	1–7 acres	Oak and hickory are the key. Mast trees equal squirrel paradise.

5. Arrangement — Interspersion

Food, cover, and water all within 200 yards of each other is the ideal. The transition zones between forest and field — edge habitat — hold more wildlife than either habitat alone. Creating and enhancing those edges is one of the highest-value improvements you can make on any sized property.

- Maximize edge habitat — the transition zones between forest and open areas
- Connect habitat patches with corridors: fencerows, creek bottoms, wooded draws
- Intersperse food, cover, and water within 200 yards of each other when possible
- Diversity of habitat types always outperforms large monoculture areas

> **Jamie's Tip:**
>
> *On any sized property, focus on creating diverse edge habitat that connects your food sources, bedding cover, and water. A property with good edge and interspersion will consistently hold more wildlife than a larger property with segregated habitat types spread far apart.*

Food Plot Starter Plan

> *"He that tilleth his land shall have plenty of bread: but he that followeth after vain persons shall have poverty enough."*
>
> **— Proverbs 28:19 (KJV)**

A food plot is a supplement, not a substitute for good habitat. When food plots are part of a comprehensive habitat plan they are incredibly effective. The key is soil preparation, right planting for your goals, and matching location to deer and turkey movement patterns.

1. Winter Wheat + Clover Mix — The Workhorse

The most versatile, most forgiving food plot combination for beginners. The wheat establishes fast and provides fall attraction while the clover takes over the following spring and persists for 3–5 years.

- When to plant: September through October
- Seeding rate: 80–100 lbs wheat per acre + 8–10 lbs clover per acre
- Soil pH needed: 6.2–7.0 — lime if lower, it won't establish in acidic soil

Jamie's Tip:

This clover and wheat mix is my go-to for beginning food plotters. It's hard to kill, reasonably priced to plant, and deer and turkey both hammer it from October through March. If you're not sure what to plant first, start here.

2. Brassicas (Turnips, Radishes, Kale) — Late-Season Magnet

Brassicas are one of the most powerful late-season food plot tools. The key most beginners miss: deer won't touch them until after the first hard frost, when cold converts the starches to sugar and makes them irresistible.

- When to plant: late July through August
- Seeding rate: 5–8 lbs per acre broadcast
- Protein content: 20–30% — among the highest of any food plot crop

Jamie's Tip:

Plant a brassica blend with turnips, Purple Top turnips, radishes, and kale. Mature bucks will ignore them in October then hammer them every evening from Thanksgiving through Christmas.

3. Native Forbs & Browse — Best Turkey Brood Habitat

For turkey brood habitat, native vegetation provides far superior results to planted monocultures in most parts of the mid-Atlantic and Southeast. Clear-cut areas, hinge-cut zones, and any location where native forbs, grasses, and browse

are springing up naturally after disturbance produce the insect diversity that turkey poults require. Poults eat almost nothing but insects their first two weeks, and native vegetation supports insect populations far better than any monoculture planting.

- Prioritize areas with natural native regrowth over monocultures for turkey brood habitat
- Hinge-cut areas with native vegetation returning are excellent turkey brood areas
- Clear-cuts in their second and third year are prime turkey brood habitat
- Native forbs: wild strawberry, partridge berry, blackberry brambles for cover and food

> **Jamie's Tip:**
>
> *Around here we rely on native browse and natural vegetation for turkey brood habitat rather than planted monocultures. When you hinge-cut an area and let native vegetation come back on its own, the insect diversity that follows is exactly what turkey poults need to survive those first critical weeks.*

Critical Food Plot Success Checklist

- SOIL TEST FIRST — $15 at your county extension office
  → *Skip this and you're guessing. I've seen $500 plots fail because the pH was 5.2.*
- LIME — most plots need 1–2 tons/acre. Apply months before planting if possible.
- WEED CONTROL — spray with glyphosate 2 weeks before planting
- LOCATION — within 1/4 mile of bedding with a quiet access route

Wildlife Track & Sign Identification

Learning to read wildlife sign is one of the most valuable skills a land manager can develop. Tracks, trails, scat, rubs, scrapes, and feeding sign tell you what species are on your property and how your habitat management is working.

