

Woodland Owners Help Shore Up Wildlife Habitat

By Christine Parrish

Thanks to an abundance of interest, including among Maine Woodland Owners members, the New England Forestry Foundation (NEFF) has enrolled 14 woodland owners in Western Maine to participate in improving important forest wildlife habitat. The landowners, whose properties range in size from 22 to 1200 acres, work with NEFF to create a plan that integrates specific habitat improvements into the parcels' forest management plans. Additionally, the NEFF team helps to determine eligibility for reimbursement on forest improvement practices that grow a healthy and vibrant forest. The focus is on promoting nesting bird habitat, establishing favorable conditions for moose, American marten, and other wildlife that need room to roam and clean water to thrive. The purpose of the project is to increase diverse habitat on private woodlands in a way that is compatible with the working forest landscape.

The once-common Canada warbler is a prime example of a species facing global habitat loss and is dependent on habitat restoration efforts in Western Maine. This species has declined over 60 percent in the past 50 years and they are now listed on the "Yellow Watch List", as a species of continent-wide concern by the organization Partners in Flight. At this rate of habitat loss, the remaining global population of Canada warblers is expected to decline by half again over the next 50 years.

This showy bird is one of the last woodland songbirds to arrive in the cool northern hardwood and mixed wood forests of Maine and Canada during late spring and one of the first to leave. They come for the abundance of protein provided by insects in the north woods and convert that bounty into raising a family. By September they have completed the return trip, traveling 3,000 miles by night to the lower slopes of the South American Andes. There they spend fall, winter, and spring with most of the world's remaining population of Canada warblers in the dense understory of cloud forests and shade-grown coffee plantations, where, unfortunately, habitat loss is occurring, as well.

Like many birds that migrate north to breed and nest, the Canada warbler is a specialist. It won't raise a family just anywhere. It requires a couple of acres of shady, wet northern woods that contain tall trees that



The male Canada warbler sings from the understory in Maine during breeding season but spends most of the year in the mountains of South America.

block out from 50 to 70 percent of the sun. They also seek shorter tree layer below that blocks out another 30 percent of the sun, and a mossy forest floor with blow-downs and downed logs, ferns, and shrub-sized trees. The female Canada warbler finds a spot in the moss or in the rootball of a tipped-over tree and spends up to 5 days weaving together strips of bark, leaves, moss, and grasses to form a loose cup of a nest right on the ground. She lays 2-6 creamy brown eggs and then settles in to sit on the nest for up to 12 days.

Even a small property can be an important part of the landscape-habitat puzzle for species like the Canada warbler. NEFF is still taking applications from woodland owners in Western Maine and everyone who applies will receive a free ecological assessment. For those who qualify, reimbursements are available for on-the-ground forest practices that improve habitat through grants from the Natural Resources Conservation Service and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation. Practices may include timber stand improvement, thinning, snag and opening creation, water quality improvement, and site-specific riparian buffer establishment. The NEFF project is compatible with sustainable forest management, can supplement current forest management planning efforts, and integrate with planned harvests. NEFF will help landowners find a forester if they are not yet actively managing their woods.

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