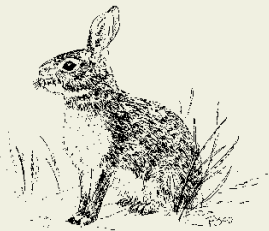

New England Cottontail Initiative

An update of activities being conducted to benefit this declining species

Largest project to date begins in Pachaug State Forest!



*If you build
it, they will
come-*

Welcome to the winter edition of the New England cottontail newsletter. As the snow begins to fall and the pellet hunts begin, we would like to wish everyone a happy and healthy holiday season.

Private Land Efforts Continue

In 2013, the Natural Resources Conservation Service's (NRCS) Working Lands for Wildlife (WLFW) program contracted with 18 applicants to implement habitat creation projects on their properties. Contracts are in various stages of execution, but once finalized, these projects will provide an additional 350 acres of habitat for New England cottontails. The next round of applications have already been submitted, and project ranking is expected to be complete by the end of January. As always, the NRCS encourages landowners to submit applications for potential projects. Please contact the NRCS or the DEEP if you have a potential project!

State Land Efforts Began Again This Fall

In consideration of bird nesting and other wildlife activity, tree harvesting

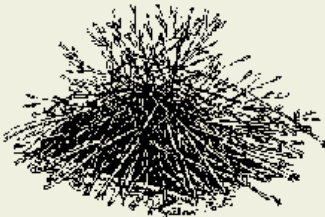
operations were suspended over the summer, however, follow up herbiciding of invasive vegetation was conducted at all sites that had projects implemented under SWG 1 and SWG 2 grants. The total area treated was approximately 150 acres. Tree harvesting activity began ratcheting up again in early November with the onset of a 111-acre project at Pachaug SF, which is not only the #1 ranked parcel in the state, but also #1 in the entire Initiative Region. This project will add to an already existing 70 acres of New England cottontail habitat in the area. In the next several weeks, work will begin on 26 acres in Roraback WMA, for a total of approximately 60 acres of New England cottontail habitat.

Research Continues

With the recent snowfall, researchers have been very busy collecting pellets for DNA analysis from locations all around the state, and we will report on newly documented NEC as the samples are tested and results come in. Please contact us if you are interested in pellet collection on your property.

Workshops and Outreach Events

There will be at least one workshop held in the spring of 2014. Please check upcoming



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newsletter issues for details regarding date and location.

Habitat Creation Project - A Landowner's Impressions

In 2011, Avalonia Land Conservancy began discussing the possibility of implementing a New England cottontail project on their Peck and Callahan Preserves. Conservancy members spent many, many months researching, planning, posting, and working tirelessly to overcome what sometime seemed like insurmountable hurdles, including the fact that the parcel is landlocked, with absolutely no access for the equipment to get to the site! After much negotiation, phone calls and emails, a deal was made with neighbors to provide cordwood from the cut in exchange for access through their property, and permission was secured from C,L and P to utilize their adjacent right-of-way. Finally, the resulting project plan, designed in coordination with NEC Project Forester Jack Berlanda was completed; implementation began in May of 2013; and by early August, 22.6 acres had been cut. Beth Sullivan, Stonington representative to the Avalonia Land Conservancy and key member of the project team, posted to her blog about her experiences and impressions walking the site in August and September, after the cutting portion of the project was completed. The following excerpt from that blog shows Beth's thoughts on the site's post-cut appearance:

What remains isn't pretty at first glance. The long swath of the Peck Preserve is open now. From a distance, it is pretty brown, a little disconcerting to a self-described tree hugger, but we

looked closer. The machines used were designed to have a low impact on the earth so we do not have any large areas of torn up ground. The wetlands were respected and left buffered and the stream now runs clear and clean. Specially chosen trees remained standing to provide reseeding sources, mast for wildlife, and some shelter. A nice diversity of species is still present. Understory shrubs lie unharmed in most areas. Blueberry and huckleberry plants, as well as smaller seedlings, ground covering vines, and small plants, will thrive in the open canopy. With sunlight now reaching the ground, seedlings that have been stunted and struggling can now begin energetic growth. Seeds that lay dormant in the soil for years will get the moisture and sun warmth they need to germinate. There was very little diversity in the understory of the Peck woodlands. Deep shade and deer browsing left little near the ground. Exposing the former forest floor to light has already begun to increase the variety and number of species present. We have noticed seedlings of sun loving plants such as Sumac and Greenbrier already visible, starting growth even this late in the season.

In this excerpt, Beth comments on the woody material purposely left behind: *Referred to as slash, those tree tops and branches left on the ground provide instant cover for small mammals. The rough slash will also deter deer that will try to enter the new area of inviting shoots and greenery. The decomposition over time will provide nutrients for the soil. As part of the funding agreement, large brush piles were created. These will provide longer term*



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shelter for many animals, and hopefully the New England Cottontail will be one of them!

