

# Partners for Fish and Wildlife in Rhode Island

## *Restoring Habitat for Future Generations*



Roseate Tern

### Background

The Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program (Partners Program) is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's most popular and effective program for voluntary, citizen and community-based fish and wildlife habitat restoration activities. The Partners Program serves as a bridge to owners and managers of private lands to develop partnerships for the benefit of federal trust species. The approach is simple: engage willing partners, through non-regulatory incentives, to conserve, restore and protect fish and wildlife habitat on their property. The Partners Program began in 1987 to help farmers restore degraded wetlands for wildlife; today it continues to grow with opportunities to restore wetland, riverine, and upland habitats.

### Partners Program in Rhode Island

The Partners Program in Rhode Island is administered from the New England Field Office in Concord, New Hampshire. Projects are focused in areas where conservation efforts will provide the greatest benefit for federal trust species, which include: migratory birds, anadromous fish, and Federally-listed threatened and endangered species. Habitats that were once in a degraded state are now providing important cover, food, water, and breeding areas for many species.

### Threats

Many species of migratory birds, waterfowl, reptiles and amphibians depend on freshwater wetlands for food, shelter and reproduction. It is estimated that Rhode Island has lost 37 % of its freshwater wetlands to development. There are approximately 65,000 acres of freshwater wetlands remaining in Rhode Island.

Coastal salt marsh ranks among the most productive ecosystems in the world, providing nursery grounds and foraging habitat for hundreds of species of fish,

### Rhode Island Partners Accomplishment Highlights 1993-2010

- Restored 200 acres of estuarine wetland habitat;
- Restored 350 acres of upland habitat;
- Reopened 5 miles of stream ; and
- Partnered with over 70 landowners and partners to achieve accomplishments.



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*Partner Program funds are used to restore native grassland that benefit the Federally endangered American burying beetle.*

shellfish, and birds. Due to development, Rhode Island has lost approximately 60% of its salt marshes with approximately 3,700 acres left.

In the mid-1800's, less than 40% of Rhode Island was forested, leaving 400,000 acres of open land for agricultural activity and development. By 1987, only 60,000 acres of farmland remained in the State. Farmland continues to decline along with native grasslands of any size. These declines have coincided with the alarming rate of decline in most grassland-dependent birds.

Rhode Island has over 500 dams and many undersized culverts that limit fish movement. A major impediment to dam removal is the presence of contaminated sediments behind these dams which can increase the cost and complexity of the removal process.

### Conservation Strategies

*Freshwater Wetland Restoration*  
The Partners Program has focused



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*The Partners Program restores warm season grasses and native wildflower mix at Avondale Preserve in Westerly, Rhode Island.*

on restoring freshwater wetlands by controlling non-native invasive vegetation. Wetlands along the Wood-Pawcatuck River and wetlands adjacent to other freshwater ponds have been invaded by Purple Loosestrife which can replace native wetland vegetation. The Partners Program is working with the University of RI and interested landowners on a biocontrol program to reduce the occurrence of loosestrife in selected wetlands by releasing beetles that feed specifically on Purple Loosestrife, thereby allowing native wetland plants to become reestablished.

### *Salt Marsh Restoration*

Restoring salt marsh ecosystems involves many strategies such as removing fill (restoring historic tidal channels), replacing undersized culverts or adding additional culverts to improve tidal flushing. Some projects focus on the removal of invasives such as Common Reed (Phragmites), allowing native vegetation to be restored. The

Partners Program is working with private landowners adjacent to Cards Ponds in South Kingstown, RI and Ducks Unlimited to restore the Cards Ponds ecosystem by using all of these techniques. The Partners Program has had major involvement with salt marsh restoration in RI such as removing dredge material from a filled salt marsh at Common Fence Point Improvement Association (Portsmouth) and improving tidal circulation at the Galilee Bird Sanctuary (a Coastal American Project award).

