

Giving

NATURE a NUDGE

Thoughtful forestry creates places for wildlife to flourish

by Linda Saucerman

For Charlie and Nanci Mitchell, it was the nightly call of a bird that prompted them to begin cutting down 15 acres of trees on their property in Gilmanton.

“We cleared some trees in 2007, some in 2008, some in 2010, and we’ll clear some again in 2014,” says Charlie Mitchell.

It might sound surprising, but all this tree removal is being done to attract birds and other wildlife, especially the nocturnal whip-poor-will, to the couple’s land.

“During the summer, we would hear whip-poor-wills, and we wanted to learn how to help them,” explains Nanci Mitchell.

And help them, they did. The areas of felled trees “greened up right away,” Nanci says. Whip-poor-wills moved in to nest along the edge of the new forest opening, where they have access to plenty of cover and flying insects to eat.

By the summer of 2010, the “nursery” the Mitchells had been creating for three years was showing signs of being fruitful. “We heard more whip-poor-wills last summer than we ever had before,” says Nanci.

Along with hearing the call of the whip-poor-will cut through the summer air, the Mitchells also saw evidence that Baltimore orioles, cedar waxwings, ruffed grouse, indigo buntings, turkeys, woodcocks, plus many other bird species were benefiting from the shrubby parcel.

Such adventures in silviculture (forest management) can offer benefits all around – a full circle of forest sustainability. Landowners, foresters and loggers can profit from the sale of trees cut during this habitat-creation process. In the Mitchell’s case, the red maples and red oaks they felled weren’t ideal for commercial timber harvest, but these renewable resources proved worthy on a very local level.

“I’m still harvesting the wood from last summer’s clearing and when I’m done I think I’ll have a total of 15 to 20 cords for our wood stove,” says Charlie. “Already we’ve had more than we could use, so we gave some to friends and we even traded some with a local farmer for manure for our garden.”

A PLACE FOR WILDLIFE

Attracting such a variety of wildlife to their property wasn’t just a matter of luck for the Mitchells. Careful forethought went

into choosing where to cut trees, which felled trees to completely remove or leave on the forest floor, how to control non-native invasive plants, and which native species should be planted. For help, the couple turned to the N.H. Fish and Game Department and the University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension Forestry and Wildlife Program. These agencies work together and share the goal of protecting and increasing wildlife habitat, including the shrubland and areas of young forest known as “early successional habitat.”

According to wildlife biologists, one of the most effective ways

to encourage this specialized habitat is to create small clear-cuts of 5 to 25 acres in size. Smaller open patches aren’t as helpful, because they leave breeding wildlife vulnerable to predators prowling the edges.

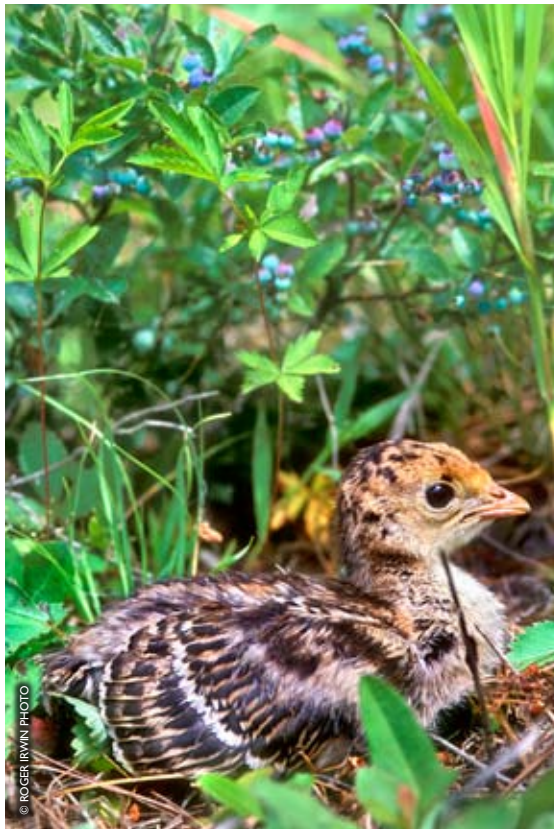
Critics wonder if downing trees in one area will adversely affect the animals that dwell in the treetops. Not so, says Jim Oehler, State Lands Habitat Biologist for N.H. Fish and Game. “New Hampshire has abundant mature forests, but native shrublands no longer exist on the landscape as they once did,” he explains. “So we create small clear-cuts as a surrogate in appropriate spots to help maintain existing populations of wildlife.”

