

Rabbitat

Brush Piles for Wildlife



Have you ever watched a startled rabbit dart across your yard and suddenly disappear as if by magic? No magic. Chances are the wily critter escaped into a strategically located den or tangled grove. You can create this kind of habitat—"rabbitat" if you will—by building brush piles. When you do, you'll find that brush piles are important for many other kinds of wildlife too....

Gimme shelter. That's exactly what brush piles provide for chipmunks, woodchucks, weasels, skunks, red fox, chipping sparrows, juncos, thrashers, towhees, cardinals, cat-birds, garter snakes, salamanders and more. They also use brush piles for nesting and den sites.

If you're planning to cut firewood, thin your woodlot for pulp or hardwoods, or cut back a shrubby hedgerow, you can get the job done and help wildlife at the same time. Here's how.



Building A Brush Pile

Brush Pile Components

Brush piles have two basic components—a base and a brushy top. The base raises the brush pile off the ground and creates tunnels for dens, nests and escape routes. The brushy top protects this space from predators.

Base materials can vary depending on what you have nearby. The most common materials are stones and logs. The stones should be about 8 to 12 inches in diameter and placed in three loose piles, each at the corner of a triangle. The logs, 4 to 6 inches in diameter, should be cut between 4 and 6 feet long and placed, log cabin-style, 4 feet high. Oak, black locust, cedar and other hardwoods make good bases because they resist rotting. Other good

base materials include large stumps, cull logs or old fence posts. A few PVC pipes or drain tiles provide escape tunnels for small mammals.

As you build the base, add branches into the interior of the structure. After the base has been completed, pile on the brush—placing the larger, stouter limbs first, and smaller limbs last. You may need to occasionally place heavier branches on top to keep the stacked brush in place. Be sure to place the individual branches at different angles and directions to ensure that the materials lock together and form air spaces. After the pile reaches about 6 or 8 feet in height, begin placing branches around the sides. Occasionally stick branches into the pile with the large end first to add stability to the pile.

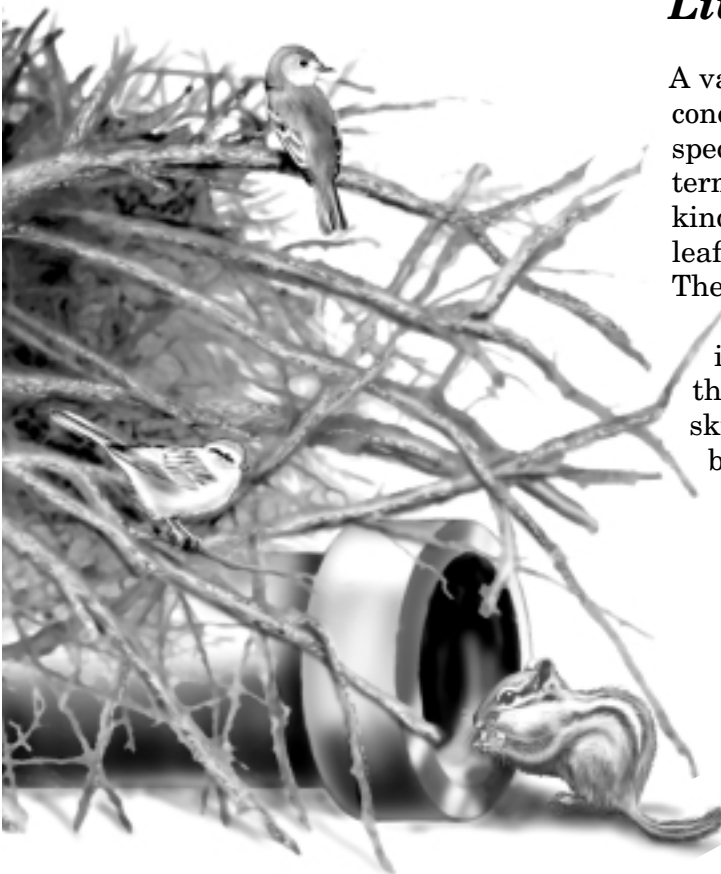


Logs, old fence posts, rock piles and stumps make good brush pile bases.



When finished, your brush pile should be about 6 to 8 feet high and 6 to 8 feet wide, and shaped like an igloo. You can also build smaller brush piles, they just won't attract as many animals. Encourage the growth of grasses and vines through your brush piles; they add density and permanence to the piles.

