



What are Forest Birds?

The term “forest birds” is often used to refer to migratory forest songbirds that breed in the extensive forests of the northeastern United States and winter in the southern U.S., Central America or South America. This group includes the colorful warblers, vireos, thrushes, flycatchers, and others that fill northeastern forests in the spring and summer. The northeastern U.S. has some of the highest diversity of breeding birds in the country due, in large part, to the varied species of forest songbirds. Many of these species are showing long-term population declines and/or have a high proportion of their global breeding population in this region, making their conservation especially important. Priority species in Vermont include Canada warbler, black-throated blue warbler, veery, wood thrush, and many more.



The black-throated blue warbler (above) is a species of hardwood/mixedwood forests that needs thick understory vegetation for nesting cover. They typically nest within 5 feet of the ground. The white-throated sparrow (top right) is found in mixed/softwood forests with low, thick cover. They nest on or just above the ground.

A high density of woody stems in the understory (below) is usually the result of a sparse canopy cover allowing sun to reach the forest floor. This may happen naturally as trees fall over or can be created through forest management.



What makes good forest bird habitat?

Many forest birds are particular about the makeup of their habitat. Some prefer hardwood forests while others prefer softwood (coniferous) forests or mixed forest. Certain species nest only in young forests; others require older forests. Within these forests a variety of vegetative layers (e.g. ground, understory, mid-story or canopy layer) are used for nesting or feeding. To provide the appropriate habitat for forest birds, it is critical to have a diverse and well-structured forest. This is not a “park-like” forest with only large trees and nothing else growing. A well-structured forest has a mix of various species of large trees, medium size trees and small trees throughout. Standing dead trees (snags) and logs and tree tops on the forest floor may look rather messy, but provide excellent habitat for forest birds.

Good Forest Management is the Key

Old growth forests can provide great forest bird habitat, but they are in very short supply. In an old forest there is a range of young to old trees, as well as a good amount of snags and large woody debris on the forest floor. As large, old trees fall over, they create room for new young trees that provide thick cover and vegetative structure. Younger, even-aged forests are common in Vermont due to past land use, but they are not structurally diverse. They consist of trees of relatively the same age and heights, so most foliage is found at the canopy level. This translates to a simplified habitat which does not provide for a diversity of forest birds. Using the techniques of good forestry, the forest can be moved from an even-aged to an uneven-aged condition where trees of all ages are found. With the help of a forester, many habitat elements can be enhanced while also improving forest health and productivity.



Even-Aged Forest - Limited structure/habitat



Uneven-Aged Forest - Good structure/habitat

The wood thrush (right) is found in mature hardwood or mixedwood forest with a closed canopy, moderate understory and midstory vegetation, and leaf litter for foraging. They generally nest in the low midstory layer 10-12 feet from the ground.



What can I do?

Forest landowners can work with a forester to develop and implement a forest management plan that will incorporate their objectives to improve the forest and habitat for forest birds. The **USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)** can provide the assistance of a professional resource manager as well as financial assistance for habitat improvement and forestry practices to help meet the goals of the forest management plan. NRCS works in partnership with the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department and the Vermont Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation to assist private landowners in improving habitat and forest management on their lands.

For more information visit the NRCS web site <http://www.vt.nrcs.usda.gov/>, or call your local USDA Service Center in the phone book under U.S. Government, Agriculture Department. **Also see** the Audubon Vermont/Forest Parks and Recreation **Foresters for the Birds** Tools and Information, <http://vt.audubon.org/>