

University of California  
Agronomy Research & Information Center

# Wildlife & Alfalfa

## A Natural Partnership

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While it is true that crop production represents a significant change from naturally occurring landscapes, it's not true that wildlife are the automatic losers in this exchange. In fact, many species of wildlife thrive within and alongside agriculture. Wildlife benefits from crops like rice and wheat, which provide grain for food. However, wildlife particularly benefits from alfalfa. Alfalfa provides significant habitat due to its nesting cover, abundant insects, perennial growth pattern, and feeding opportunities. In fact, there are hundreds of species that prefer alfalfa to other, even natural, landscapes.

What are the characteristics that make alfalfa such a good habitat for so many species? Perenniality. Alfalfa fields represent a stable, relatively undisturbed area where plant growth continues throughout the year, unlike other sites that are either disturbed, or exhibit only seasonal growth. High Feeding Value. The high palatability of alfalfa, which makes it such a good dairy feed, also makes it desirable to many herbivores, including many species of insects, rodents and grazing animals. Cover. Alfalfa canopies provide an

## Alfalfa – The Beginning of a Food Chain!

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While most people see an alfalfa field as simply a uniform horizontal green mass, of benefit only to the farmer, an alfalfa field is teeming with many forms of life that enrich us all. To many species of wildlife, alfalfa fields provide an oasis of green in landscapes of tilled fields or dry brush. Alfalfa is a 'primary producer' that supports many types of insects and vertebrate herbivores, such as gophers that inhabit the root zone.

In turn, songbirds, migratory birds, birds of prey, hunting mammals, snakes, and lizards feed upon the herbivores. Deer, antelope, and elk commonly feed in alfalfa fields, especially in times of drought. Foxes can be seen hunting rabbits and gophers, which feed on alfalfa fields. Many raptor species, including Swainson's Hawk and bald eagles, can be found hunting in alfalfa fields. Alfalfa is the beginning of a food chain that supports not only millions of farm animals and human beings, but many forms of wildlife that are important to the Earth's ecosystems.

## **How Wildlife Species Use Alfalfa**

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This listing of many forms of wildlife found in alfalfa fields was obtained by considering the 675 regularly-occurring resident and migratory terrestrial wildlife (amphibians, birds, mammals and reptiles) that live in California. Of these, 182 species, or 27% were considered to be frequent, moderate, or occasional users of alfalfa, either in the crop itself, along the margins of the fields, or in the plowed or seeded fields during cultivation and stand establishment, or during harvest or irrigation events. The suitability of alfalfa for a species for Reproduction (R), Cover (C), or Feeding (F) is designated, along with the degree of suitability (•••= High, ••= Moderate, or •= Low). A certain species may use alfalfa only at certain stages of field management, crop growth, or stage of the wildlife. These designations were developed by L. Fitzhugh (Wildlife Biologist, UC Davis), based upon the California Wildlife Habitat Relationships model, version 7.0, and modified through literature review and consultation with other experienced wildlife biologists and ornithologists.

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