Though your brush pile should last from ten to 15 years, it will require periodic maintenance. About every six years or so, add new brush to renew the pile. As the pile finally begins to deteriorate beyond usefulness, construct a new brush pile adjacent to the old one. Don't tear down the existing one, as you may be disturbing a few lingering tenants. By building next to the old pile, you will be providing a continuous source of cover.



Depending on the size of the pipes, you can create safe exits for chipmunks, rabbits, woodchucks and foxes as well as other tunnel-loving wildlife.

Brush Pile Placement

Build most of your brush piles within or near woods. This is most easily accomplished after a timber sale. A good rule of thumb is to build two to four brush piles per acre, spaced about 100-150 feet apart. Forest wildlife quickly inhabit brush piles, especially after a harvest. Place others along fence rows or your yard border. Also, there are a few places *not* to place a brush pile. To avoid pest problems, locate your brush pile well away from your garden and house. No sense feeding the rabbits or attracting unwanted skunks and rodents. And, if attracting small mammals is your goal, don't place a brush pile under a snag where hawks and owls can launch their attack...although they need to eat too.

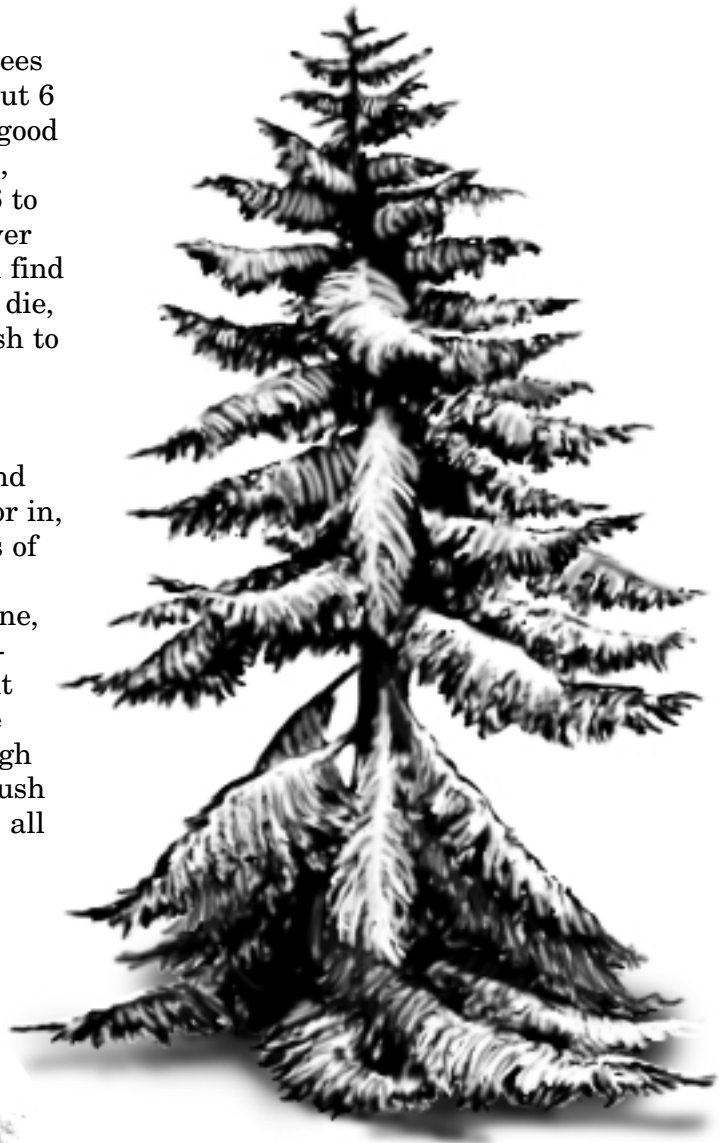
Living Brush Piles

A variation on the traditional brush pile concept above is the living brush pile. These special structures create shelter *and* a long-term food source. You can build two different kinds of living brush piles: one using broad-leaf trees, and the other using evergreens. The idea is to cut partially through the trunk or stem, leaving as much of the bark intact as possible. Since a tree is fed through the cell layer just under the bark's skin, the tree can flourish for several years before dying.

