Riparian Areas Benefit Wildlife

Riparian areas are often described as the place where the land and water meet. This unique habitat is the site of many interactions between river and bank that are vital to the animals and plants that live there. As a result, this transition zone between the upland and aquatic communities often has higher species richness and diversity than other habitats and is an important ecological component of the landscape.

Riparian areas provide a variety of functions from filtering and reducing pollution into streams, to reducing erosion, and providing wildlife habitat and shade to control water temperature. The distinct soil and vegetation form a network of roots and ground cover that intercepts runoff from upland areas and stabilizes the river bank. Riparian areas also provide essential flood control by slowing rushing flood waters and providing a place for swollen rivers to expand outside of their banks.

Though they are only a small part of the natural landscape, riparian areas are of great value to fish and wildlife. Trees and other plants that shade the river help keep the water cool while stabilizing banks and providing food (i.e. leaves and twigs) for aquatic insects. Riparian areas provide for many of the needs of native fish and wildlife. Fish need food and year-round water that is clean and cool, as well as cover from predators and stable spawning and rearing areas. Wildlife heavily use riparian areas because the moist, fertile soils support a rich food supply and offer excellent shelter from predators and the elements.

Riparian areas come in all shapes and sizes and may be as small as a foot or so wide, like the steep bank of a small creek, or hundreds of feet wide along lowland rivers. Differences in riparian habitats are often related to differences in terrain and stream size, and adequate dimensions should be determined on a case by case basis. However, in general, riparian buffers of at least 20 feet are needed to provide stream shading benefits. Wildlife habitat and bank stabilization benefits can be seen in areas of at least 25 feet and a buffer of about 40 feet is the minimum necessary for flood water storage and water quality protection. To provide an array of functions, the total width of a riparian buffer should range between 35 and 150 feet.

There are numerous benefits to protecting and restoring riparian areas from their ability to filter runoff and stabilize river banks to the important role they play in supporting healthy fish and wildlife populations. UGRA supplies a field guide to riparian plants to anyone interested in learning more about riparian areas and the function of the vegetation they support. Please contact me to obtain your copy today.

Let's Keep *Our* River Clean

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