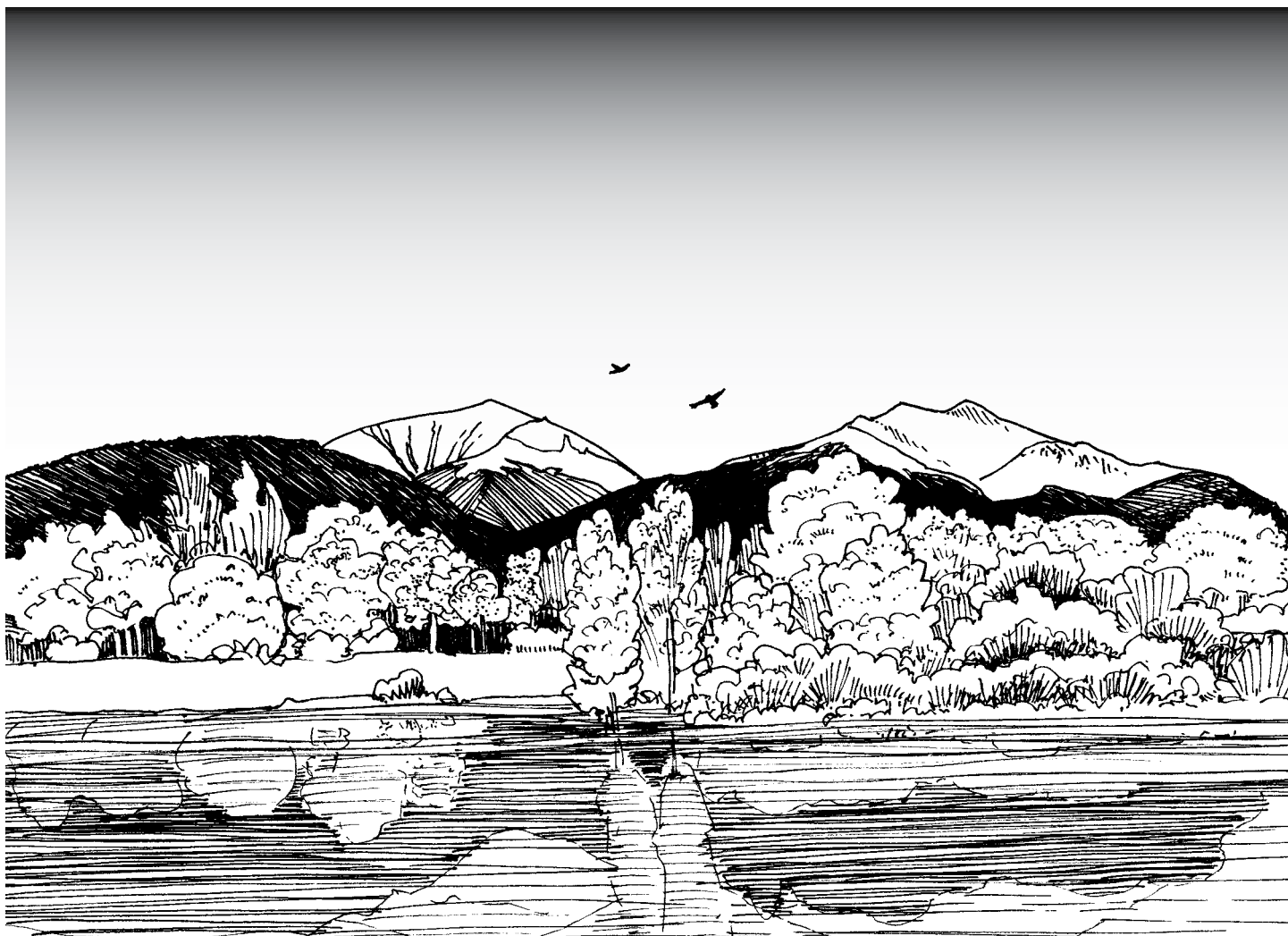


*Getting Started Workbook:*

# **Preserving the Natural Resources of Your Country Home or Ranchette**



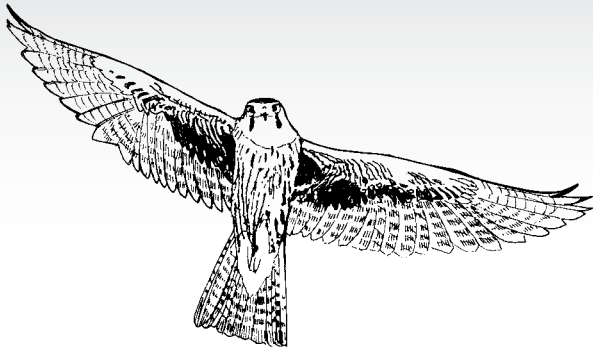


# Contents

Caring for Your Land .....	3
How to Use this Guide.....	3
Taking Stock: What do you have? .....	4
Soil Conditions. ....	5
Water Use .....	6
Native and Invasive Plants .....	7
My Plants .....	8
Domestic Animals .....	9
Living with Wildlife .....	10
My Wildlife.....	11
Helping Native Birds .....	12
Fires and Floods.....	13
Local Resources.....	14