### Grassland Restoration

Since 1995, The Nature Conservancy has worked with the Partners Program to restore native grasslands on Block Island. Block Island is home to the only viable population in the northeastern U.S. of the American Burying Beetle, a federally endangered species. Restoration efforts improve habitat for the beetle as well as for numerous grassland-dependent bird species including the grasshopper sparrow, barn owl, and northern harrier. It is also helping rare plants such as Northern Blazing Star, a state threatened species.

Partners' funds have also been used by Audubon Society of Rhode Island, Westerly Land Trust and South Kingstown Land Trust to restore native grasslands. Planting native warm season grasses such as little bluestem and switchgrass along with native wildflowers provides valuable habitat for grassland nesting birds and enhance habitat for native pollinating insects.

### Fish Passage

The Wood-Pawcatuck River is the premier freshwater fishery and recreational resource in the State. Access to important habitat for diadromous fish including the alewife, blueback herring, American shad, and American eel, as well as native resident fish such as the eastern brook trout along the Wood-Pawcatuck River is blocked



Restoring early successional habitat helps the New England cottontail.

by dams and undersized culverts. The Partners Program is working with private dam owners, nongovernmental organizations, and state and federal agencies to restore fish passage by removing unwanted dams or installing fish passage structures in the watershed including the 2010 removal of the Lower Shannock Falls Dam. Additionally, the Partners Program is supporting the restoration of fish passage on the Woonasquatucket River in Providence through the removal of the Paragon Dam.

### Unique Projects

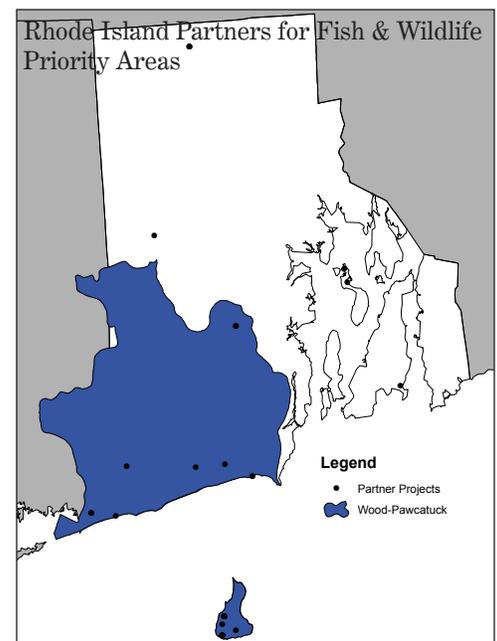
One feature of the Partners Program is its ability to fund or complete unique habitat restoration projects with its own staff and equipment. In 2009, the Partners Program used its own staff and equipment to restore habitat for tiger beetles, such as the state-listed threatened Pine Barrens Tiger Beetle and other invertebrates that had been threatened by encroaching pitch pine/white pine at The Nature Conservancy's Queen River Preserve. In 2010, Partners staff operated FWS Refuge equipment to restore a former gravel pit to early successional habitat for the Hopkinton Land Trust.

### Candidate Species Projects

Working in partnership with the RI Department of Environmental Management, U.S Department of Agriculture, private landowners, and nongovernmental organizations, the Partners Program is supporting a new initiative in RI to restore the early successional habitats that are required by declining populations of the New England Cottontail (Federal Candidate Species). As an initial project the Partners Program supported a restoration project at the Westerly Land Trust's Grills Preserve.

### Cooperative Conservation

From 1993 through 2010 the Partners Program in Rhode Island has worked with on over 50 projects with over 70 landowners and partners. This work has contributed to the enhancement or restoration of over 200 acres of estuarine wetland habitat, over 350 acres of upland habitat, the restoration of fish passage to over 5 miles of reopened stream in support of dozens of migratory and federally protected species.



Wood-Pawcatuck River Association

Removing Lower Shannock Dam on the Pawcatuck River.

**For additional information or questions contact:**

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