U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Proposed Great Thicket National Wildlife Refuge

A Coordinated Response to Wildlife Decline in the Northeast

Draft Land Protection Plan and Environmental Assessment For Review

The Challenge

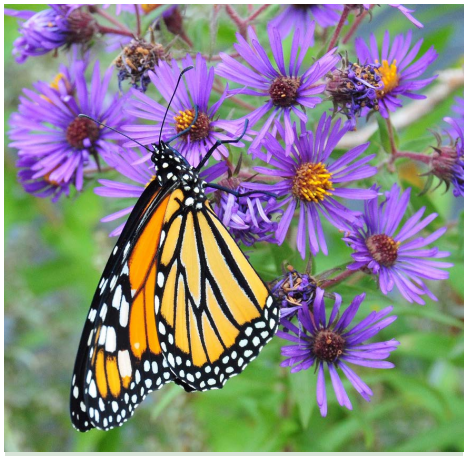
Over the past century, many shrublands and young forests across the Northeast have been cleared for development or have grown into mature forests. As this habitat has disappeared from much of the landscape, the populations of more than 65 songbirds, mammals, reptiles, pollinators, and other wildlife that depend on it have fallen alarmingly.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service), state wildlife agencies, private landowners and dozens of conservation organizations have responded to this urgency by restoring and protecting shrublands and young forest in New England and New York. Despite significant progress, experts have determined that more permanently protected and managed land is needed to restore wildlife populations and return balance to Northeast woodlands.

Our Proposal

To address this need, the Service is proposing to establish Great Thicket National Wildlife Refuge, a system of public lands that would be dedicated to managing shrubland habitat for wildlife and enjoyed by visitors whenever possible.

The Service has worked with state wildlife agencies and other conservation partners using species information, modeling and spatial analysis to identify 10 refuge acquisition focus areas, across six states, including Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island and New York.



Tom Koerner/USFWS

If approved, the proposed Great Thicket National Wildlife Refuge could provide places for migrating monarch butterflies to fuel up on nectar-producing plants.

Benefits For Wildlife and Communities

The dynamic, short-lived shrubland and young forest habitats provide food and shelter for New England cottontails, American woodcock, ruffed grouse, monarch butterflies, box turtles and scores of other species. Habitat management ranging from cutting and prescribed burning to shrub planting, as well as protection of naturally sustained shrublands like wetlands, would ensure these creatures and vibrant habitat remain a part of our landscape.

While the refuge, like all national wildlife refuges, would be managed specifically for wildlife, we would seek to provide wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities whenever possible. The agency gives special consideration to hunting, fishing,

Where are we in the planning process?

- ☑ *Preplanning*
- ☑ *Consult with State Agency Partners and other Experts*
- ☑ *Develop and Analyze our Proposal**
- ☑ **We are here** — *Release Draft Land Protection Plan and Environmental Assessment for Public Review and Comment*
- ☐ *Review Public Comments, Develop Responses, and Adjust Final Plan as Needed*
- ☐ *Prepare Final Land Protection Plan*
- ☐ *Regional Director Prepares a Finding of No Significant Impact**
- ☐ *Seek Director's Approval of Final Plan*
- ☐ *Release Final Plan and Begin Implementation*