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United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

# Caring for Your Land



*Living in the country or on a ranchette requires more attention to the land than living in the city or suburbs. As a property owner, you are a land steward and must manage your acreage in the most beneficial way possible. Learning about the soil, water, plants, and animals on your land, and how to take care of them, can be a lifelong endeavor. But you don't have to be an expert to get started. This workbook will help you begin exploring your land and the issues you need to be aware of to protect it and the surrounding environment.*

## How to Use This Guide

The tools found in this guide will assist you in planning how to manage your land. They will help you take stock of what's on your land, offer questions to consider in developing your goals, and provide worksheets, ideas, and additional resources to help you begin the journey of being a responsible land owner.

The first step is identifying what exists on your land. Use the accompanying questions and worksheets to record the plants, animals, water resources, and other features of your property. While you are out wandering your property collecting this information, you'll begin crystallizing your goals and objectives as you visualize the possibilities for your land.

### To Learn More:

- **USDA Service Center:** Find your local office here: <http://offices.sc.egov.usda.gov/locator/app>
- **Local Conservation District:** Find your local district here: [www.privatelandownernetwork.org/plnlo/conservationdistricts.asp](http://www.privatelandownernetwork.org/plnlo/conservationdistricts.asp)
- **Cooperative Extension:** Look up your local office: <http://www.csrees.usda.gov/Extension/index.html>



### Helpful Hint

Have fun and enjoy the process. Your efforts will have long-lasting impact for years to come.



# Taking Stock

*Before you pick up that shovel or chainsaw, or before you turn your horse loose on the grass, take stock of what you've got: What plants and animals live on your property? What lives on the surrounding land? Do you have natural sources of water on the property? This inventory will help you figure out the current condition of the land and determine what you can do to protect and enhance it.*

## Your Landscape

Whether you own 5 acres or 5,000 acres, your property is a part of an even larger landscape. What you do on your land has an impact on your neighbor's land and beyond. By identifying the types of habitat on your acreage, you will begin to learn which plants and animals and other living things you are likely to see. Major habitat types include woodlands and forests, shrublands and grasslands, wetlands, and riparian areas along streams (see descriptions at [www.audubonathome.org/countryhome](http://www.audubonathome.org/countryhome)).

## Considerations:

What major habitat types occur on your land?

What habitats types surround your land?

What lived there 50, 100, 200 years ago?

If you have a forest, which types of trees dominate the forest?

If you have a wetland, what federal, state, or local laws protect the wetlands?



## To Learn More:

- **Conservation Planning Records:** [http://www.or.nrcs.usda.gov/technical/conservation-planning-and-conservation-records/data/Landowner\\_Info\\_Cover\\_0806.pdf](http://www.or.nrcs.usda.gov/technical/conservation-planning-and-conservation-records/data/Landowner_Info_Cover_0806.pdf)



## Helpful Hint

Look beyond your property line, to resources available on adjacent properties, and work with your neighbors on cooperative conservation planning.

# Soil Conditions

*The soils on your property were created by local plants, weather, tiny soil creatures, and other forces working to break down the underlying rocks and geological formations. Soil provides the foundation for the plants and animals on your land, and helps control and filter storm water, and store groundwater. Your soils also determine which land uses are most appropriate for your property. Learn as much about your soils as possible, and protect them for future generations.*

## My Soils

Have your soil tested by your local extension service soil lab, or do it yourself with a kit from a garden store.

List your soil properties below.

pH: \_\_\_\_\_

Texture \_\_\_\_\_

Calcium \_\_\_\_\_

Potassium \_\_\_\_\_

Phosphorus \_\_\_\_\_

Other \_\_\_\_\_

## Considerations:

What are the predominant soil types on your land?

If you are losing soil to erosion, what can be done?

