



Building Better Buffers

Buffers for Wildlife

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Buffers can provide critical habitat for wildlife. In general, the wider and more diversely planted the buffer, the more benefits it provides. A good buffer provides food, shelter, clean water, and breeding and nesting sites for multiple species. Buffers act as conservation corridors that connect larger areas of habitat and provide areas of cover for wildlife movement.



Deer: White-tailed deer are highly adaptable and thrive in a variety of habitats. They benefit from wider buffers that include a mix of hardwoods, brushland, and grassland adjacent to cropland or pastureland. Buffers also connect these types of habitat, allowing deer to thrive. Food plots made

up of perennial plants like clover can be used to attract deer. Tall perennial grasses and forbs provide cover and bedding areas.



Pollinators: Pollinators and other invertebrates need high-value pollen and nectar plants, nesting and shelter sites, and access to clean water. Planting a variety of plants that bloom in different times of the year, from early spring to late fall, provides food for pollinators throughout

the growing season. Pollinators need to be protected from pesticides, so having buffers that are more than 30 feet wide or buffers separated by shelterbelts, trees, or shrubs will help protect them. Native insects also help control pests reducing the need for pesticides. More information can be found in [BWSR's Pollinator Toolbox](#).



Buffer Law Requirements

- ◆ **Public Waters:** 50-ft average, 30-ft minimum width buffer
- ◆ **Public Ditches:** 16.5-width buffer
- ◆ **Alternative Practices:** Practices that provide water quality benefits comparable to full-width buffers may apply in some situations, along with reduced width buffers.
- ◆ **Buffers must consist of perennial vegetation, not row crops or noxious or invasive weeds**



ABOUT THE SERIES: Building Better Buffers is a series of guides offering voluntary options to landowners who want to improve their existing buffers. They provide information about improving buffers for increased water quality, enhanced habitat, and forestry, plus ideas for buffer maintenance and alternative practice options.



Fish and aquatic animals: Fish, amphibians, reptiles, and other aquatic animals benefit from healthy buffers due to the clean water they provide. Forested buffers or areas of brush and trees along a waterway moderate and cool temperatures so fish and small aquatic organisms that they feed on can thrive. Buffers absorb rainwater, which recharges groundwater and decreases stream flashiness, which also benefits aquatic organisms.



Game birds and songbirds: Most bird species are sensitive to environmental changes. A variety of bird species can indicate good stewardship of natural resources. The number and type of birds present on a farm indicate the overall quality of habitats, such as food availability and nesting opportunities. Pheasants and other game birds need large blocks of habitat to nest and protect themselves from predators but will use smaller areas for movement, shelter, and food. Birds also provide pest control, potentially decreasing the need for pesticides.

Diverse native prairie seedings make the best plants for a good pheasant buffer. Cool-season grasses that start growing early in the year provide nesting cover. Thick-stemmed grasses hold up to snow and provide the year-round cover pheasants need to survive. Forbs and legumes add diversity that attracts insects and provide seeds for food. Thick-stemmed plants also provide improved cover.



Beneficial plants include:

- 💧 **Cool-Season Grasses** (early growing, thick-stem winter cover): Wheatgrass , Canada Bluejoint, Canada Wild Rye, Native Bromes and Sedges
- 💧 **Warm-Season Grasses** (cover, thick-stem for winter cover): Indian Grass, Big Bluestem, Little Bluestem, Switchgrass, Sideoats, Blue Grama
- 💧 **Forbs/Legumes** (cover, food sources): Sunflowers, Bergamot, Black-Eyed Susan, Prairie Clovers, New England Aster, Milkweed, Coneflower, and many more



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