Some people associate the term “clear cut” with an unsustainable form of large-scale logging where hundreds or even thousands of acres may be cut to the ground without regard to long-term environmental impacts. “What we’re doing is different,” explains Emma Carcagno, Wildlife Program Assistant at Cooperative Extension. “We’re cutting to maintain a mix of habitats modeled after

an ecosystem that existed before humans squelched fire, flooding and other natural processes.”

Such different habitats, including shrublands, were once abundant in New Hampshire, created by fire and by flooding from storms and beaver dams – natural processes that humans have been putting the kibosh on for generations.

“There are more than 4,000 dams on rivers and streams in New Hampshire, so the amount of natural disturbance from flooding is far less than it once was,” says Oehler. “Before, when rivers flooded during spring melts, large ice blocks would break loose



Many bird species, like the wild turkey, benefit from early successional forest habitat.



COURTESY PHOTOS



Far left, Nanci and Charlie Mitchell's property before the "brontosaurus" did its job in fall of 2007. Opposite page, the same parcel the following spring. Two years later, patches of young and old forest are complemented by an open field (far right) – the result being a diversity of habitat that can host a wide range of wildlife.



BLACK BEAR

SHRUB-LOVIN' CRITTERS

Early successional habitats are thickets filled with dense shrubs, young trees, grasses and wildflowers. Because of human activity, such areas have been on the decline in New Hampshire. As these shrublands disappear, many species that depend on these habitats are experiencing population reductions. More than 100 species use early successional habitats, including:

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|------------------------|--------------------|
| American woodcock | Northern harrier |
| Black bear | Prairie warbler |
| Black racer | Purple finch |
| Bobcat | Ruffed grouse |
| Canada lynx | Smooth green snake |
| Eastern hognose snake | Timber rattlesnake |
| Eastern towhee | Whip-poor-will |
| Moose | White-tailed deer |
| New England cottontail | Wood turtle |



SMOOTH GREEN SNAKE

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WOOD TURTLE

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PURPLE FINCH

© JOHN GILL PHOTO

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and get carried downriver with such velocity that riverbanks were scoured, creating perfect conditions for colonization by shrubs.”

Humans also have become almost too tidy when it comes to cleaning up after wind and ice storms. Removing all the fallen trees from an area hit by a storm takes away the potential for creating those “nurseries” used not only by birds, but by snakes, voles and other rodents. “Downed trees that are left on the ground are good cover,” says Carcagno. “And those logs provide protection for the plants from deer, so it allows shrubs to grow.”

In addition to natural processes, the amount of early successional habitat in New Hampshire was much higher at one point because of the large number of abandoned farm fields growing into shrubland. This bounty of brush served as breeding, nesting, foraging and hunting grounds for more than 100 species. Some species that are now state-listed as endangered, threatened or of special concern also use early successional habitat, namely the New England cottontail rabbit, northern black racer snake and the eastern towhee.

Some abandoned farm fields never grew into early successional habitats because they were gobbled up by housing and commercial developments. Even if species that had inhabited the farmland and surrounding habitat were able to survive amid the manicured lawns, they weren’t the only critters on the block. Suburban predators like cats and dogs moved into the neighborhood, along with coyotes, foxes and raccoons. Animals that can more easily adapt to human interferences reach artificially high numbers quickly and can effectively penetrate the small patches of shrubland in suburban landscapes, wreaking havoc on birds and small mammals that rely on early successional habitat.