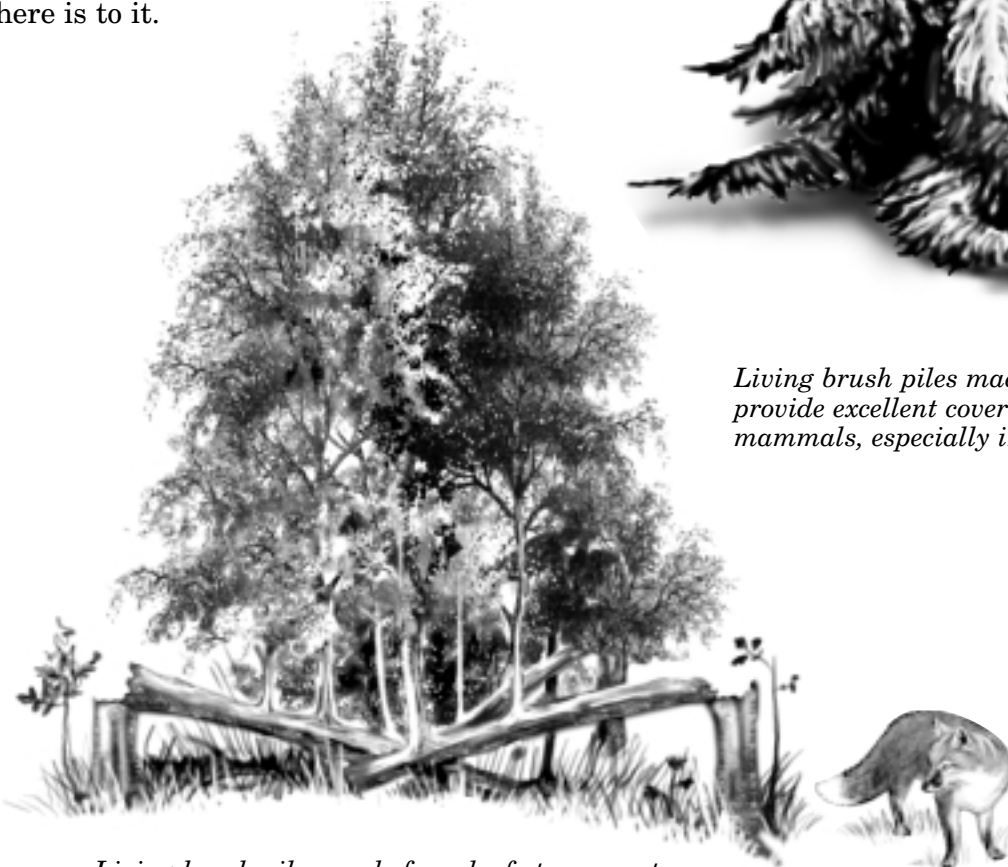


Create a living brush pile using broadleafed trees by locating a group of six or more saplings about 6 to 10 feet tall. Aspen, birch and basswood are good choices, but any broadleafed tree will do. Then, partially cut through each tree at a height of 6 to 10 inches from the ground, and topple them over toward one another. In a couple of years, you'll find a dense growth. When the saplings eventually die, cut through them completely and use this brush to construct a traditional brush pile.

The buds, twigs, and leaves of broadleaf living brush piles feed deer, rabbits, ruffed grouse, and wild turkey. In addition, the insects that harbor in, and under, living brush piles are favorite foods of rufous-sided towhees, gray catbirds, brown thrashers and other songbirds of the brush. Pine, fir, spruce, cedar and hemlock make good evergreen living brush piles. They provide excellent cover, especially in winter. Simply select a tree with ample lower limbs and cut halfway through the first two or three whorls of its branches. Push down on the branches to form a "tepee." That's all there is to it.



Living brush piles made from evergreen trees provide excellent cover for foxes and other mammals, especially in winter.