Deer Sign

- Tracks: 2.5–3.5 inches, two pointed toes in heart shape. Mature bucks over 3 inches.
- Rubs: buck removes velvet on 1–4 inch trees. Fresh rubs indicate recent activity nearby.
- Scrapes: pawed-out depressions under licking branches — primary rut communication

  → On private land we build our own mock scrapes and licking branches to hunt over. On public land, finding a natural scrape LINE along a travel corridor — not just one isolated scrape — is far more productive. A series of scrapes along a ridge or travel route indicates a primary route worth hunting.
- Beds: oval depressions 3–4 feet long in leaves, grass, or snow

Jamie's Tip:

On private land we build our own mock scrapes and licking branches to hunt over — it gives us control over where the activity happens. On public land, find a scrape LINE along a travel corridor rather than hunting a single scrape. I've watched single scrapes go completely cold for weeks at a time.

Turkey Sign

- Tracks: 3.5–4.5 inches long by 4–5 inches wide, three long toes forward
- Scratching: turkeys rake leaves with both feet simultaneously — oval scratch patterns
- Droppings: J-shaped from gobblers, spiral clump from hens — diagnostic for sex
- Dusting bowls: shallow round depressions in dry fine soil — often old road beds or sandy areas

Jamie's Tip:

Find turkey dusting areas in dry, sunny spots with fine soil. These are excellent trail camera locations in summer when turkeys are in summer patterns.

Predator Sign

- Coyote tracks: 2.25–2.75 inches, oval, four toes, claws almost always showing
- Near-perfect straight line of travel — very different from the meandering trail of a dog
- Scat: dark, twisted, tapered ends containing hair and bone fragments

Jamie's Tip:

> *Set trail cameras at creek crossings and fence gaps along field edges to pattern predator movement. Coyotes, foxes, and bobcats use the same crossing points repeatedly. Knowing their travel routes makes trapping far more effective than calling alone.*

Predator Management: Maintaining Balance

> *"And the fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every fowl of the air, upon all that moveth upon the earth, and upon all the fishes of the sea; into your hand are they delivered."*
>
> **— Genesis 9:2 (KJV)**

Research in multiple states has documented coyotes killing 60–80% of fawn deer in some areas during spring. Combined with nest predators like raccoons, opossums, foxes, and bobcats, the impact on turkey, quail, and ground-nesting birds can be severe. Our job as stewards is to maintain balance.

Important:

ALWAYS check state and local regulations before hunting or trapping ANY predator species. Regulations vary by state and all trapping requires a valid license.

Key Predators

- Coyotes: 35–55 lbs in the East. Kill fawns, turkey hens on nests, and poults. Most active year-round.
- Raccoons: #1 predator of turkey and quail nests. Can destroy multiple nests per night.
- Opossums: significant egg thieves and nest predators — often overlooked
- Foxes: take poults, young rabbits, and ground-nesting birds
- Bobcats: efficient predators of turkeys and fawns where populations are high

Trapping — Most Effective Year-Round Management Tool

Trapping is the most consistent predator management tool available to landowners. Unlike calling, traps work 24 hours a day without your presence. A well-placed trap at a travel corridor can remove animals that have completely learned to avoid hunters.

- Foothold traps (Duke #2 or #3) at trail intersections, creek crossings, and fence gaps
- Cage traps for raccoons and opossums near food plots, water sources, and nesting areas
- Check all traps within 24 hours — legal requirement in all states and basic ethical obligation
- Trapping license required in all states — obtain yours before setting any trap

Jamie's Tip:

I do more trapping than predator calling for managing predators on my land. Trapping during December, January, and February — when coyotes are in breeding season and traveling more than usual — combined with trapping nest predators like raccoons before turkey nesting begins in spring, is the most effective combination for improving fawn and bird populations on your property.

Realistic Expectations

Predator populations rebound quickly after removal. Think of predator management like mowing grass — the grass grows back, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't mow it. Consistent targeted trapping during critical seasons, year after year, is what produces measurable results in fawn survival and bird recruitment.

Bedding Areas & Travel Corridors

Deer spend approximately 90% of their daylight hours in bedding areas. If your property doesn't have quality bedding, deer will use it for food but live somewhere else. Creating and protecting bedding areas is one of the highest-impact, lowest-cost habitat improvements you can make.

Hinge Cutting — Creating Bedding Cover

Hinge cutting is the most effective and affordable bedding cover improvement available to small landowners. You partially cut a tree so it falls but remains alive, creating a horizontal canopy at deer height that is nearly impenetrable while continuing to produce food and cover.