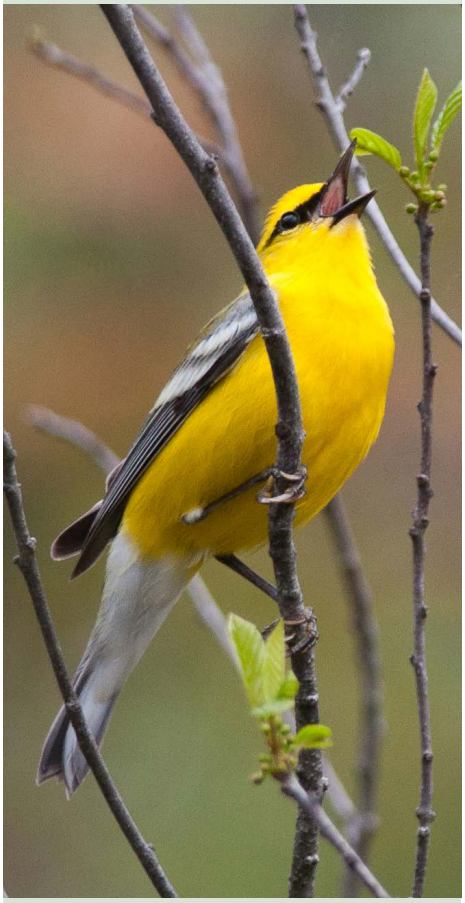
* The National Environmental Policy Act requires federal agencies to evaluate their proposed actions. This law also requires that the agency issue a Finding of No Significant Impact explaining how the chosen action will not have a significant effect on the human environment.

Tom Barnes/USFWS

*New England cottontail**

guizmo/Creative Commons

*American woodcock***



Peter Wilton/Creative Commons

*Blue-winged warbler****

wildlife observation, wildlife photography, environmental interpretation and environmental education, and uses a specific process to evaluate the feasibility of those public uses as land is acquired.

National wildlife refuges don't just provide a boost to wildlife. They are strong economic engines for local communities across the country. A 2013 national report Banking on Nature found that refuges pump $2.4 billion into the economy and support more than 35,000 jobs. Spending by refuge visitors generated nearly $343 million in local, county, state and federal tax revenue in 2011. Recognizing that there can be a tax loss when placing land in government ownership, the Service offsets this loss by annually contributing funds through the refuge revenue sharing program to the county or other local unit of government.

The Public Process

Before the Service can purchase lands to become part of the National Wildlife Refuge System, we must complete a rigorous strategic planning and public process.

The draft land protection plan and environmental assessment for the proposed Great Thicket National Wildlife Refuge will be available for public review for 45 days. The plan explains the need for land conservation and how our proposed actions complement other conservation activities, and describes each of the 10 focus areas across the six states. The agency will evaluate comments and make a final decision in 2016 on whether to establish the refuge and begin working with interested landowners.

If the plan is approved after the public comment period, the agency could begin working with willing and interested landowners to acquire approximately 15,000 acres through conservation easements or fee-title acquisition. Current refuge staff would manage all acquired lands within existing resources. **If the plan is approved, this process would take decades, as the Service works strictly with willing sellers only and depends on funding availability to make purchases.**

The National Wildlife Refuge System is the largest network of lands in the nation dedicated to wildlife conservation, with 563 national wildlife refuges covering more than 150 million acres. A hundred years in the making, the refuge system is a network of habitats that benefits wildlife, provides unparalleled outdoor experiences for all Americans, and protects a healthy environment.

Send your comments by March 4, 2016 via:

- Email northeastplanning@fws.gov with "Great Thicket LPP" in the subject line
- Mail to Beth Goldstein, Natural Resources Planner, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 300 Westgate Center Drive, Hadley, MA 01035-9589
- Fax to 413/253 8480

For more information:

Contact Beth Goldstein, beth_goldstein@fws.gov, 413/253 8564, or Bill Zinni, bill_zinni@fws.gov, 413/253 8522

Learn more at:

http://www.fws.gov/northeast/refuges/planning/lpp/greatthicketLPP.html

**New England cottontail*

In a multi-agency conservation strategy, state and federal biologists highlighted land protection and management as necessary for long-term conservation of the region's only native rabbit, the New England cottontail.

***American woodcock*

This proposed land protection effort could ensure that the iconic American woodcock finds the young forest needed for its breeding song and flight.

****Blue-winged warbler*

If this proposed land protection plan is realized, declining blue-winged (pictured) and prairie warblers would receive a considerable push toward population goals established by wildlife managers.