



Managing Your Woodlot with Birds and Wildlife in Mind



Want to learn about the health and productivity of your land? Birds can help! Birds are great indicators of your land's health because they are especially sensitive to change and stress in and around their homes. For that reason, birds will also be one of the first to indicate that your actions are truly increasing the health of your woods and its inhabitants. A healthy bird population points to healthy woods, so managing your land with birds in mind does not just benefit birds. Active maintenance of bird habitat will make your woods healthier, more resilient, and more productive. Not to mention, healthier woods also provide homes for a wider variety of wildlife such as black bears, bobcats, and eastern red-backed salamanders. An added bonus of a healthy bird population is free insect damage control, which means less investment in insecticides and bug zappers for you!

Forests in Vermont, New York, and northern New England are home to some of the highest concentration of bird species breeding in the continental United States—meaning this region provides rich, essential habitat for all local wildlife species. As a result, small landowners are essential to bird and wildlife conservation. You can play an active role by beginning to maintain your woodland with birds in mind. With careful planning, you can have productive working woodlands that provide habitat for many of the bird and wildlife species that call this area home. A forester or wildlife biologist can help you determine which actions are most suitable for the unique conditions on your land.

Here are some actions you might take on your land and why they are important:

- **Inventory and map your land for important habitat features.** Learn which resources already exist on your land! Take your mapping even further by looking at the landscape beyond your property lines to understand how your land fits into the big picture. Google Earth and Google Maps are great sources of free, aerial imagery. MyLandPlan.org also provides the tools you need to not only map and journal about your woodlot but, you can also set goals, communicate with natural resource professionals and find additional support.



- **Leave dead and dying wood standing and other woody material on the forest floor for food and shelter.** Snags (standing, dead trees) and downed trees serve as resting, nesting, and food sources for about 40 species of birds. Many birds will use cavities as nesting sites and the insects that thrive on snags as a food source. Birds of prey will use snags for hunting viewpoints. Logs serve as drumming sites for ruffed grouse, and piles of finer woody material on the ground can be helpful for protecting regeneration from browsing by deer and moose. Leaf litter and woody material also provide moist habitats for tasty critters that many forest birds will feed on. Leaf litter often looks messy to us, but it is home to an important food source for forest birds.
- **Maintain native trees and shrubs that produce fruits, seeds, or nuts.** These trees provide a great food source for birds living on, or passing through, your land. They will be especially important during fall migrations and during winter for birds that remain year-round. Examples of trees include serviceberry, raspberry, black cherry, and dogwood. Encouraging the growth of white pine, hemlock, and other softwoods will also provide important cover for wintering birds.
- **Avoid breaking up forest patches by limiting roads and trails.** Large forest patches increase the diversity of birds your woods can support. You can maximize “unbroken” forest habitat by considering how much edge space your forest has compared to the interior forest area. Circular and square forest patches provide greater unbroken forest habitat than oblong or rectangular shaped forest because there is less edge space. It is also important to limit interruption of forest habitat by minimizing the presence of roads and wide trails and by maintaining tree cover over existing roads and trails.
- **Remove invasive plants because they don’t support local wildlife.** The fruits of many invasive plants have lower nutritional value than natives, which is especially troubling for the thousands of migratory birds passing through this area in need of nourishing food for their journeys. Birds will build nests in invasive plants as well, which may make them more vulnerable to predators. What’s more, non-native, invasive plants often out-compete and reduce the presence of important native plants. Native plants provide a nutritious food source in the form of fruit and seeds, are home to other tasty treats like insects and spiders, and provide a safe space for birds to build their nests.



- **Create piles of brush and branches for wildlife shelter.** You can create brush piles by stacking downed tree limbs. These piles are a great source of shelter for many critters that call your land home, especially during the winter.
- **Maintain a variety of tree and shrub species, ages, and sizes.** Maintaining a diverse woodland will provide habitat for a larger number of bird species. Additionally, providing numerous types of tree species will allow your woodland and its inhabitants to be more resilient to change and disturbances. Diverse woodlands can often look messy to us, but complex, messy forest structure can be a signature of healthy woodlands and key to supporting a wide diversity of living things in your woods.
- **Thin your woods or conduct a harvest to enhance bird and wildlife habitat.** Thinning describes the act of removing less desirable trees from your woods. The goal is to promote the growth of other trees by decreasing the density of trees. As a result, competition for resources decreases, contributing to the health of the remaining trees. Remember, healthy woods lead to healthy wildlife populations!
- **Minimize harvesting and other disruptive activities during bird breeding season (May to mid-July).** Most northeast birds breed throughout the spring and early summer. Delaying harvesting and other disruptive activities until after the middle of July allows chicks to leave the nest before the disturbance begins. Delayed harvesting can also protect forest soils from damage.
- **Create a small forest opening of small trees, bushes, and grasses for nesting and food sources.** Woods made up of tree seedlings and saplings less than fifteen years old are referred to as early successional habitat. Ideally, these young forests should be at least two acres in size. If you do encourage early successional habitat, be careful not to break up older interior forest patches by doing so.
- **Restore areas along streams and creeks.** The wet edges along creeks and streams are referred to as riparian areas. Riparian areas are crucial to countless plant and animal species. Many birds use riparian buffers during both migration and breeding season. Riparian areas that are at least 50 feet wide will meet the baseline needs of various songbirds, but areas that are 200 to 300 feet will provide much more preferable habitat for songbirds.



- **Avoid drastic changes (sharp edges) between wooded and non-wooded habitats.** An “edge” is a place where two different types of habitats meet. Softer edges have a gradual change in vegetation height near forest edges. Predators and nest parasites are the greatest threat to birds within 150 feet of the forest edge. Buffering forests with soft edges will keep birds nesting near the forest edge safe.



- **Learn to identify the birder’s dozen.** The birder’s dozen is a great starting point for learning about birds in your woods. They are taken from among a selection of the 40 forest songbirds that have been identified by Audubon as high priority for protection. These 12 birds were selected because they are simple to identify by sight and/or sound, use a wide range of woodland habitat types collectively, are showing a decline in their global populations or are at risk for decline, and have a significant portion of their global population breeding in New England’s forests.
- **Talk with your neighbors about working together for birds and wildlife.** Talking with your neighbors will allow you to maximize benefits for birds and wildlife across the boundaries of your land. Perhaps you and your neighbors can provide a broader variety of resources by combining your efforts. By getting your neighbors involved, your combined efforts will have an even bigger impact.

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