

Early successional forest habitat on private lands:

A study of private landowner decision-making in New York State

Early successional forest habitat is characterized by very dense growth of bushes and saplings. Due to natural processes of succession, early successional forest habitats are constantly changing, typically lasting less than 20 years before vegetation structure and species composition mature or succeed into a substantially different habitat type.



Early successional forest habitat is created through forest disturbance or reversion of agricultural lands.

Human dimensions research strives to understand human behavior associated with resource management and to apply concepts and empirical findings to real-world, contemporary problems of management. Our research results include empirical data, conceptual frameworks, and theoretical insights and applications. These research products are used in the policy development, implementation, and evaluation processes of a wide array of policymakers, especially those in state and federal agencies.

Study Contact Team



Background: Early Successional Forest Habitat Management Challenge

With changing land use practices and suppression of natural disturbance, early successional forest habitat (ESH) and related wildlife species are in decline in New York State. This type of habitat supports Golden-winged Warblers, American Woodcock, and other important game and non-game species. Historically, ESH was prevalent in the state, but now, its quality and maintenance for wildlife depends upon purposeful management. Given that 77% of New York's forest lands are privately owned, the existence of adequate ESH hinges on private forest landowners undertaking management activities.



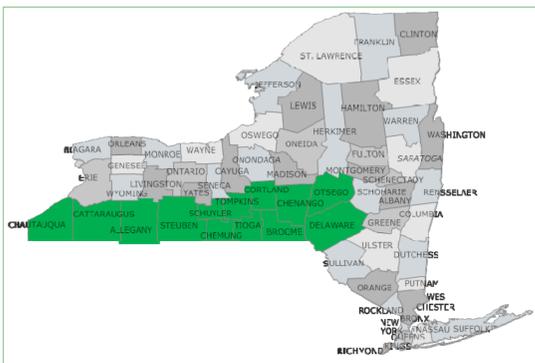
Common Nighthawk (left) and Ruffed Grouse (right) are early successional bird species in decline. © Jim Livaudais

Various opportunities and constraints affect the ability of management agencies, local communities, and other conservation partners to manage for, and sustain, ESH across New York State. Existing federal and state policies and conservation plans for these habitats and associated species, along with interventions emerging from those policies and plans in the form of outreach, incentives, and other programs, aim to influence landowner actions. Yet, ecological changes (e.g., climate change, tree diseases and pests, etc.) add uncertainty to the management context.



The Study

This two-year study is a collaborative effort of the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation Bureau of Wildlife and the Cornell University, Department of Natural Resources, Human Dimensions Research Unit. It addresses the need to restore and retain ESH in New York, particularly in the upland forest (shrubland and forestland). The study focuses on private forest landowners of the Southern Tier.



The study area includes 13 counties of the Southern Tier of New York State.



Objectives

- 1) Explore the state of knowledge and outreach related to ESH among experts working with private forest landowners.
- 2) Determine private forest landowner attitudes, awareness, motivating factors, and constraints toward types of management practices on their lands.
- 3) Develop a typology of private forest landowners to better understand the target audience and inform outreach efforts.
- 4) Explore the context for private landowner management decisions.



Methods

The study employs mixed methods:

- ◆ A review of research literature about ESH and private woodland owners.
- ◆ A document review of wildlife conservation plans for ESH and wildlife species.
- ◆ Interviews with forest and wildlife professionals with experience in ESH research, management, and outreach.
- ◆ Interviews with private landowners with experience in ESH management.
- ◆ Focus groups with private landowners.
- ◆ Survey of private landowners in the Southern Tier of New York State.



Anticipated Impacts

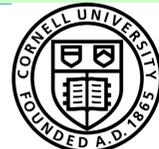
This project will provide extensive information on the context for ESH management in New York State; the state of knowledge of conservation needs and constraints; motivations, barriers, and the role of wildlife in landowners' decisions to manage for ESH; and a typology of landowners. The project will outline outreach strategies or incentive programs that could effectively encourage private landowners in New York State to manage for ESH. We expect that these findings will aid the NYS DEC and their partner agencies interested in encouraging landowners to increase ESH. The results and conclusions will also further our understanding of the human dimensions of forestry and wildlife conservation.



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