



MANAGING STATE LANDS FOR WILDLIFE

Managing Fields



Newly planted corn field at the Hubbard Farms WMA in Walpole.

Agriculture

Of Fish and Game’s nearly 52,000 acres, 730 acres is field land. Five hundred sixty-five (565) acres of that (or nearly 80% of our field land) is leased out to farmers. Fish and Game works cooperatively with farmers across the state to plant and maintain fields to provide food and cover crops for wildlife. Typical crops include corn and hay. Corn is primarily planted in fields along waterfowl flyways, such as the Connecticut River, to provide an important food source during migration. Hay is planted in those fields where the focus is maintaining habitat for grassland dependant wildlife such as bobolinks and meadowlarks. In these cases, hay cutting is somewhat restricted to allow successful nesting. All farming on WMAs is done under a 10-year written agreement that is approved by the Governor and Executive Council. Other species benefit from these crops as well, including turkey, deer, grouse, a variety of songbirds, and other wildlife.

Old Fields

The remaining 165 acres of field land is maintained by Fish and Game as old field habitat containing varying combinations of flowering shrubs, wildflowers, and grasses. Fields are maintained every 1-5 years by brush hogging. How long we wait between mowing depends on the type of habitat we are attempting to achieve. Mowing every year maintains a grass and wildflower dominance. Mowing every five years allows more shrubs to colonize a field, which will attract a different suite of wildlife.



NHFG staff brush hogging an old field on Bofinger WMA in Dummer.

Field habitat is important to a wide array of wildlife – both common and rare. Regardless of how often they are mowed, fields provide an important source of food in the form of berries, seeds, or insects for turkeys, deer, and bear, as well as songbirds including indigo buntings, and prairie warblers. If located in close proximity to wetlands, fields can also provide nesting habitat for waterfowl and American bitterns, as well as feeding areas for wood turtle, black racers, and smooth green snakes, all of which are experiencing population declines. If in close proximity to alder swales or patches of young forest, fields will provide breeding habitat for American woodcock. When shrubs are allowed to colonize a field, they can provide habitat for New England cottontail, yellow warbler, indigo bunting, song sparrows, eastern towhee and many others, whose populations have also been in decline. Pollinators also benefit from the wildflowers that are allowed to proliferate in old fields. On average, 125 acres of old fields are mowed annually on both WMAs and some state forest lands. Field mowing doesn't start until July 15 to allow successful bird nesting to occur.

To learn more about managing old fields on your property, visit [Managing Grasslands, Shrublands, and Young Forest Habitats for Wildlife: A Guide for the Northeast](#).