## To Learn More:

- **Soil Testing:** Contact your local cooperative extension office for information about soil testing: [www.csrees.usda.gov/Extension/index.html](http://www.csrees.usda.gov/Extension/index.html)
- **Soil Protection:** For information on how to protect your soils from wind or water erosion, contact your local USDA service center (offices.sc.egov.usda.gov/locator/app) or conservation district ([www.nacdnet.org/resources/cdsonweb.html](http://www.nacdnet.org/resources/cdsonweb.html)).
- **Soil Information:** Start your soils education here: <http://soils.usda.gov/education/facts/>



## Helpful Hint

You can find the types of soil on your property, and their characteristics, at the NRCS web soils survey site: <http://websoilsurvey.nrcs.usda.gov/app/WebSoilSurvey.aspx>

# Water Use

*All living things depend on clean water to survive. The way you use and care for water requires vigilance: The amount of water you have available, where it comes from, and where it drains to are important factors in conserving this finite resource and protecting the quality of streams, lakes, and aquifers. Have your well tested annually to inspect water quality, and check your septic system to ensure that it's not contaminating groundwater. Reduce or eliminate the use of pesticides and other chemicals to avoid polluting water bodies on your property. Use native plants in your landscaping to limit the need for irrigation.*

## Considerations:

- How does water get to your property?
- What water rights do you have on your land?
- Do you share water sources with neighbors?
- Have you mulched plants to prevent moisture loss?
- Are you limiting the use of chemicals that would pollute local waters?
- Do you have any small leaks to repair?
- Can you turn off your irrigation system?
- Are you able to harvest water?

## My Water Quality

Check	Date
Well	_____
Septic	_____
Pond or stream	_____

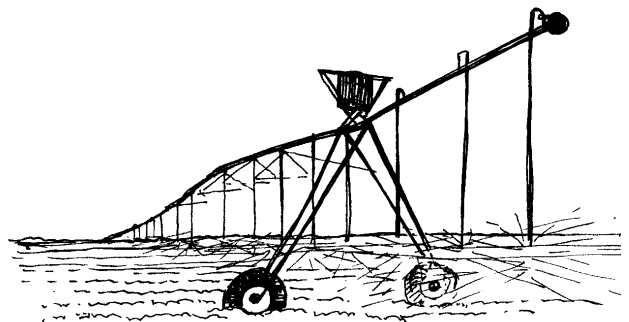


## Helpful Hint

Make a list of the ways in which you can reduce your use of water, such as by using drought resistant native plants on your property.

## To Learn More:

- **Water Rights:** Brush up on water laws and rights in your area at [www.blm.gov/nstc/WaterLaws/references.html](http://www.blm.gov/nstc/WaterLaws/references.html)
- **Protecting Water Quality:** For pollution prevention, educational resources and other information, see [www.epa.gov/water/](http://www.epa.gov/water/)
- **Water Conservation:** Tips for saving water are online at [www.awwa.org/waterwiser/](http://www.awwa.org/waterwiser/)



# Native and Invasive Plants

*Plants maintain the health of your land by creating and protecting the soil, filtering and creating clean air, filtering and protecting groundwater, and providing food and shelter for you, your animals, and native wildlife.*

## Native Plants

Native plants are those that occur naturally in a particular area and are adapted to the local climate, soil, and water conditions. Once they are established, native plants will usually thrive without the need for supplemental irrigation or pesticides. Also, because native plants have evolved with the local wildlife, they provide excellent sources of food, nesting, and shelter for native animals. The native trees, shrubs, grasses, and wildflowers in your area have traditionally grown together as members of plant communities.

## Invasive plants

Invasive plants are usually exotic (non-native) plants that can escape into the wild and, without natural controls, may spread rapidly, out-compete and replace natives, and take over entire areas. Invasive species can completely alter local habitats and diminish the habitat's value to native wildlife. Bring invasives under control using the least toxic methods.

## Considerations:

Which plants are native to your area?

Which native plants would be appropriate for your property?

What are the most common exotic invasive plants in your area?  
Are they on your property?

What are the local regulations about controlling noxious weeds on your land?

What are the least toxic methods for removing invasives from your property?



## Helpful Hint

Visit a local nature preserve to observe the plant communities that are native to your area.

## To Learn More:

- **Plant Identification:** Ask your local extension agent or native plant club for help and suggested field guides to help you identify your native plant communities and their trees, bushes, forbs, and grasses.
- **Invasive Plants:** In addition to local extension agents and native plant clubs, information about your local exotic invasive plants is online here: <http://plants.usda.gov/java/noxiousDriver>

# My Plants

## **Most Common Trees**

Species	# or Percent	Native, Invasive, other?
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

## **Most Common Shrubs**

Species	# or Percent	Native, Invasive, other?
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

## **Most Common Grasses and Forbs**

Species	# or Percent	Native, Invasive, other?
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

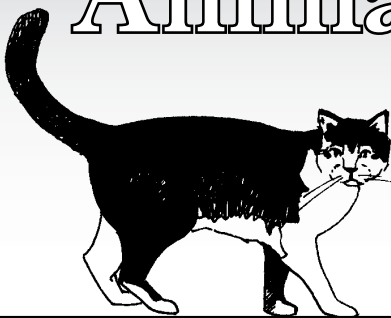
How do my plants compare with those found in local native plant communities?