- Cut 2/3 through the trunk 2–4 feet from ground toward the fall direction
- Leave the hinge attached — the tree stays alive and sprouts prolifically
- Best species: basswood, maple, oak, and beech — they resprout aggressively
- Target trees: 4–8 inch diameter — large enough for cover, small enough to hinge safely
- Work in February or March before sap rises for best regrowth response
- Also effective in summer through August — creates immediate thermal cover for fall

Jamie's Tip:

On our homestead we've created several bedding areas — multiple quarter-acre blocks of pole-timber sized trees hinge-cut in winter and some through summer into August. Scattering several small bedding areas across the property is more effective than one large block. It keeps deer distributed and gives them options based on wind direction and hunting pressure.

Important:

SAFETY: Always hinge cut AWAY from your body. Never work alone. Wear hard hat, chaps, and eye protection. NEVER enter bedding areas during hunting season.

Travel Corridors

Deer use the same travel routes day after day. Identifying and enhancing these corridors is one of the most effective hunting and management strategies on any sized property.

- Creek bottoms and drainages — deer naturally follow low ground between high points
- Fencerows with shrubs and trees connecting habitat patches across fields
- Wooded draws extending from main timber toward food sources or agricultural areas
- Pinch points: places where cover narrows, forcing deer through specific locations

Jamie's Tip:

> *Find your pinch points and you've found your best stand locations. A narrow strip of woods connecting two timber blocks — where deer HAVE to funnel through — is worth ten times more as a stand location than a wide-open food plot where deer can see 360 degrees.*

Quick Win Priority Matrix

Project	Difficulty	Cost	Wildlife Impact
Plant clover/wheat food plot	Easy	$50–150/acre	HIGH — immediate attraction and nutrition
Create brush piles in open areas	Easy	Free	MEDIUM — instant rabbit and quail cover
Stop mowing fencerows and edges	Easy	Free (saves fuel)	HIGH — best free habitat improvement
Install trail cameras	Easy	$100–300	MEDIUM — reveals what species you have
Hinge-cut multiple small bedding areas	Medium	Chainsaw fuel	HIGH — holds deer on your property
Begin trapping program (Dec–May)	Medium	Traps + license	HIGH — protects fawns and turkey nests
Soil test and lime food plot areas	Easy	$10–15/sample	HIGH — foundation for all food plots
Plant native shrubs and fruit trees	Easy	$50–200	HIGH — long-term food source

Worksheet 1: Property Habitat Scorecard

Rate each element 1–5: 1=Poor/Absent, 3=Average, 5=Excellent

Habitat Element	What to Look For	Score (1–5)	Top Action
Hard Mast (Oaks/Hickory)	# mast trees per acre, species diversity		
Soft Mast (Berries/Fruit)	Berry bushes, persimmon, wild grape		
Browse Quality	Shrubs, forbs, young tree regeneration		
Food Plots	Planted food sources, agricultural fields		
Water Sources	Reliable water within 1/4 mile, year-round		
Bedding Cover	Thick, secure bedding areas		
Escape Cover	Dense thickets, brush piles, tall grass		

Habitat Element	What to Look For	Score (1–5)	Top Action
Edge Habitat	Forest-field transition zones		
Travel Corridors	Fencerows, creek bottoms, wooded draws		
Nesting Cover	Tall grass, shrubs, undisturbed areas		
Predator Management	Active trapping program, Dec–May		
Invasive Species	Free of fescue monoculture, invasive shrubs		

Worksheet 2: Food Plot Planning Sheet

Plot Name/Location	Acreage	Soil pH	Planned Crop	Planting Date	Result

Worksheet 3: Trail Camera Log

Date/Time	Location	Species	Count	Age/Sex	Notes

Worksheet 4: Annual Habitat Improvement Plan

Project	Season	Est. Cost	Expected Benefit	Done?

Project	Season	Est. Cost	Expected Benefit	Done?

A Final Word

> *"The earth is the LORD's, and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein."*
>
> **— Psalm 24:1 (KJV)**

Every acre you manage well, every fawn that survives because you controlled predators, every turkey that hatches because you improved nesting cover — that matters. Not just for the hunting, but because it reflects the character of the God who made it all and trusted us to take care of it.

Start small. Be consistent. May God bless your land and your work on it.

— Jamie Dingus | The Holy Homestead | TheHolyHomestead.com

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