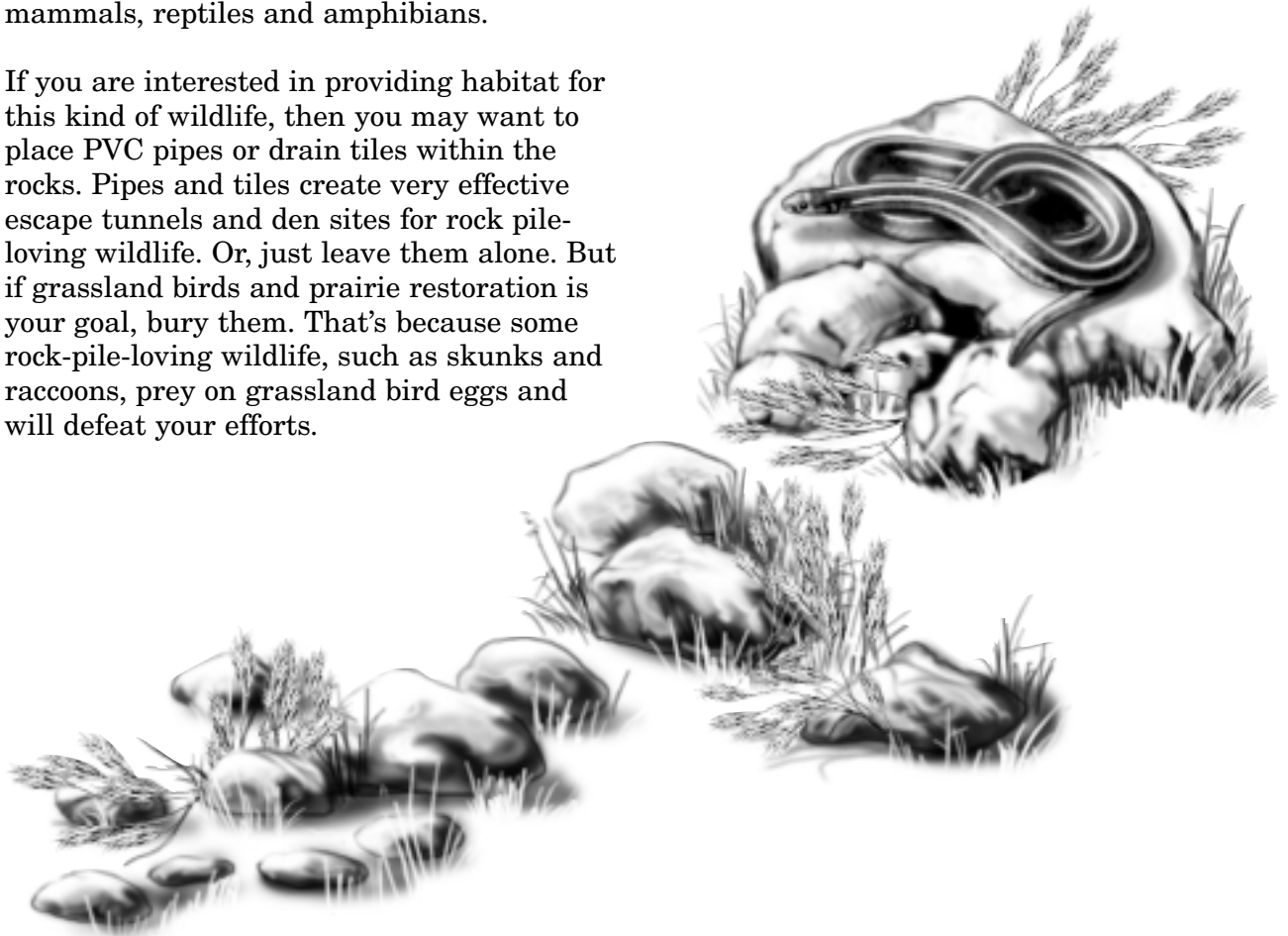
Living brush piles made from leafy trees create food for deer and cover for small mammals.

A Word on Rock Piles

Throughout Wisconsin, the tilled earth contains an abundance of rocks...most left behind by melting glaciers. Many farm fields are outlined with rock walls or have a large rock pile dumped in some forgotten corner by generations of farmers who annually added to the collection each spring after heaving frosts worked new rocks to the field surface. These may be found in or near woodlands or grasslands. Some may even be natural rocky outcroppings—a glacial deposit.

Rock piles and walls provide special habitats for wildlife. Chipmunks, skunks and other small rodents and snakes are partial to these hard, sun-warmed quarters. A wide variety of ants and other invertebrates live beneath rocks which are in direct contact with the earth. Ant colonies can also thrive in them and provide food for a host of birds, mammals, reptiles and amphibians.

If you are interested in providing habitat for this kind of wildlife, then you may want to place PVC pipes or drain tiles within the rocks. Pipes and tiles create very effective escape tunnels and den sites for rock pile-loving wildlife. Or, just leave them alone. But if grassland birds and prairie restoration is your goal, bury them. That's because some rock-pile-loving wildlife, such as skunks and raccoons, prey on grassland bird eggs and will defeat your efforts.



Notes



Notes





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