Beth continues; reporting on new species, both flora and fauna:

As we walked the entire site, we noticed new birds already. Several types of Flycatchers: Peewees, Phoebes, and Kingbirds, were having a field day with the numerous dragonflies cruising around. Several butterflies made use of the now-open areas: Red-Spotted Purples, Black Swallow tails, and American Coppers. We could see that the ferns, low plants, berry bushes and vines such as greenbrier were already beginning to grow up and fill in. On close inspection, it was wonderful to see the tree stumps already re-sprouting vigorous new shoots. Oaks, Beeches, Maples, Birches and Hickories all seem to be in a hurry to get a jump start on re-growing. It is this new growth that will provide the food and thick, dense cover that we aim for.

Finally, in this excerpt, Beth details her experience with follow-up project work:

As part of the Funding agreement we had with National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, we needed to replant the area with species that will provide diversity, grow in a way that creates cover and also provide food for many species. On September 21 a small but dedicated group of volunteers took on the first phase of the challenge. The entire project covers 28 acres of hilly and rocky terrain. The ground is strewn with "slash", branches and woody debris left on site to provide cover and nutrients for the soil over time. Not

easy walking!! We were joined by our DEEP Forester with his chainsaw, and a USFWS biologist with plants and supplies. We lugged in a large garden cart with shovels, rakes, bags of grass seed, plants, netting, flagging tape and miscellaneous small items as well as water in large jugs. We had to clear the skid trail as we went along, moving branches and large debris and ultimately made it a half mile in to the far east of the property where a steep slope needed attention. There we raked the earth to plant a special conservation seed mix of grasses to germinate rapidly and stabilize the soil on the slope. We dug holes...



Beth Sullivan, Avalonia Land Conservancy

no easy task in the rocky earth, and planted dozens of small seedlings, plants known to be beneficial for the wildlife we hope to attract. However, all these new seedlings and sprouts are like candy for the deer. Each plant needed to be staked and netted and surrounded by slash to deter the deer from nibbling. Nearly 5 hours later we walked out. Our load was lighter but muscles were sore! It rained the next night. Now we hope the grass will sprout, the plants will root and flourish and the deer will not discover them! Thank you to all who made the large effort!

And this winter, when there is snow on the ground, we will go out hunting for little brown pellets signs that maybe the New England Cottontails have indeed moved in.



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We wish to thank Avalonia Land Conservancy for all their hard work, and we too hope the New England cottontail moves in!

Other Species - Spotlight on American Woodcock

The American woodcock (*Scolopax minor*) is a popular game bird throughout eastern North America. Woodcock are a young forest dependent species, requiring young forest, open habitats, and moist soils. Woodcock utilize young forest habitats in Connecticut for breeding and as stopover areas for feeding and cover during migration. Woodcock prefer dense, shrub-dominated forests with moist soils. Moist soils ensure that earthworms are near the soil surface and are available to foraging birds. Unfortunately, shrubland habitat has been disappearing in Connecticut over the last 40 years, primarily due to development and forest maturation. As suitable habitat patches become increasingly smaller, wildlife species attempting to utilize those patches become increasingly vulnerable to predation. Research conducted by the CT DEEP indicated that woodcock occupying patchy, fragmented habitat had significantly lower survival rates than birds inhabiting larger, less fragmented habitat.

Woodcock populations have been declining within their range during the last 40 years. In Connecticut there has been an annual 3.8% long-term (1968-2013) decline in the woodcock breeding population, as indexed through the Singing Ground Survey. A number of initiatives, involving multiple partners, have been formed to reverse the de-

cline of woodcock. The Northern Young Forest Initiative and the Atlantic Coast Young Forest Initiative are both geared towards creating and maintaining woodcock habitat in order to achieve the goals of the North American Woodcock Conservation Plan. Work to establish and maintain young habitats for NEC will also likely benefit woodcock.

All young forest dependent wildlife will benefit from active forest management. In addition to the obvious benefits for a myriad of wildlife, humans benefit from active forest management as well. As one example, passive recreational users such as bird watchers and naturalists will benefit from an increase in young forest habitat on the landscape. Bird watching in general is one of the biggest forms of outdoor recreation in the country. In



PAUL J. FUSCO / MOUNT VERNON SONG BIRD SANCTUARY

Connecticut, an estimated 25% of the population is engaged in bird watching. Over 68% of all birding trips were to brushy or grassy habitats. With over 80% of young forest dependent birds in decline, increasing the amount of young forest habitat will result in increased bird watching opportunity.

Contact Information

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



New England Cottontail Initiative

following:

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Our office location is:
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Marlborough, CT 06447
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The following websites offer further information pertaining to New England cottontails:

[www.ct.gov/deep/
youngforestinitiative](http://www.ct.gov/deep/youngforestinitiative)
www.newenglandcottontail.org
www.ctnracs.usda.gov/cottontail
[www.fws.gov/northeast/indepth/
rabbit](http://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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