



The Rhode Island Coverts Program

Managing Rhode Island's Forests to Enhance Wildlife Habitat

The Issue

Rhode Island's forests provide habitat to a large variety of wildlife species. While forests cover 59 percent of Rhode Island, wildlife biologists and foresters are finding that forest fragmentation and loss of habitat is having a detrimental effect on many bird species and other wildlife. For instance, twelve of sixteen shrubland birds and seven of ten grassland birds have declining population trends in the region. Many are listed as threatened or endangered in several northeastern states. Additionally, American woodcock have declined by 40% over the past 30 years, ruffed grouse have largely disappeared from southern New England, and the New England cottontail occur in only 20% of the area that this species was historically found.

The issue is that most of the state's 393,000 acres of forest are owned by an estimated 38,000 private individuals who own 50 acres or less. These small tracts of land have become fragmented by roads, homebuilding and other developments which have disrupted wildlife corridors. In addition, forest landowners with small amounts of forest land are less likely to manage their property for wildlife habitat protection.

RI RC&D, working with numerous partners, has started the Rhode Island Coverts Program in Rhode Island to help woodland owners conserve their land and protect wildlife habitats in an effort to sustain forests and prevent further fragmentation.

Rhode Islands Coverts Project



The **Rhode Island Coverts Project** is the latest program to help landowners. The Coverts Project is a special educational program developed jointly by Cooperative Extension Systems in Connecticut and Vermont and the Ruffed Grouse Society in 1983. Since then it has expanded to eleven other states across the northeastern U.S. with the exception of the state of Rhode Island.

Covert (**pronounced cover with "t"**) is a word that describes a thicket that provides shelter cover for wildlife.

The goal of the Project is to show individual woodland owners how sound forest management practices can make wildlife healthier, more diverse, and more abundant through improved wildlife habitats. Actively managed demonstration areas are used as outdoor classrooms. A well-designed covert will provide food sources, nesting sites, and protection from snow, ice, and predators. One example of a covert is a tree and shrub thicket that provides shelter for wildlife such as quail, rabbits, pheasants, turkeys and songbirds. A tree and shrub covert can be established through natural regeneration, enhancing existing thickets, or designing and planting a thicket from scratch on open ground. Snags (standing or fallen dead trees) are another example of a covert that can benefit wildlife. Snags provide nesting or den sites as well as insects as a source of food for wildlife such as birds. Cavity nesting birds that reduce insect and rodent populations and provide color and song, need snags to thrive.

Coverts Project Cooperators

Each year the **Rhode Island Coverts Project** seeks woodland owners and other interested individuals who want to learn more about their forests and the wildlife that live in them in exchange for a commitment to share that knowledge with others in their community. Up to twenty-five (25) woodland owners are chosen annually to participate in the two and one-half day workshop that focuses on forest ecology and stewardship, wildlife management and land conservation. The training consists of both indoor and field sessions, as well as informal time to learn from fellow participants. In addition, each participant is given materials to take home. The seminar includes meals, lodging, and reference materials that allow them to either answer questions on forest and wildlife management, or direct the questioner to the proper professionals. In exchange, participants are asked to return to their communities and share what they've learned with others and work to help build a statewide Cooperator network.



Now in its 7th year, the project has trained 100 landowners from across the state. A model of a successful partnership, the participating landowners cumulatively own and manage 2,012 acres and manage another 6,234 acres for other people and/or groups. To date, the participants have entered into over \$800,000 of conservation contracts with USDA NRCS to implement forest and wildlife habitat management on their properties.

Some Species that Benefit from a Covert



New England Cottontail



American Woodcock



Ruffed Grouse

Current Partners

USDA-NRCS
 RI RC&D Area Council, Inc.
 RIDEM –Divisions of Forest Environment and Fish & Wildlife
 RI Chapter of the Ruffed Grouse Society
 URI-Dept. of Natural Resource Science
 Rhode Island Forest Conservators, Inc.



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