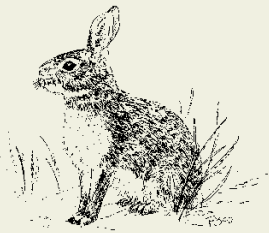

New England Cottontail Initiative

An update of activities being conducted to benefit this declining species

Over 100 Acres of Cottontail Habitat Presently Being Restored at the #1 Parcel in the Region!



*If you build
it, they will
come-*

Welcome to the latest edition of the New England cottontail newsletter. It's been quite some time since our last issue, and we have a lot of information to bring you! We would also like to wish all of you a happy and healthy Thanksgiving.

What's Happening With the Listing Status?

Since 2006, when the New England cottontail was classified as a candidate for federal protection under the Endangered Species Act, the US Fish and Wildlife Service has been working with the states to evaluate populations, threats, conservation actions, plans, and commitments to conserve the species. All of this effort has been in preparation for making a final decision as to whether or not listing the New England cottontail as threatened or endangered is warranted. Now that decision is just around the corner; a determination will be made no later than September 30, 2015. Regardless of what decision is made, work will continue throughout the region to restore habitat and help this species. We

will continue to keep you updated on issues concerning the listing status; or please see <http://newenglandcottontail.org/conservation-strategy> for more information.

Private Land Efforts Continue

The Natural Resources Conservation Service's (NRCS) Working Lands for Wildlife (WLFW) program continues to attract private landowners interested in creating cottontail habitat on their property. This program has been very successful; to date, 41 management plans have been drafted, resulting in over 650 acres of new New England Cottontail habitat. As always, the NRCS encourages landowners to submit applications for potential projects. For more information about pursuing a project on your property, please contact the NRCS or the DEEP. You can find NRCS local service office contact information at <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/ct/contact/local/>, and DEEP contact information is available at the end of this newsletter.

State Land Projects

State lands efforts continued throughout 2014. In February, a 26-acre project was



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completed, which, when combined with prior work and already-existing habitat, resulted in a 60-acre patch of habitat. Additionally, Phase 2 of the Pachaug State Forest (Wyassup Lake Block) project is well underway. This will result in an 111-acre patch next to 70 acres of existing habitat, all on the #1 parcel in the region! Finally, a third State Wildlife Grant has been funded; the first area selected for work is the Spignesi Wildlife Management Area, in the Scotland-Canterbury Focus Area, where a 57-acre project is proposed. This location is near a complex of private land locations that are already known to host NEC populations.

was once pasture, allowing thick, dense areas of shrubs, young trees, grasses and weeds to grow and provide important food and cover. While the Landowner Incentive Program implements restoration to benefit a myriad of species dependent upon early successional habitat, this certainly can include New England cottontail, and, given that the Chase property is located in the Lebanon Focus Area, we hope that NEC is just one of many species that will utilize the newly created habitat. The following is Paul's experience and thoughts on the project; excerpted from an upcoming article in *Connecticut Wildlife*.

Workshops and Outreach Events

Staff has participated in multiple outreach events in the past year, including presentations for landowners, land trusts, forest practitioners, sportsmen's groups and conservation organizations.

A Landowner Incentive Program project to benefit NEC

In December 2012, landowner Paul Chase was awarded a DEEP Landowner Incentive Program grant to create, enhance and restore approximately 13 acres of habitat on his 110-acre property in Montville. The Chase property had been previously been in agriculture for hundreds of years, but without any active pasturing and farming, it was growing back up into mature forest. Program Coordinator Judy Wilson worked with Paul to design and implement a project that would restore the reverting field habitat on the property and remove low value trees from what

Truthfully, I am not a hunter of rabbits but I am interested in the welfare of the New England cottontail. What we do for it enhances the habitat of species that mostly interest me. These requirements are similar to the NEC's. I have not heard the whippoorwill's song or the grouse's drumming in more than a decade on family land. (We have owned this parcel since 1824.) Selective cutting of firewood in a wet area north of the proposed project has been instrumental in maintaining prime woodcock habitat for many years. In fact, when Judy, Mike Gregonis of the Wildlife Division and I were walking the property to determine final plans, my setters, Jing and Diomid had the good fortune of pointing seven woodcock just north of the subject area within a few minutes. I believe the dog work impressed Judy and Mike. (Me, too!) The timing of this little fall of woodcock couldn't have happened at a more opportune time.

After patiently waiting for several



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months, the work finally began on October 16, 2014. TR Landworks (Ted), the winning bidder for the project and an experienced contractor for the DEEP, arrived with his excavator with a grinding attachment, harvester and forwarder. The excavator grinds all the smaller growth, the harvester tackles the bigger trees and the forwarder hauls the logs... via a created woods road through hardwoods to the landing along a paved road at the eastern



Photo by Judy Wisler

boundary of my property. Ted finished his work on November 4, 2014, having completed the project in just under 3 weeks. Many brush piles were created for the New England cottontail's benefit. Jon (note: Paul's son) —who performs most of the “bull work” around the old farm—and I were very pleased with the outcome. Having much experience creating wildlife shrublands throughout Connecticut and other New England states, Ted knows what to leave for the benefit of wildlife, such as highbush blueberry, winterberry, blackberry, red raspberry, to name just a few species, eliminating the need for all of these to be individually marked by Judy. All apple trees were saved. Several large oaks, two buttonballs (what my grandfather called sycamore) down by the spring, a few other hardwoods and much Eastern red cedar were retained. In surveying the completed project, what is most emotional and gratifying is my refreshed memory of how this section of my property appeared back in the 1950s, with some changes, of

course. Glacial rock, from which foundation stones had been pinned and feathered 200-300 years ago, stone walls and undulating terrain have returned to eyesight, and I can't think of a better way to describe this revelation than going back in time to the days of my youth.

