



Mark Bennett, Indiana Department of Natural Resources

WHAT IS A BRUSH PILE?

The term “brush pile” describes a mound or heap of woody vegetative material constructed to furnish additional wildlife cover. Brush piles can be fashioned in many different ways to meet various cover needs for particular wildlife species.

Loosely formed brush piles can provide nesting habitat, resting areas, concealment, and protection from predators. Brush piles that are relatively open at ground level, but tightly compacted above, can provide good protective cover against harsh weather conditions. Densely packed piles of logs, rocks, or boulders can provide den sites for additional species of wildlife.

Constructing brush piles on your land can provide cover for ground-nesting birds (such as quail), many songbirds, rabbits, and other small mammals. Landowners should determine what cover types are needed and specifically design brush piles to meet those needs.

PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS

- Several strategically placed medium-size piles (roughly 10 feet in diameter and 6 feet high) are better than one large one.
- Plant native vines such as Bittersweet, wild grape, or Virginia Creeper as an attractive cover for the brush pile; border with wildflowers; or screen with shrubs. Shrubs can provide additional food and cover.
- Brush piles can be developed in woodland habitats with the material left from timber harvesting, woodland edge development, forest stand improvement, forest opening development, or firewood cutting. Brush piles are not a replacement for undisturbed woodlots, den trees or snags.

- Place brush piles near wildlife food sources. Good locations include: along forest roads and edges; in woodland openings; along field edges and corners; and beside streams and wetlands. Isolated piles are not likely to be well-used.
- Keep brush piles away from houses and lawns to avoid problems with nuisance wildlife.
- Brush piles are flammable. Keep them away from buildings.
- Consider requesting technical assistance from an NRCS, IDNR, or U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist through your local SWCD Office.

BRUSH PILES FOR NESTING, RESTING AND ESCAPE COVER

Predators such as owls, hawks, foxes, coyotes, and domestic pets, can significantly impact rabbit and quail populations when thick, brushy cover is lacking or not well distributed. The well-planned creation and placement of brush piles can often supplement naturally occurring escape cover for these and other wildlife species.

A loosely formed brush pile will encourage plant growth by allowing sunlight penetration. The tangled network of dead branches will eventually be intertwined by a thin to moderately dense stand of grasses and forbs. The end result is excellent resting and escape cover. These same types of brush piles may also be used as nesting sites by songbirds.



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The key to forming this type of habitat is to lightly pile branches in such a fashion so that plenty of sunlight reaches the ground. The branches can be sparingly piled in a teepee-type fashion or laid against an elevated object, such as a tree stump or fallen log. Discarded Christmas trees can be used in a similar manner. The resulting

combination of overhead woody cover mixed with a grass and forb groundcover provides a secure hiding and resting site.

An old, discarded section of woven wire fencing, rolled up to an inner diameter of 1½ to 2 feet and laid on its side, will afford rabbits considerable protection from predators and at the same time allow grasses and forbs to grow up through the openings. Brush piles fashioned in this way take on the characteristics of the “old briar patch” that rabbits find attractive.

Placement

Rabbits and quail rarely stray far from good protective cover. This often limits the use of large open spaces that might otherwise serve as important nesting and feeding habitat. By placing brush piles along the edge or scattered throughout large open areas, rabbits and quail are more likely to utilize all available habitat.

General Recommendations

- Good locations to place brush piles include:
 - ⇒ Adjacent to edges of gullies, woodlands, and pastures or hay fields
 - ⇒ Within shrub thickets, fencerows or shelterbelts
 - ⇒ In field corners or other odd areas
- For edge habitats, such as along a woodland, fence row, or gully, one brush pile every 200 to 300 feet will provide adequate cover and travel lanes between food sources.
- On properties with little natural cover, create three or four brush piles per acre.
- Avoid the bottoms of drainage ways and low spots where standing water or flooding will reduce the usefulness of brush pile for upland wildlife species.

Living Shelters

A brush pile will last longer if constructed of living materials. In addition to providing cover and protection, living brush piles made from partially cut hardwood trees can supply buds, twigs, leaves, and seeds for animals to eat. Red cedar or locust trees can be used as well.

To make a living brush pile, find several (three to five) small hardwood saplings (4 to 8 inches in diameter) located within a few feet from one another. Cut each tree halfway through the trunk about 12 to 18 inches above the ground. Place the cuts on the outside, away from the other trees in the group. Fold the treetop over towards the other trees in the group so it rests on the ground or on top of the other half-cut trees. Since the tree is not cut all the way through,

the tree will stay alive for some time. Pile limbs and brush to reduce any large entrances, particularly near the folded

trunks. Avoid covering the tops of the cut trees so they will continue to grow.

BRUSH PILES FOR HARSH WEATHER COVER

Brush piles can help ground dwelling wildlife escape the effects of harsh weather (bitterly cold or extremely hot), snow, and ice. A well-constructed, properly maintained, brush pile can supplement natural cover for 10 to 15 years.