What can I do to improve the health of my plant communities?





# Domestic Animals



*For many rural residents, owning horses, other livestock, or pets is a priority. To properly manage livestock and maintain the health of the land, you need to find out how many animals your land can sustain and create a regime to prevent overgrazing, which can damage your soils, vegetation, and water holding capacity. Cats and dogs that are allowed to roam may threaten livestock as well as wildlife and can be at risk from wild predators and diseases. Cats should be kept indoors, and dogs should be leashed, fenced in a pen, or under your voice control.*

## Considerations:

- Is livestock appropriate for your land?
- What are the local stocking rates for each type of livestock?
- What is the best grazing regime?
- Is there evidence of overgrazing?
- Are your pets vaccinated, licensed, spayed or neutered, and wearing appropriate identification tags?



## Helpful Hint

Contact your local cooperative extension office to see if livestock is appropriate for your property, and for help in determining appropriate stocking rates and grazing schedules for your property.



## To learn more:

- **Livestock:** <http://www.nm.nrcs.usda.gov/news/publications/smallacreagegrazing.pdf>
- **Reducing threats from cats:** [http://www.audubon.org/bird/at\\_home/SafeCats.html](http://www.audubon.org/bird/at_home/SafeCats.html)

# Living with Wildlife



*Before your land was developed, it was part of a larger landscape that was home to hundreds of plant and animal species. Learn how to live with wildlife, avoid animal nuisances, and help native species to thrive on your land. As you learn about the animals that live on your property, you will be able to avoid wildlife conflicts, enjoy interacting with a wide range of animals, and better protect their habitats. Remember, too, the smaller creatures, such as butterflies, bees, and other beneficial insects. Protect them by using the least toxic methods when battling pests on your property. Use wildlife-friendly fencing to allow safe, free movement of wild animals.*

## Considerations:

Does the fencing on your land allow free movement of wildlife?

What kinds of wildlife do you currently find on your land?

What insect pests do you need to control?

What are the least toxic control methods available?



## Helpful Hint

Wildlife need food, shelter, and water. As you learn about the animals on your land, find out what they need, how your land satisfies their needs, and what you can do to help them thrive.

## To learn more

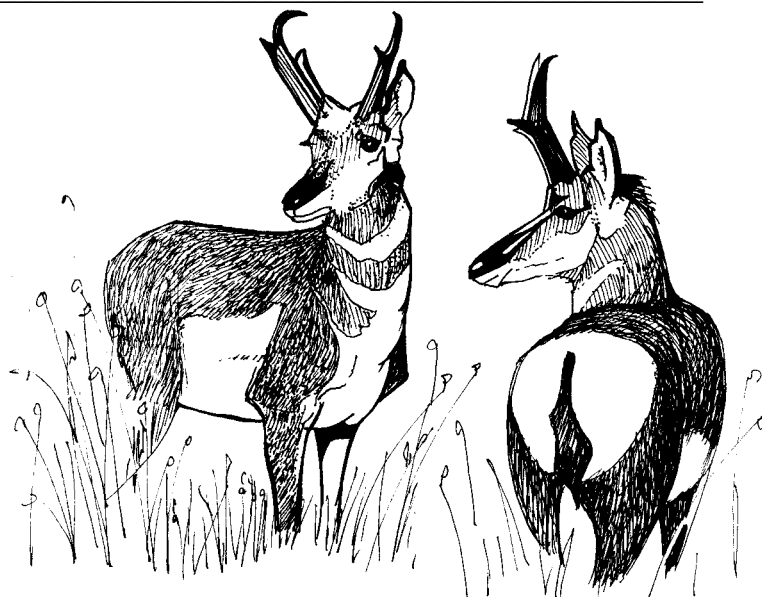
- **Identifying Animals:** Field guides—either online or in a library or bookstore—can help you identify unfamiliar animals.
- **State Wildlife Agencies:** Your state wildlife agency will have additional information about game and non-game wildlife in your area.
- **Wildlife Friendly Fencing:** [www.audubonathome.org/fences](http://www.audubonathome.org/fences)
- **Nuisance Wildlife:** Links to resources addressing the most common wildlife issues is online at <http://ranchettes.audubon.org/wildlife/nuisance>.
- **Integrated Pest Management:** Non-toxic solutions to your insect problems can be found online at [www.audubon.org/bird/at\\_home/IPM\\_Alternatives.html](http://www.audubon.org/bird/at_home/IPM_Alternatives.html)

# My Wildlife

What are the most common native animals on my property, and what do they need to thrive?