Meanwhile, many of the old farm fields that did remain untouched by bulldozers eventually sprouted enough greenery to evolve from shrublands into mature forests. Over time, across the state, the scales tipped far in the direction of maturing forests, and shrubland and young forest habitats became scarce. At first, the

thought of a tall stand of trees sounds like a success story. And it is. But the key is this: If you want a diversity of wildlife, you need a diversity of habitats.

“We used to think, just let nature take its course,” says Nanci Mitchell. “We didn’t appreciate the importance of having different habitats.”

HABITAT HELP FOR LANDOWNERS

Creating new shrubland for the New England cottontail, woodcock and other vulnerable species is where folks like the Mitchells come in. Through N.H. Fish and Game and U.N.H. Cooperative Extension, private landowners can arrange for a free onsite consultation to develop new early successional habitat or maintain current shrubland.

“We walk the property with them to see what kind of habitat is there now and then write up a recommendation,” says Carcagno. “Sometimes we have a landowner who is already doing some timber harvesting on the property, but who also wants to create special areas for wildlife.”

As part of the consultation process, Carcagno and her colleagues can offer listings of contractors to do the work, will arrange to be onsite when the contractor arrives, and can guide private landowners through the grants and other financial assistance programs. Depending on the habitat plan, landowners typically get about 75% reimbursement for the costs associated with creating early successional habitat.

Oehler adds that many different factors are considered during a consultation, such as the slope of the land, the existence of rare plants, and the presence of vernal pools – a favorite of the Eastern (or red-spotted) newt, our state amphibian.

Meanwhile, the clock is ticking for the survival of species like the New England cottontail. This species (not to be confused with the smaller, non-native Eastern cottontail) was at one time a true New Englander – its range blanketed Connecticut, Rhode Island and Massachusetts, and spread into portions of New York, Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine.



Download a free copy of “Shrublands,” a Habitat Stewardship Series pamphlet, from www.wildnh.com.

GIVING SHRUBLAND A HELPING HAND

To learn more about helping New Hampshire's wildlife by creating shrubland habitat on your property and how you can qualify for reimbursement related to the removal of non-native plants and other species, contact N.H. Fish and Game's Wildlife Division at 603-271-2461 or UNH Cooperative Extension at 603-862-3594.

Programs to enhance wildlife habitat in New Hampshire are made possible in part by federal Wildlife Restoration funds.



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Once a forester selects and marks trees for removal, skilled loggers cut and drag them to landings, where they are loaded on trucks and taken to mills.

Today, however, Carcagno and others call the situation “dire” for the New England cottontail; it is completely gone from Vermont and found only in pockets elsewhere in New England. In the Granite State, the rabbit is believed to exist only in the Merrimack Valley and a portion of the Seacoast.

NEW PERSPECTIVE

Since New Hampshire is the second most-densely forested state and about 80% of our forested land is privately owned, there are plenty of opportunities for early successional habitats – and the species that use them – to make a comeback.

