

# Increasing the Impact of Forest Stewardship through Wildlife Habitat Management

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The Forest Stewardship Program is administered by the State and Private Forestry unit of the U.S. Forest Service. It provides assistance to forest landowners where good stewardship will enhance and sustain the long-term productivity of multiple forest resources, including wildlife habitat. The program provides landowners with the professional planning and technical assistance they need to keep their land in a productive and healthy condition.

Service foresters and private consulting foresters are the backbone of the program through their work with landowners. Over the past decade, about 7.5 million acres of “family owned” forest land have benefited from the program. This represents about 6 percent of all privately owned forest land in the Northeast and Midwest. The Forest Stewardship Program is currently looking at large-scale ways to increase its impact on the ground.

Small-scale, one-on-one work between a forester and a landowner is still important, and always will be. For example, talking with a forester was rated as a useful or very useful way for landowners to get forestry information according to surveys conducted by Dr. Brett Butler of the U.S. Forest Service.

In this short article, we want to look at some examples of small-scale stewardship at work in New England, particularly some wildlife habitat work being done for ruffed grouse and Neotropical songbirds. This work could become much larger in scale with added emphasis and national partnerships.

Consulting Forester Charlie Koch lives in Jaffrey, NH, and works, in part, with local landowners who want to provide habitat for ruffed grouse. Charlie manages one large block of land permanently protected by easements (about 1,000 acres). This land occurs in three adjacent parcels currently owned by Sarah Timmons and Sheldon Pennoyer. Landowner participation is critically important in the effort to proactively provide stewardship for woodlands, and both Sarah Timmons and Sheldon Pennoyer are great examples of exemplary stewards of their land.



Photo 1. Pictured is Sheldon Pennoyer, a New Hampshire woodland owner and manager of wildlife habitat.

Sarah’s husband Jeff was an enthusiastic advocate of managing for ruffed grouse because he liked to hunt them. As a result, forested areas 10 to 12 acres in size were selected for grouse management using Koch’s forestry expertise.

On a beautiful, sunny day in May 2009, Charlie joined Sheldon, local NRCS District Conservationist Krista Olsen, and Roger Monthey to visit some wildlife habitat areas on the Pennoyer and Timmons property (photo 1). The two properties abut each other, and their mutual efforts to provide wildlife habitat greatly enhance the overall effort.

After looking at some fields maintained by Pennoyer that are also important to grassland birds such as the bobolink and eastern meadowlark, the group viewed some possible wildlife openings in the forest and potential wildlife shrub plantings on the Pennoyer property.

Charlie and Roger then walked onto the Timmons property and through several open fields that were being managed by the Timmonses to retain their old field condition. These fields were brush hogged periodically to maintain the grass and meadow habitat. To Charlie and Roger's surprise, there were a substantial number of sugar maple seedlings in one of these open fields, indicating that a decision needed to be made to either manage the sugar maples or maintain that area as a field.

They finally reached the small patch cuts that Charlie had established. These sites were selected based on stocking conditions—densely stocked areas with stagnant growth, sites with less productivity for timber, and sites that had been heavily cut in the past that left some low-quality residual trees.

The plan is to create a 2- to 3-acre patch cut every 10 years within the 10- to 12-acre selected areas, eventually providing four adjacent age classes (0-10, 10-20, 20-30, and 30-40 years old) (photo 2). Black birch is a dominant sapling in the openings, but sugar and red maple, white ash, and red oak are also present.

Koch has noticed ruffed grouse using the 10-year-old age class patch cuts, which are also used by early successional songbirds. On this day, they heard early successional species such as the common yellowthroat and chestnut-sided warbler, and the black-throated blue warbler that prefers continuous tracts of hardwood or mixed forest with a dense understory of small saplings. The black-throated blue was seen in a 10-year-old patch cut that had some large eastern hemlock trees left as residuals.



Photo 2. Consultant Forester Charlie Koch stands beside a 2- to 3-acre, 10-year-old patch cut that has produced a high density of saplings for ruffed grouse habitat.

Steve Hagenbuch, conservation biologist for Audubon Vermont, recommends that landowners consider creating a small number of patch cuts, up to 2 acres in size. This will help create a multilayered variety of habitats that can support a greater number of species. He also recommended leaving some standing live and dead trees and 6 snags an acre within the patch cuts. Hagenbuch has visited at least 38 plots of land in Vermont ranging in size from 30 to 3,000 acres.

Speaking of Audubon Vermont, the U.S. Forest Service, State and Private Forestry provided a grant, "Foresters for the Birds," to the Vermont Department of Forests and Parks in partnership with Audubon Vermont. The first workshop was held at the Audubon Center in Huntington, VT (photo 3) in May 2009.

This grant is designed to 1) promote stand-level silviculture as a tool to enhance bird habitat and generate income from forest products, which also offsets land holding costs and helps keep forests as forests; 2) provide training to foresters about conservation biology and habitat sciences; and 3) capitalize on foresters' experience to create useful, practical tools for integrating timber and bird habitat management.

The workshop attracted 45 foresters and included training in bird identification, bird habitat assessments, and silvicultural options for bird management. Additional workshops will be offered in 2010, and efforts to integrate bird habitat needs with silvicultural practices will be the focus of discussions until the grant ends in 2011.



Photo 3. Vermont County Forester Michael Snyder discusses a patch cut on Audubon Vermont's property that was made to develop habitat for chestnut-sided warblers.

The list of positive, proactive steps to enhance wildlife habitat through silvicultural practices goes on and on. We have only provided several examples. Others species that would benefit include the American woodcock, black-throated green warbler, blue-headed vireo, eastern wood pewee, wood thrush, and yellow-bellied sapsucker, among others.

Connections between landowners and Audubon Societies who are simultaneously connected with the forestry sector (as exemplified in the Vermont case) hold great promise

in increasing forest stewardship efforts. The alternative to such practices may include sale of the land, and eventual parcelization and fragmentation, which are the greatest enemies of forests in the Northeast. Partnerships at the national level with wildlife groups such as the Ruffed Grouse Society, along with concurrent implementation at the ground level, could produce a variety of benefits for wildlife and the land in the heavily populated East, whose forest base is shrinking.

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