Species

### Food, shelter, and other needs

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are approximately 20 lines visible. The paper has a slight shadow on the right side, suggesting it's resting on a surface.

# Helping Native Birds

Many birds will be attracted to the plants, water, and other features on your property. Bird feeders, nest boxes, or special habitat management can also help birds. Learn to identify the common birds that live on your land and make an effort to help those that need additional help to thrive in your area.

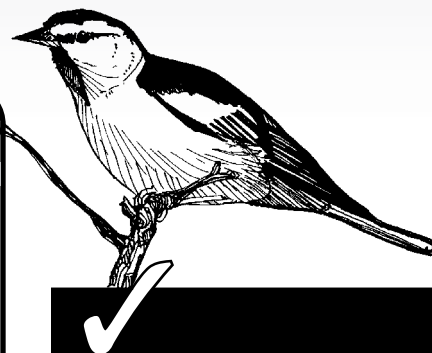
## Considerations:

Are there birds that are unique to your region that could benefit from your land?

What kinds of birds would you like to attract to your property?

Do you provide safe, clean water for birds and other wildlife?

Do you have large, reflective windows that may confuse birds?



## Helpful Hint

Use decals spaced 2 inches apart on the outside of large windows to lessen the chance that birds will mistake your clean windows for flight paths.

## My Birds to Help

Species:

How I can help:

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

## To Learn More:

- **Birds to Help:** Lists of birds that need help in your area can be found online at [www.audubonathome.org/birdstohelp](http://www.audubonathome.org/birdstohelp) and [www.fishwildlife.org/allbird\\_landbird.html](http://www.fishwildlife.org/allbird_landbird.html)
- **Identifying Birds:** Field guides—either online or in a library or bookstore--can help you identify unfamiliar birds.
- **Active Learning:** Join a local Audubon chapter, attend field trips, and ask knowledgeable people to help you identify and help the birds on your property. Search for your local Audubon chapter online at <http://www.audubon.org/states/locator.php>.



# Fire and Floods

*Living in the country entails living with natural processes such as fires and flooding. Although these events, when they occur naturally, may be necessary to maintain the health of your land, you'll want to take preventative steps to protect your home and your family. Understand the role these processes play in your area, and learn how to promote the process without endangering yourself. Learn preventive measures and know what emergency services are available in your area.*

## Considerations:

- What plant and animal species are dependent on natural fires?
- How can your habitats benefit from using controlled burns as a land management tool?
- Do you have a fire safety plan for your property?
- Where is the closest fire department and do they know the location of your homeme?
- What parts of your property are prone to flooding?
- Does any portion of your property lie within a floodplain?

## To Learn More:

- **Fire:** Information about how to protect your land from fire, and fire-prevention efforts in your community can be found online at [www.firewise.org](http://www.firewise.org).
- **Flooding:** Information on how to prepare for flooding, flood maps, and more is available online at the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) website: [www.fema.gov/hazard/flood/index.shtm](http://www.fema.gov/hazard/flood/index.shtm).



## Helpful Hint

Never drive through flooded water crossings.



# Local Resources

*Use this page to record important local contact information*

Name	Phone	Website or Email
Local USDA Service Center:		<a href="http://offices.sc.egov.usda.gov/locator/app">http://offices.sc.egov.usda.gov/locator/app</a>
Cooperative Extension Office:		<a href="http://www.csrees.usda.gov/Extension/index.html">http://www.csrees.usda.gov/Extension/index.html</a>
Local Conservation District:		<a href="http://www.nacdnet.org/resources/cdsonweb.html">http://www.nacdnet.org/resources/cdsonweb.html</a>
State Wildlife Agency:		
Local Water Authority:		<a href="http://www.wateruseitwisely.com/contactwater/index.shtml">http://www.wateruseitwisely.com/contactwater/index.shtml</a>
Local native plant nursery:		
Local native plant society:		
Local Audubon Chapter:		<a href="http://www.audubon.org/states/locator.php">http://www.audubon.org/states/locator.php</a>
Water quality testing:		

Other important information:

More information online at [www.audubonathome.org/countryhome](http://www.audubonathome.org/countryhome)