

Summary



Bill Thompson

Blue-winged warbler

Executive Summary

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Shrublands and young forest habitats in the Northeastern United States have declined dramatically over the past century, primarily as a result of the decline of agricultural land use, forest maturation, development pressures, and wetland draining and filling. Many shrubland-dependent wildlife species are rapidly disappearing along with their now-imperiled habitat, and have been identified as high priorities for conservation by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) and state wildlife agencies. Due to the urgency of this situation, state, Federal and non-governmental partners have begun a six-state collaborative shrublands restoration and protection effort. Conservation activities are already in progress, including assistance by numerous agencies and organizations to restore shrublands on private lands, and restoration on existing state and Federal secured lands, including shrubland management on existing National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS) lands. This partnership effort has identified a need for additional secured acreage and management capability to meet population and habitat goals.

In this draft Land Protection Plan/Environmental Assessment (draft LPP/EA), we propose to establish the Great Thicket National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) as an additional Service contribution to help stem the decline of shrubland-dependent wildlife species. As part of our proposal, we have identified 10 Refuge Acquisition Focus Areas (RAFAs) encompassing approximately 298,820 acres across six northeast states. Within these larger focus areas, the Service would acquire approximately 15,000 acres total in fee title or easements. This approach allows us the flexibility to assist partner efforts over time as needed in areas most critical to landscape connectivity.

Several surrogate species, including the New England cottontail (NEC), prairie warbler, blue-winged warbler, field sparrow, American woodcock, and brown thrasher, have been identified to represent the entire suite of declining shrubland wildlife. Modeling and spatial analysis related to several of these species and other Federal trust resources were used to guide the design and development of this proposal. As a result, several areas within the proposed Great Thicket NWR

represent overlapping opportunities to benefit populations of species currently listed as threatened or endangered, such as the bog turtle and the northern red-bellied cooter, as well as numerous declining priority breeding landbirds identified in the New England/Mid-Atlantic Bird Conservation Region Plan 30 (BCR 30). For example, we estimate that we will contribute up to 5.4 percent of the BCR 30 population goal for the blue-winged warbler and 6.8 percent for the prairie warbler, both BCR highest-priority species, on a relatively small number of acres compared to the total amount of BCR acres. We also expect this proposal to make measurable contributions towards habitat and population goals identified in the multi-agency Conservation Strategy for the NEC by increasing the long-term certainty of shrubland management and success in strategic locations throughout the northeast.

This proposal represents the application and implementation of multiple Service directives, policies and planning guidance, including the concept of Strategic Habitat Conservation, Landscape Conservation Design, and strategic growth of the NWRS. This draft LPP/EA closely aligns with the conservation priorities of many Service programs as well as Service partners including the states of Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, and New York, the NEC Executive and Technical committees, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), and the Wildlife Management Institute. To

Prairie warbler



Kevin Fleming

date, these partners have committed significant resources toward protecting, maintaining and managing shrubland habitat and will continue to do so in the future. For example, as of January 2015, the NRCS has created or maintained approximately 1,500 acres of NEC habitat through the Working Lands for Wildlife program, which provides financial assistance to landowners who voluntarily participate in habitat-related projects that can reverse population declines for certain wildlife species. The proposed Great Thicket NWR will complement these commitments made by our partners.

The estimated cost to acquire the entire 15,000 acres for the proposed Great Thicket NWR is between \$84 million and \$129 million. Because the method of acquisition would be decided on a case-by-case basis for each landowner, it is impossible to determine exactly how many acres would be acquired in fee title and how many acres would be acquired in conservation easements. Therefore, we have provided a low range based on the acquisition of conservation easements on all 15,000 acres and a high range based on the fee title acquisition of all 15,000 acres. The cost-per-acre values used in this rough estimation are based on land purchases associated with nearby national wildlife refuges for each RAFA.

Given the costs associated with this project and in light of our willing-seller-only approach, it could take 30 years or more to acquire fee or easements for the entire proposed 15,000-acre refuge. A long-term commitment of this nature is not at all uncommon when compared to the status of other NWRs land protection projects. However, unlike some wildlife species that require large unbroken blocks of habitat, shrubland-dependent species can be sustained on smaller, scattered parcels connected by linear features such as power lines. Indeed, existing shrublands that currently support targeted species occur in smaller patches across the landscape identified in this proposal (i.e. within RAFAs). This has positive implications for the timing of future acquisitions in that we are already working in a fragmented landscape and our efforts will not be compromised by projected future land use changes or human population growth.

In areas with more persistent and stable types of shrublands we encourage passive management techniques and allow for natural vegetative growth. In other areas, we will engage in active restoration and maintenance of shrublands and young forest habitat types, where appropriate. Managing habitat for shrubland species can take many forms, depending on the acreage and current condition of the tract of land and how much effort we are able to commit to management. Depending on soils, hydrologic regimes, and vegetation, we may consider mechanical cutting, prescribed burning, herbicides, riparian area restoration, or planting habitat areas to create and maintain optimal conditions.

While national wildlife refuges are managed specifically for wildlife and wildlife habitat, public uses are often allowed. The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 (Public Law 105-57; 111 Stat. 1235) directs the Service to give special consideration to allowing wildlife-dependent recreational activities—namely hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, environmental interpretation, and environmental education—on national wildlife refuges when these uses are compatible with the mission of the NWRs and the purposes of the refuge. As lands are added to the proposed Great Thicket NWR, we will complete our agency’s process for determining when, where, and how to permit public uses.

Shrublands



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