

Managing for Upland Wildlife

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What follows is an introduction for incorporating habitat enhancement opportunities into your land management plan to encourage the increased use of your upland property by wildlife. I emphasize “introduction,” as your course of action will depend on your property and management goals. A key aspect to keep in the back of your head while managing on your specific parcel of land is to be aware of the larger landscape surrounding your land.

Much of the New England landscape has reverted into mature growth forest following the transition from an agro-based economy at the turn of the last century. In addition, human population growth and development has increased almost exponentially in the last 100 years. These factors have influenced a large scale, landscape shift from an open field/forest habitat to a largely dominant mature forest landscape with limited available open habitats. This changing landscape has been identified as one of the major influences contributing to the decline of many early successional wildlife species such as the American woodcock, New England cottontail and golden-winged warbler. Managing a portion of your land as early successional habitat can benefit over 50 species of many game and non-game wildlife species.

Before we go on, let’s define “early successional habitat”. At the basic level this type of habitat can be classified into three habitat stages:

- 1) Grasslands and open fields.
- 2) The Regeneration Stage, which starts after an initial clearing (or in some cases a natural disturbance such as hurricane or fire) and can last 10 to 15 years, depending on the forest community (plant species) that occur on your particular parcel of land.
- 3) Young forest habitat starting after the regeneration stage and can last 40 to 50 years depending on the forest community present.

First Steps

Before incorporating early successional habitat into your management plan several factors should be considered (List taken from Oehler et. al., Chapter 5):

1. What kinds of wildlife are you interested in?
2. What are the current and past conditions of your property that will influence your management goals?
3. Does the land have the potential or inherent ability to produce the kinds of habitats needed for the wildlife of interest?
4. How large is your property?
5. How does your property fit in the overall landscape perspective?

Once you have clearly answered these questions you can proceed in adding early successional habitat to your management plan.

Management plan:

- 1) Develop achievable management objectives
- 2) Identify the important wildlife habitat types on your property – here is where you can enlist assistance from state wildlife biologists and foresters.
- 3) Develop an action plan to achieve your objectives.
- 4) Secure assistance from federal and state cost share programs

Patch Size

Small habitat patches of $\frac{1}{4}$ acre and larger provide food and cover benefiting various upland species that are more mobile and can move between small patches. However, a guideline to shoot for to maximize successful reproduction and survival for wildlife species with a small home range is to maintain a patch size of 5 acres. In your management plan, consider how your parcel contributes to the landscape level distribution of early successional habitat, noting that the ideal amount of the landscape in some stage of early successional habitat is between 10 and 20 percent. If you have 100 acres, managing 10 to 20 acres of your land in regenerating and young forest stands will benefit wildlife the greatest.

Shrublands and Old Fields

If your management objectives call for some perpetual low cover food source and shelter as part of your plan, you will want to manage for some shrubland on your parcel. Species such as New England cottontail and grouse will benefit from this. Shrubland provides vegetative structure and diversity beneficial for wildlife nesting, brood rearing, feeding and cover from predators. You can either clear cut an area and start from scratch, or revive an area for shrubland. With either option the plan should call for reentry into the stand every 1 to 3 years. This will maintain a stable shrubland, keeping fruiting shrubs available for wildlife food and also maintain necessary cover. This habitat can be seen on regularly managed power line right of ways. Next time you are passing a power line, stop and walk in a few hundred feet for reference.

Many of the same wildlife habitat values achieved by maintaining shrubland can also be accomplished by recovering old fields and orchards on a property. Old fields with high stem density of woody plants provide nesting sites and escape cover as well as a food source. Old orchards also serve as high value for wildlife food source. Apple trees can be “released”, or opened up by mowing and selectively cutting around the old trees. Undesirable species can be removed and plant species such as high-bush blueberry, blackberry and winterberry can be encouraged.

Regenerating and Young Forest Habitat

With the exception of hemlock, the greatest wildlife species diversity in forest habitat stands is found in regenerating and young forest communities. A well-managed area of your land in this habitat class will result in highly valuable wildlife habitat. The management applications will greatly depend on what particular forest community (plant species make-up) you have to work with. For example, aspen and birch will respond better to full sunlight whereas coniferous, sugar maple and oak regeneration has better potential in partial shade. This is where enlisting the assistance of a state wildlife biologist and forester can benefit your plan.

Management on the ground

Land over 50 acres, unless you have the experience and equipment, is best managed using the expertise of a commercial timber harvest company. You will also be able to profit from the commercial harvest of your trees while managing for wildlife habitat. It is recommended that you employ the help of a professional forester or wildlife consultant to assist with your management plan. Contact the local State Forest office for names of contacts.

There are also federal and state cost share programs that, in some cases, help offset the expense of managing for wildlife. These include:

- Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP): A program that provides financial assistance to landowners who enter a contract for a period of time (5 years, 10 years or longer) to create and maintain high quality wildlife habitats. Cost-share assistance is greatest when landowners commit to 15 years or more.
- Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP): A program that provides technical and financial assistance to restore and protect wetlands that provide wildlife habitat, improved water quality, and recreation. Two options are available; 1) a conservation easement where USDA pays 100% to restore the wetland and 2) a ten year contract option where the USDA pays 75% of the cost of restoration. In both cases the land is retained by the owner with some restrictions on use.

For more information on these programs go to: www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/farbill

- Conservation Reserve Program (CRP): This program provides up to 50% assistance for management of warm season grass and tree plantings on highly erodible farms fields.
- Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP): A program for cropland owners that places land into a retirement conservation program. This is a joint program between the state and federal government.

For more information on these programs go to: <http://www.fsa.usda.gov/dafp/cepd/default.htm>

Contact information for federal and Maine state agencies that assists with technical and funding assistance information for early-successional habitat management.

Farm Service Agency
Maine State Office
967 Illinois Ave.
Bangor, ME 04401
(207) 990-9100

Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS)
Maine State Office
967 Illinois Ave.
Suite #3
Bangor, ME 04401
(207) 990-9100

Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife
284 State Street
41 State House Station
Augusta, ME 04333
(207) 287-8000

Maine Forest Service
22 State House Station
Harlow Building
Augusta, ME 04333
(207) 287-2791

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