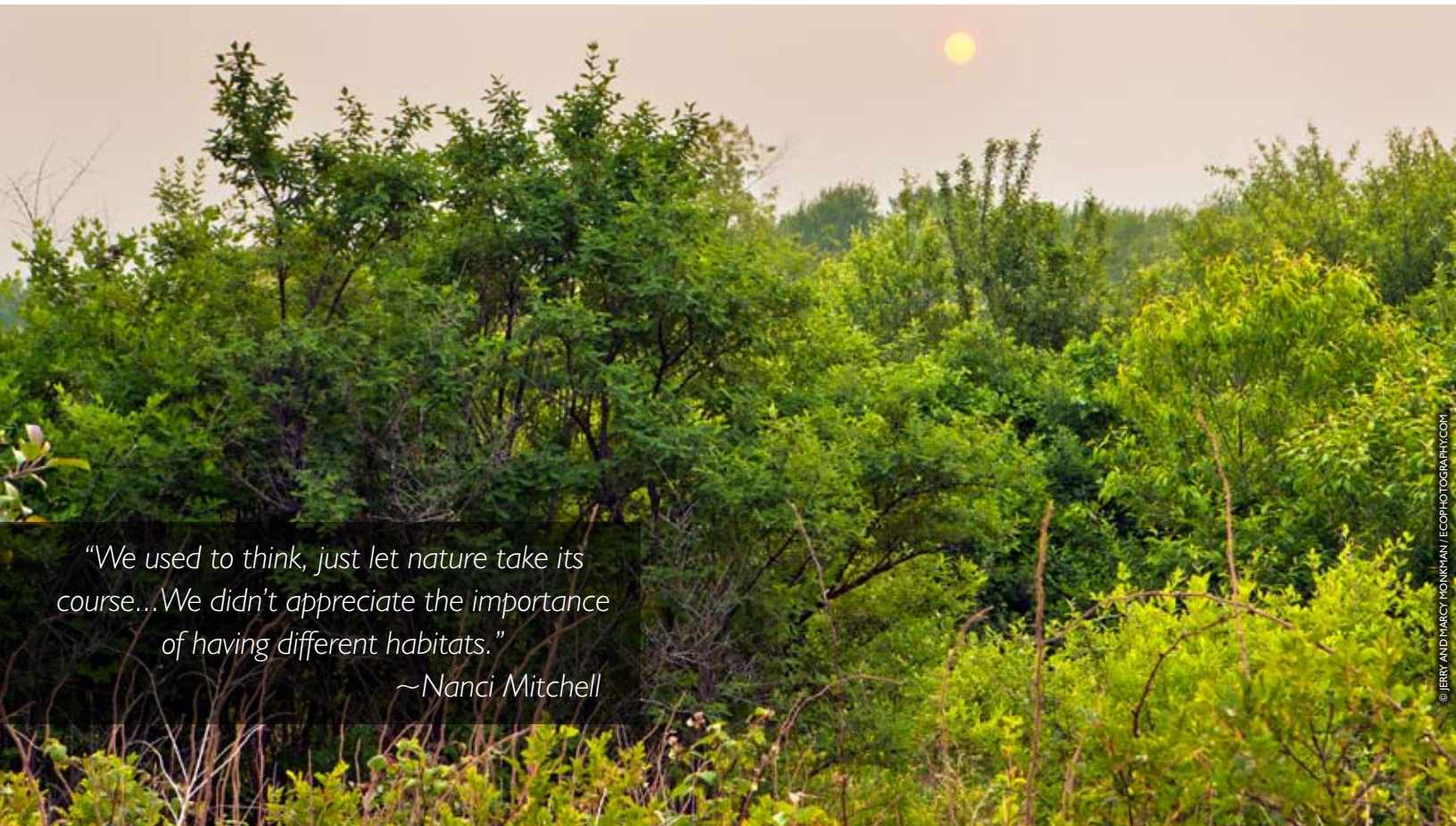
For the Mitchells, their understanding of the importance of early successional habitats was something that evolved.

“Over the years we’ve had a real attitude change,” says Charlie. “When we first saw some of the naturally occurring early successional habitat [on our property], we thought, ‘Look at this ugly land.’ Now we get excited by it and look at it in an entirely new light.”

Such enthusiasm is shared by Carcagno and her colleagues at Cooperative Extension and Fish and Game. “It is definitely exciting to work with private landowners and to know that together you can have an impact on helping wildlife and potentially reviving a species,” she says.



Linda Saucerman is a freelance writer based in Somersworth, N.H. She specializes in environmental journalism and travel writing.



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~Nanci Mitchell

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