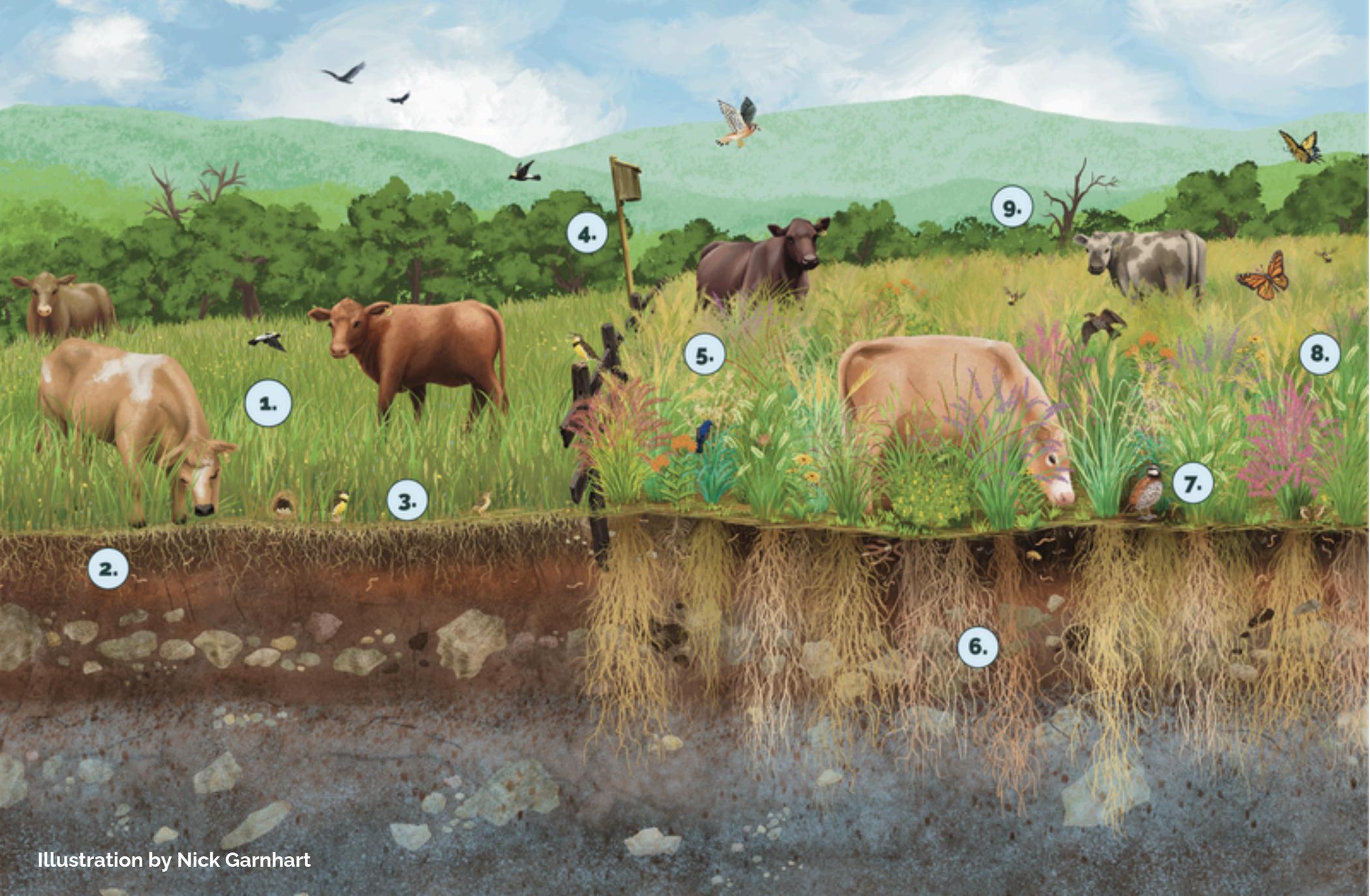


DIVERSE FORAGES: GOOD FOR THE LAND, THE HERD, AND THE BIRD



Good grazing management practices take advantage of the complementary growth periods of both cool-season and native warm-season grasses, allowing livestock continuous access to fresh forage for more months of the year.

Diversifying forages within grazing systems allows producers to take advantage of the beneficial attributes and various growing periods of different plants. In the illustration on the front of this handout, we highlight the advantages of having both cool-season grass pastures (e.g., fescue and orchard grass) as well as pastures with a mix of native forbs, legumes, and warm-season grasses (e.g., oxeye sunflower, partridge pea, and little bluestem). These complement each other to provide a more continuous and potentially extended grazing window while supporting wildlife.

- 1 Cool-season grasses (CSGs) grow well in the spring and fall, making them ideal livestock forage during these seasons. They can also be "stockpiled" (accumulated growth) for grazing later on. An example would be summer stockpiling, in which a portion of CSG-dominated fields are left ungrazed in the spring, providing a stockpile of forage available for grazing later on.
- 2 While CSGs are great for hay and fresh forage, and work well for some wildlife, they have limitations. Their comparably shallower roots are unable to reach water during dry periods, so they go semi-dormant during droughts.
- 3 Grassland birds such as the Eastern Meadowlark, Grasshopper Sparrow, and Bobolink have adapted to successfully nest in CSG fields, building their nests directly on the ground. These birds are most vulnerable during their peak breeding season, from mid-April to early July. Effort should be made during this time to avoid overgrazing, overstocking, and/or clipping (bush-hogging) pastures during these months, to allow more birds to fledge the nest.
- 4 Nest-boxes are an easy way to supplement natural cavities by providing safe nesting opportunities for at-risk cavity-nesting birds such as the American Kestrel, our native grassland falcon. Other farmyard birds that benefit from nest-boxes include Tree Swallows, Eastern Bluebirds, and Purple Martins. These species perform an important role on farms by consuming rodents and insect pests that harm livestock and crops.

- 5 Native warm-season grasses (NWSGs) are uniquely adapted to Virginia's hot, dry summers. They are dormant in cooler temperatures but grow vigorously from May through August, offering strategic grazing during the summer when CSGs are inactive (i.e., the "summer slump").
- 6 NWSGs can offer myriad benefits to producers. These grasses typically have deep roots that can access moisture during dryer times of the year, they thrive under poor soil fertility (low pH, low phosphorus), and they have the ability (as C4 grasses) to continue photosynthesis during hot weather. These attributes make them a good candidate for sites with poor soils. Meanwhile, NWSGs are non-toxic, while tall fescue (a CSG) causes measurable losses in animal performance in the summer. And NWSGs offer benefits of nutrient retention and erosion prevention during heavy rainfall events.
- 7 NWSGs provide a different type of habitat that is favored by species such as Northern Bobwhite, Blue Grosbeak, and Wild Turkey. These grasses, known as "bunch grasses", grow in clumps and create pockets of bare space between plants. This allows grassland birds and their young to more easily navigate along the ground while still being protected from overhead predators by a canopy of grass.
- 8 Native flowers (i.e., forbs) and native legumes can complement warm-season grass stands by providing additional nutrition for livestock and floral resources for pollinators.
- 9 Snags (i.e., dead trees) should be left standing if they do not pose a safety threat to people or structures. They provide critical nesting habitat and food for cavity-nesting birds, including woodpeckers, owls, falcons, and songbirds.

Additional resources on regenerative agricultural practices, native warm-season grasses, and the associated benefits for farmland, farmers, and wildlife conservation can be found here: vagrasslandbirds.org/resources/