Generally, brush piles of this type should range between 10 to 15 feet in diameter, and 5 to 8 feet in height. The most common design is built using logs (arranged in a tic-tac-toe pattern) for the foundation and covered with brush. Start with the largest material on the bottom to provide hiding space under the pile. Shallow depressions can also be dug before beginning the brush pile to provide more space.

Foundation

Use the largest available materials when constructing the foundation. Logs at least 6 to 10 inches in diameter and 10 to 15 feet in length are recommended. The larger materials at the bottom keep the smaller limbs off the ground, helping to prevent decay.

Start construction by laying logs parallel and 6 to 12 inches apart. Next, place a second layer of logs on top of, and perpendicular to, the first layer (again about 6 to 12

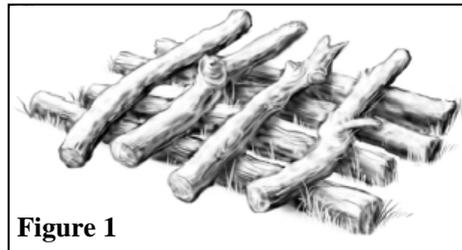


Figure 1

inches apart - see Figure 1). Large, flat rocks can be substituted for the second layer of logs. Repeat this process one or

two more times to complete the final tiers. The intent is to make a pyramid-type structure that has a hollow core. Note that old and discarded fence posts can also serve this purpose.

Many other options for building brush pile foundations are possible depending upon the materials available.

- A tree stump that is still in place can create an adequate foundation. Place several logs (6 to 10 inches in diameter and 5 to 6 feet long) on top of the stump so that the logs are radiating out from the center (see Figure 2).

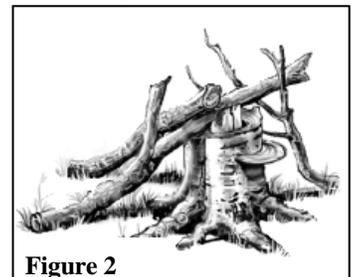
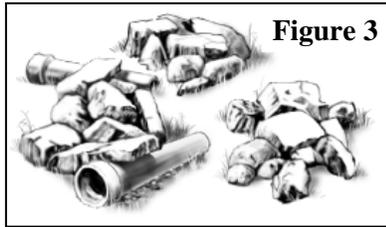


Figure 2

- Discarded wooden pallets can also make a suitable base. Pallets should be arranged in 4-6 layers (and elevated from the ground using concrete blocks, stones, etc., if available) to form the foundation.
- Small rock piles can be substituted as foundation material. Create rock piles approximately 12 inches apart with each pile about 10 inches high and 12 inches across. Stagger the piles so that they are capable of supporting the next layer of limbs (see Figure 3).
- Consider utilizing drainage tile, 6 to 8 inches in diameter, to create small wildlife tunnels within the foundation.
- Caution should be taken when constructing brush piles with a bulldozer as they often have too much dirt in them to be useful for wildlife.



Brush Covering

Once completed, cover the foundation with larger branches and limbs, placing the smallest stock on top. The cover can consist of small limbs, saplings, old Christmas trees, stumps, or loose brush.

Ideally, the foundation should be covered with 2 to 4 feet of brush. Larger brush piles provide more security for wildlife and will receive more use than smaller piles. Leave openings (6 to 12 inches in width) in the sides at several places for easy wildlife access. Add to the brush pile as new brushy material is available. The older brush will settle as it decays, and new cover must be added as time passes.

When properly constructed, harsh weather brush piles will contain an easily accessible labyrinth of tunnels and cavities at ground level and at the same time provide good overhead shelter from harsh weather. Once again, brush piles should be established throughout the management area to meet wildlife needs.

OTHER CONSTRUCTION OPTIONS

A simple pile of logs, wood slabs, large rocks or boulders can be very attractive to amphibians, reptiles and small mammals, especially when located near or within woodland habitats. Piles of rotting logs or wood slabs not only provide shelter, produce an abundance of food items, but also maintain the moist conditions required by woodland amphibians.

Rock Piles

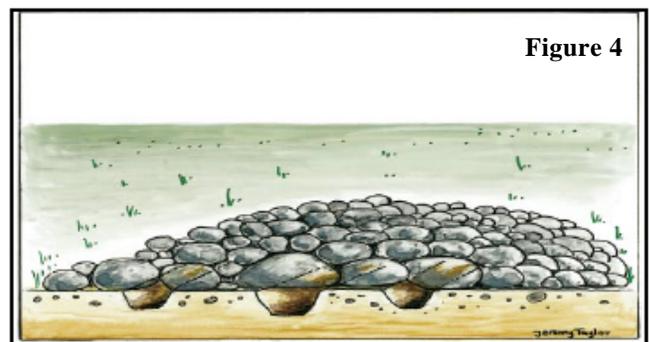
Amphibians and reptiles such as frogs, lizards, salamanders and snakes will benefit from rock piles. Besides providing shelter and basking areas, the rocks absorb heat during the day and radiate warmth at night.

Rock piles should start with the largest rocks (or boulders) on the bottom of the stack to create hiding places between rocks. Broken slabs of concrete can also be used for the foundation by arranging them loosely to form tunnels and cavities. Digging depressions under large flat rocks can create temporary pools for breeding frogs and salamanders (see Figure 4).

