

Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy

People and Wildlife Living in Harmony

Forests: The Last Defense

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Riparian forest buffers and stream quality

By Fred Fox

Long ago, nearly every mile of every stream and creek in Loudoun County ran clean and pure, protected by a dense mantle of mature trees. After two centuries of agriculture and, now, thirty years of intense residential development, most of this forest has been cut down or saved only as thin strips at streamside. These remaining trees and the ones that we've been able to plant along the waterways are the only buffer between pollution and the sensitive aquatic ecosystem.



Riparian forests, the trees that grow along the streams, intercept and filter nutrient runoffs from lawns, golf courses, and agriculture. We've all read of the horrifying effects of chicken farming on the Chesapeake Bay, but in a smaller way, every drop of running water in our county is affected by what happens around it.

Riparian forests intercept and filter nutrients and other pollutants and up to ninety percent of sediment, phosphorous, and nitrates. They lower the water temperature ten to twenty degrees below the temperatures of streams without wooded shelter; an increase of only four degrees can destroy or cripple the life in the water. These stream buffers block flooding by stabilizing the banks and acting as a sponge to help soak up excess water. And woods along the streams welcome wildlife, from dam-building beavers to the smallest aquatic organisms, as they contribute to our own quality of life by providing havens in our increasingly busy world.

To help, join the Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy as it works to reforest our stream banks and preserve our threatened waterways. Farmers and part-time farmers can take advantage of the generous agricultural cost-share programs, with reimbursement for up to one hundred percent of the costs to fence livestock away from streams and plant trees. Plant trees on your property. Leave existing trees and understory along streams undisturbed, for the benefit of both the water and the wildlife. Leave lawns and ground cover high with only occasional mowing; grasses, too, can help filter pollution.

Keep a watchful eye on developers in your area, as they clear land and operate machinery near streams. Encourage your elected officials to support regulations for protecting water-side areas and to enforce the existing protection laws. For many areas, it's too late. For us, there's still time. We can preserve our riparian woodlands and plant new protective tree stands, saving our clean water and the wildlife that depends on it, and making a better place to live for us all.

For more wildlife and habitat information and resources, visit us at: www.loudounwildlife.org