

## PLANT COVER FOR WILD ANIMALS DURING THE WINTER SEASON

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The writer has considered for some time past the relations that exist between the plants and animals of Northern Illinois. Through vocation (teaching of biology) and avocation (hunting) I have tried to find out just what might be done in our area to encourage a suitable plant growth to protect the animal life during both summer and winter seasons. Through personal observation and some data obtained by members of college classes in Animal Ecology I have arrived at a few conclusions. They follow briefly:

1. Summer plant cover is quite satisfactory in most areas. Small grains, hay crops, fence and hedge rows, even corn fields, offer considerable protection to nesting and feeding life. Nesting in hay fields is hazardous to wild life, however, in that incubation and cutting are oft times overlapped and many accidents occur.
2. Modern farming methods tend to discourage the old hedge rows and weedy fence rows, both of which are of considerable value to wild life, summer and winter.
3. Road commissioners are more and more trying to make parkways of the roadsides, which in turn reduces natural cover crops.
4. Many of the forms that make excellent cover in the summer are of little value as winter cover crop as they tend to snap off easily or have their leaves blown off.

Whether we consider pheasants, quail and partridge or rabbits the need of adequate protection through the winter season is of prime importance. Hedge rows have been, and are, one of the very best means of affording a good hiding place. They are usually associated with briars and bush. These in turn tend to hold up the grasses and weeds and make permanent hiding places and areas where the seeds are held out of the snow. Long rows of cover seem better than one large

clump in that the wild life has a better chance of escape from any natural enemies that might be in the area. The presence of pigeon grass and various other weeds affords food material for quail and pheasant and the bark of the shrubs and fruits from roses and red haws will take care of the food needs of the rabbits.

In the pictures which have been taken to illustrate this talk I have endeavored to show contrasting condition of summer and winter cover. Some that look excellent in August will not hide a pheasant or a rabbit in December. Corn, for example, will have most of its leaves snapped off before spring arrives. Many of the smaller grasses will become matted and worthless as cover. Many farmers will have removed hedges and cut or burned out the weeds of the fence rows. This practice is probably conducive to good farming, but it is tough on the wild life.

On a trip made the latter part of April some areas were found where the plant cover was still erect and sufficiently dense to be of value as a cover. In one rather marshy area the old growth of rushes and smartweed made a framework on which the leafy sedges hung in abundance. This created one of the finest covers that I have seen. Another area which afforded excellent protection consisted of stinging nettle, pigweed, goldenrod, wild aster, giant ragweed, smart weed and pigeon grass. This association not only stood up well during the winter but kept a fair share of its foliage and still had seeds in the flower heads.

The local sportman's club is sponsoring a movement whereby it will furnish seed of a "Game Bird Cover Mixture" to any farmer who will set aside some small area to be used as a sort of a refuge. If more farmers would leave a wide turn at the corner, or a good growth along ditches and not burn out the fence rows the problem of coverage for wild life would be greatly lessened.