Please keep an eye out in future editions of *Connecticut Wildlife* for the full article!

Shrubland Birds Find a Home in NEC Management Areas

Even though it has been only 3 years since trees were harvested at the Housatonic River, Roraback and (little) Goshen Wildlife Management Areas, shrubland songbirds appeared to have found some suitable breeding habitat this year. During surveys conducted in May and June, these cottontail project areas were alive with song and activity (note, no actual nest surveys were conducted). At all 3 WMAs, eastern towhee, common yellowthroat, chestnut-sided warbler and either willow or alder flycatcher were heard or seen. The Roraback and Housatonic River (south) sites also hosted field sparrow, indigo bunting, blue-winged and prairie warbler.

While the projects at all three WMAs involved cutting mature forest to allow regeneration, the sites vary a bit



in landscape character, patch size and the nature of the projects. The 12-acre Goshen site abuts a large field. It is somewhat wet, and woody vegetation has bounced back with vigor. Vines and shrubs nearly obscure brush piles that



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were constructed at the time of the timber harvest. At Roraback in Harwinton, there are 2 separate project areas, which added to existing fields and young forest. The Poland Road project on a gentle dry slope is quite large, 14 acres cut in 2011 and 26 acres in 2014. The South Road project, 10 acres, is a bit wetter where tree cutting was interspersed with wetland, field and woods. At Housatonic River WMA, there are also 2 projects sites. The project at the south end of the WMA, where the bird survey was done, involved both a 20-acre timber harvest and a 12-acre shrub-planting project on an old-field that was cleared of invasive bush honeysuckle. Although no official survey was conducted at another project area at the north end of the property, birders were delighted for several days this spring by a singing male yellow-breasted chat.



years, but some may live over six.

Ruffed grouse are well adapted to live in young forests. They have short wide wings that allow them to effectively navigate through early successional habitat and a small, thick bill with a slight hook, allowing for a diverse mixture of forest foods. Grouse consume vegetative matter, herbaceous plants, fruits, seeds, grasses, acorns, grapes, su-



mac, catkins and buds. Interestingly, they have also been known to consume snakes, frogs and salamanders.

The ruffed grouse is North America's most widely distributed resident upland game bird, ranging from Alaska across southern Canada to the Atlantic Coast and south into the Appalachian and Rocky Mountains. They inhabit all of the Canadian Provinces and 38 of the continental states. In Connecticut, the largest remaining concentrations occur in the northwestern portion of the state.

During the breeding season, males establish and defend small territories, advertising their presence by beating their wings against the air, producing a sound called drumming. Hens lay 8 – 14 eggs which are incubated for 24 – 26 days. Chicks leave the nest as soon as they are dry, immediately start



These sites are open to the public. Please check the DEEP website for directions and enjoy some of these birds next spring.

Other Species - Spotlight on Ruffed Grouse

The ruffed grouse (*Bonasa umbellus*) is a chicken-sized bird approximately 16-19 inches in length. Adults weigh between 16-28 ounces; males are slightly larger than females. Grouse are distinguished by the ruff-like feathers on the base of their neck and the dark band located near the end of their tail fan. Grouse usually survive less than two

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feeding themselves, and begin flying at about a week old. Typically, less than half of the original brood survives the summer.

Grouse are abundant only where young forest habitats are common, using areas of high stem densities for cover and openings with grasses and herbaceous vegetation for foraging.

Historically ruffed grouse were common in Connecticut. In the beginning of the 19th century nearly 3/4 of Connecticut's original forest was cleared for agriculture and settlement. As this farmland was abandoned and started to mature, there was an upward trend in the amount of young forest habitat and populations most likely thrived. However, these young forests are now past their utility for most wildlife species that are dependent on early successional habitat; including ruffed grouse. Early successional habitat can be created; since over 80 % of the land in Connecticut is privately controlled, the public must be involved if large scale habitat work is to be implemented. Explaining the benefits of early successional habitat to landowners and fostering support for projects is critical for ruffed grouse populations to rebound to historic levels.

(Information taken from CT DEEP's Ruffed Grouse Fact Sheet; to view this sheet and others, please visit [Wildlife Fact Sheets](#))

Contact Information

For more information, or to discuss a potential project, please contact the following:

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- Jack Berlanda
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Our office location is:

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The following websites offer further information pertaining to New England cottontails:

www.ct.gov/deep/

[youngforestinitiative](http://youngforestinitiative.org)

www.newenglandcottontail.org

www.ctnr.usda.gov/cottontail

www.fws.gov/northeast/indepth/rabbit

What do you think?

We hope you find this newsletter informative and we welcome all comments.

To submit recommendations or to unsubscribe, please email:

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