General Recommendations

- Build a mound of rocks and stones of different shapes and sizes, arranging the rock pile in a way that creates openings for shelter.
- Place pieces of chimney tile, old clay field tile or lengths of pipe at the base for entrances and tunnels.
- Add flat rocks on top for amphibians and reptiles.

SPECIFICATIONS



Materials that contain toxic substances (i.e. pressure treated lumber/posts, creosote railroad ties, lead painted surfaces, tires, etc.) shall not be used.

Site-specific requirements will be listed on the attached specification sheet. Specifications are prepared in accordance with the FOTG Standard 645-*Upland Wildlife Habitat/Management*.

OPERATION AND MAINTENANCE

- Brush piles are not permanent structures. Rot and decay are a normal process of brush piles. As brush piles rot, more insects are attracted, providing additional food for birds and other wildlife. The piles should be inspected yearly to see if the state of decay is such that additional brush is needed, or if a new brush pile should be constructed.
- Fertilizer can be applied to *living* brush piles to encourage other plant growth and to help the half-cut trees stay alive. Scatter about 5 pounds of 12-12-12 fertilizer (or equivalent) on each living brush pile in March or April.

Acknowledgements:

Fig. 1-3: *Wildlife Management for Missouri Landowners* (3rd Ed).
Fig. 4: *Outdoor California*, CA Department of Fish & Game.

Wildlife Brush Pile - Specifications Sheet

NAME: _____
COUNTY: _____
TRACT NUMBER: _____

FIELD NUMBER: _____
DATE: _____
ASSISTED BY: _____

Specific Recommendations

Purpose of Brush Pile: _____

Species to be benefited: _____

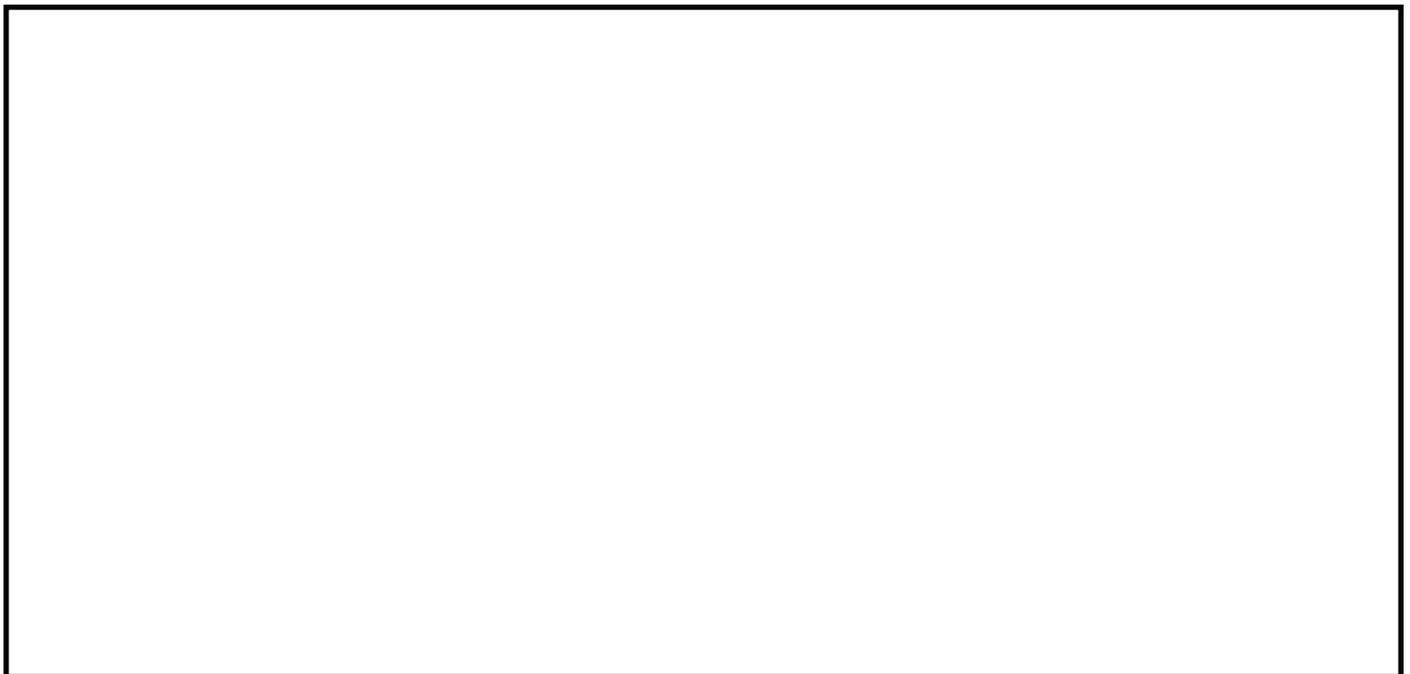
Number and spacing of Brush Piles: _____

Preparation: _____

Lime/Fertilizer Recommendations (if necessary): _____

Additional Operation and Maintenance:

Site/Sketch Map



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