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Sweet Songs from your Forest

As a landowner, you know the challenges associated with meeting multiple ownership objectives. Whether you manage for high-quality timber, wildlife habitat, recreation, or a combination of these, you know that successful management of your property requires specific planning on your part. Even if you wish to direct your resources strictly for wildlife habitat, your management plan can become quite complex.

Consider for example the unique habitat required by wood ducks compared to the needs of wild turkey. These two birds thrive in significantly different habitats: one in wetlands and the other in sparsely wooded areas, respectively. Therefore you may encounter a dilemma if you desire having both on your property, unless of course the resources on your land can simultaneously support both of these species. Managing for songbird habitat on your forest property—whether exclusively or in conjunction with another objective—also requires careful consideration.

As with any wildlife species, the different species of songbirds prefer different habitats. Some songbirds depend exclusively on early-successional habitat, the young forest such as following a clearcut. Other species prefer late-successional habitat, and of course there are those species assorted intermediate stages of forest maturity. Many of the songbirds with which you are familiar depend on early-successional habitat. In New York and elsewhere in the Northeast, the amount of this young forest habitat is declining as forests mature.

Humans are disturbing New York forests less than they have historically, by decreasing the frequency of disturbances like clearcuts and natural disruptions such as pest outbreaks and forest fires. According to the federal Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the state of New York has lost thousands of acres of young forest in the last 15 to 20 years alone. The NRCS supports many conservation programs in New York State. Some of these are designed specifically to help landowners increase wildlife habitat, especially songbird habitat, on their property.

New York is home to an exciting variety of wildlife species, from Clinton to Chautauqua County, and everywhere in between. Conservation specialists have identified early-successional forests, grasslands, and riparian areas as wildlife habitats of special concern. If you have a stream on your forest property, then you can investigate strategies that would maintain or improve the riparian habitat along that waterway. Although every bird in the state plays an important role in ecosystems, wildlife bird species of special concern in New York include species such as Bobolink, Blue-winged Teal, Henslow's Sparrow, Northern Harrier, Eastern Meadowlark, Vesper Sparrow, Short-Eared Owl, and Grasshopper Sparrow.

Some songbirds require a dense forest understory habitat that provides nesting habitat and cover. If you have recently clearcut part of your forest, you can expect to see, and more likely hear, many songbirds in the near future. Open areas such as meadows and grasslands are crucial for songbirds and some birds of prey. For these species, open areas provide their next meal, including seeds, nuts, berries, insects, small mammals, and other organisms. If your property does include a grass field or meadow, this offers an opportunity to erect nesting boxes for birds. Be careful with the placement of nesting boxes—since every bird species requires unique habitat, most are very selective in where they will choose to nest. For instance, the American Kestrel will only use a nesting box that is placed very high on a tree or post in the middle of an open field, whereas an Eastern Bluebird prefers to build a nest in a box placed on the edge of such a field. If you have a stream or creek running through your land then you can put up nesting boxes for Wood Ducks, who normally build their nests in tree cavities in riparian areas.

If you have a residence on your property, you might consider the nearly endless possibilities for attracting songbirds to your own backyard. Place feeders near places where birds will have adequate cover, as found in brush piles and thickets. A simple tray feeder is a suitable start because it provides easy access for all kinds of birds. Supply your feeder with seeds used by your desired species of

songbird. Black oil sunflower seeds, for example, will attract multiple bird species to the same feeding station. Your local feed or hardware store that sells seeds can help you select an appropriate mixture.

Finally, there are many conservation strategies for you to consider while managing your forested property to benefit songbirds. You might plant forage grasses on skid trails, harvest landings, or in open meadows and fields. Maintain brush piles throughout your forest. Brush piles provide useful habitat for songbirds and many other forest wildlife. If you harvest trees in your forest, whether thinning for firewood or planning a timber sale, leave the treetops and branches behind and intact. Small-scale prescribed burning can create areas of early-successional forest and encourage dense understory plant growth [check local regulations before burning]. Include a vegetative buffer along stream corridors. If your property does not include a natural waterway, investigate your potential to expand a spring seep. Manage your trees to promote the growth of species that provide food for songbirds—this can be done simultaneously with other landowner objectives, such as recreation and timber production.

Contact local professionals to help you identify strategies that will increase the number of songbirds on your property. You may qualify for a state or federal wildlife conservation program. These programs provide benefits to eligible landowners, including grant money to fund your wildlife project or assistance with specialized equipment. No matter the region of New York State in which you reside, there government and non-government groups who can help you make your private land more attractive to our feathered friends.

For additional information on forestland activities that will benefit your objectives, visit Cornell's forestry website at www.ForestConnect.info, contact your local office of Cornell University Cooperative Extension, or join the New York Forest Owners Association through their website at www.nyfoa.org

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Editors note: This article is the eleventh in a 15 part series that is provided through a joint initiative of Cornell University Cooperative Extension and the New York Forest Owners Association as an educational service that helps the citizen of New York enjoy, use, and sustain private rural lands. For more information on these and other topics, please contact your local office of Cornell Cooperative Extension or visit www.ForestConnect.info or www.NYFOA.org.