

Habitat Management Plan for New England Cottontails at Wiley Recreation Area

Town of Scarborough, Maine

Submitted by

Town of Scarborough Conservation Commission
with assistance from:

Jay Chace, Assistant Town Planner
Town of Scarborough

Kelly M. Boland, NEC Restoration Coordinator
Rachel Carson National Wildlife Refuge

Fred Seavey, Partners for Fish and Wildlife Biologist
U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Introduction

The Wiley Recreation Area is a 42.6 acre property owned by the Town of Scarborough. It abuts Rachel Carson National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) on the north and east side and is used for a playground, ball fields and trails. Back from the main recreation area is a field that, left idle, has grown native shrubs and small trees (Figure 1). Shrubland has declined significantly in Maine (comprising less than 2 percent of the landscape in many areas) and the field was identified by biologists as an area that has wildlife value for young forest/ shrubland dependent species. The New England cottontail is a state-endangered animal found in southern Maine and needs this type of habitat to survive. Rachel Carson NWR is restoring habitat for cottontails on its neighboring property. Therefore, managing portions of both properties for early successional habitat would contribute to creating a large habitat area for the species.

On May 9, 2011, the Scarborough Conservation Commission and the Assistant Town Planner met with Biologist Kelly Boland (New England Cottontail Restoration Coordinator) and Fred Seavey (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service) to discuss opportunities on this property to help cottontails and other shrubland-dependent species. Currently, the 'back field' of Wiley Recreation Area is partially vegetated by native plants including blueberry, arrowwood, meadow sweet, speckled alder, willow, dogwood, rose and red maple (Figure 1). It is an ideal parcel to continue to allow growing into a native shrubland and young forest community. Ultimately, this could provide the dense thicket habitat needed for cottontail populations to thrive. However, currently, in certain places, shrub and seedling development are being hindered by thick mats of grass and small trees (e.g., white pine), which are competing for resources and light, and the area would benefit from minimal management activities aimed at reducing these sources of competition.

Figure 1. A 12-acre developing shrubland and young forest parcel on Wiley Recreation Area, Scarborough, Maine, proposed for habitat enhancement for New England cottontails.



Management Goal and Objectives

The goal of the proposed plan is to enhance approximately 12 acres of the developing shrubland and young forest at the Wiley Recreation Area to create high-quality habitat for New England cottontails. Not only will cottontails benefit from the proposed management activities, but also a variety of species that depend on early successional habitats, including chestnut-sided warblers, eastern towhees, pollinating bees, and butterflies. Habitat will be improved in the short-term by 1) increasing density of native shrubs, 2) enhancing native shrub/seedling growth, and 3) creating additional places that provide concealment and thermal cover for cottontails. Furthermore, maintaining the native shrub community long-term will create important habitat needed to help secure populations of this declining species.

Management Recommendations

The goal is to increase the density of shrubs and maintain the current shrub community. Activities proposed include:

- ✓ Planting or seeding native shrubs
- ✓ Mowing grassy areas
- ✓ Removing tall trees (>20ft) and small pines
- ✓ Controlling invasive species (honeysuckle, autumn olive)

To create high-quality thicket habitat over a relatively short time period, stem densities of the regenerating shrubland could be increased by planting native shrubs between some of the patches of existing shrubby areas. In drier sites, small patches (~10 ft x 20 ft) of grass could be mowed, tilled, or scarified prior to planting (or seeding) to enhance shrub or forage growth in these areas. Plants such as grape, winterberry holly, dogwood, Virginia rose, and common elderberry could be planted to facilitate the expansion of existing thickets. In addition, individual white pine, gray birch, and maple trees (>20 ft) within portions of the 12-acre area could be cut to eliminate sources of shade for developing shrubs and encourage stump sprouts. Select trees along the north and/or eastern perimeter of the field could be felled to enhance young forest edge habitat between the shrubland and mature forest (termed a “feathered edge”). The branches from cut trees could be used to construct brush piles next to shrubby areas and on top of grassy patches, to provide additional concealment and thermal cover to cottontails. Sapling-size white pine trees within the shrubland interior also could be cut to limit regeneration of this conifer, which is less suitable to cottontails. Finally, to maintain high-quality forage long-term, the small number of invasive plants (honeysuckle and autumn olive) that occur on the parcel could be removed (cut and/or dug out) to prevent establishment.

Estimated Cost and Benefits

The total cost of the restoration likely would be less than \$10,000.00 for a 10-year agreement depending on selected management activities. Funding of this project is available from the Partners for Fish and Wildlife (PFW) Program (USFWS) and the town would not incur any capital expenditures.

Benefits from the project include educational opportunities for residents and school groups (a sign could be installed describing the benefit of the land to wildlife), partnership with neighboring Rachel Carson

National Wildlife Refuge, and enhancing natural area for the native wildlife and the community. Furthermore, if New England cottontails use the property, the State of Maine will provide protections to the town in the case of an incidental take on the parcel. Because the New England Cottontail is a candidate for the federal endangered species list, the town also will be eligible for a developing federal protection called a Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances.