

Ruffed Grouse Society

Celebrating 50 Years of Managing Forest Habitat

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The year 2011 marks the 50th anniversary of the Ruffed Grouse Society (RGS), established in 1961 by a group of Virginia sportsmen concerned about the future of North America's most widely distributed grouse. Today RGS remains singularly focused on sustaining the shrublands and young forest habitats required by the ruffed grouse, American woodcock, chestnut-sided warbler, and many other species of wildlife. RGS' mission may be even more timely now than ever before as these important habitats and the wildlife they support become less and less abundant on the landscape.

In February 2007, the American Bird Conservancy classified early successional (young) deciduous forest habitats in the eastern United States as one of the nation's 20 most threatened bird habitats. Throughout the eastern United States, young (under 20 years old) deciduous forest habitats have decreased by 33 percent over the past several decades, while total forestland has increased by approximately seven percent.

In the absence of fire, which historically raced across much of North America, young forest habitats are sustained primarily through the natural succession of open lands to shrub-dominated fields or through the use of active forest management treatments in existing forest stands. Acreage treated on national forests in the East using the types of treatments that led to the development of young forest habitats has declined by 52 percent since 1995.

Approximately 70 percent of our eastern forests are controlled by non-industrial private forest landowners. The use of active forest management on these private ownerships is declining due to a variety of factors, one of which is ownership fragmentation. Private parcels are increasingly being fragmented into

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smaller and smaller tracts, and unfortunately, research on the attitudes of private landowners clearly shows that as the size of private forest tracts decreases, so too does the likelihood of active forest management.

Not surprisingly, these recent declines in shrublands and young forests have resulted in the declines of wildlife that depend upon these habitats. The ruffed grouse, bobwhite quail, and American woodcock are important game birds throughout much of the eastern United States. These three species are experiencing population declines throughout much of this region.

Breeding Bird Survey data collected by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service confirm that the number of bird species characteristic of shrublands or young forest habitats that are experiencing population declines in the East exceeds the number that are increasing. Conversely, the number of bird species characteristic of mature forest habitats that are experiencing population increases exceeds the number that are declining. Many of these declining bird species that use shrublands or young forest habitats are classified as high conservation priority. These include the whip-poor-will, yellow-breasted chat, and the seriously imperiled golden-winged warbler, which was petitioned for federal listing under the Endangered Species Act in 2010.

Due to the ephemeral nature of shrublands and young forest habitats, breeding-bird use of these habitats may last only a few years. The relatively brief period of time that young forests provide optimum habitat conditions for some bird species necessitates the regular development of these habitats through targeted active forest management.

RGS pursues this goal by providing technical and financial assistance to resource management agencies responsible for wildlife conservation on local, state, and federal public lands; educating private landowners and the general public about the essential role played by active forest management in sustaining a diversity of wildlife habitats, and therefore, a diversity of wildlife; and by working to establish regulatory policies that promote sound forest stewardship.

To date, the Society has contributed millions of dollars to establish shrublands and young forest habitats on public lands through its Management Area Program. Habitat quality on just over 500,000 acres of public land has been improved through the society's collaborative efforts with the U.S. Forest Service, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and fish and wildlife agencies in almost every state that supports ruffed grouse or American woodcocks. Typical management activities include the construction or reconstruction of roads

The Ruffed Grouse Society of America was formed on October 10, 1961, in Monterey, Virginia.

and trails to facilitate timber harvests designed to enhance young forest habitats. These roads and trails can also provide critical access for sportsmen and sportswomen, hikers, backpackers and other forest users. Shrubbylands are periodically renewed by mowing or some other form of mechanical treatment.

Although RGS doesn't provide financial assistance to private forest landowners to support habitat management activities, the society does provide technical assistance through on-site habitat consultations conducted by its staff of wildlife biologists at no cost to the landowner. RGS has found that most landowners are more than willing to utilize commercial timber sales to establish young forest habitats once they understand the importance of these habitats to ruffed grouse and other wildlife. The key message the RGS works to convey is that a timber sale is not an end unto itself. Instead, it is the means to an end—wildlife diversity.

The society's COVERTS program provides another opportunity to reach out to private landowners. COVERTS programs are coordinated by university extension offices in various states, with the longest-running program conducted by the University of Wisconsin. COVERTS workshops are intensive, two- to

Increasing the use of active forest management on public and private forestlands is the primary goal of the activities of the Ruffed Grouse Society.

three-day events where 20-30 landowners receive classroom and field instruction on wildlife ecology and forest habitat management. Using the philosophy of "teach one, reach one hundred," workshop participants are then expected to share what they've learned with neighbors and others in their community

Decisions made in Washington, D.C., and our state capitals can dramatically affect how we can or can't manage our nation's public and private forestlands. As one would expect, the Ruffed Grouse Society is actively engaged in the debate surrounding the future of forest wildlife conservation when relevant issues arise. The society, like the Boone and Crockett Club, has consistently used sound science as the foundation of its contributions to this debate. This is one reason why the RGS was first invited to appear before Congress in 1993 and provide testimony regarding the benefits to wildlife from thoughtful forest management practices. The Society's message then was simple: "To sustain the full array of forest wildlife on our nation's federal public lands, we must sustain the full array of forest



Left to right—Bruce R. Richardson, Jr., president; Seybert Beverage, secretary and editor of publication; Dixie L. Shumate, Jr., treasurer. Bruce Richardson is a former president of the Virginia Hotel Association and at one time was sports director at The Homestead Hotel, Hot Springs, Va. He is now president of a private trout company in Monterey, Va., has hunted grouse all his life.—Seybert Beverage is a Monterey, Va. attorney. Vice-president of his law class, University of Virginia and Phi Beta Kappa. He is an authority on the Allegheny Mountain region and somewhat of a historian. Also is an ornithologist and has had a lifetime interest in the Ruffed Grouse.—Dixie Shumate is a biologist and also a trout culturist. He is a native of Marion, Va. and is an authority on the forest and game in the grouse states. He is a graduate of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and the U. S. Fish and Wildlife School, Courtland, N. Y. Formerly with the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries and now biologist with the Virginia Trout Company, Inc.

wildlife habitats—very young, very old, and all ages in between. Old forests develop through time; young forests develop only when created through active forest management."

For the past 10 years, the Ruffed Grouse Society has worked in cooperation with the Boone and Crockett Club and other partner organizations of the American Wildlife Conservation Partners (AWCP) to promote wildlife-friendly legislation and policies at the federal level. It's gratifying to note that since the "timber wars" of the Pacific Northwest in the 1980s and 90s, which affected forest management policy across the nation, the pendulum appears to be swinging back toward a more balanced approach to forest management that includes active management—the same approach promoted by the Ruffed Grouse Society over and over again. This shift in perspective is evidenced in part by the passage of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003 (HFRA)—legislation that was vigorously promoted by the Society and others within AWCP.

HFRA was designed to expedite resource management projects deemed necessary to protect rangelands and forestlands from catastrophic wildfire, insect infestations or disease. Too often in the past, these types of projects were delayed by the endless paperwork required by a web of federal regulations and legal challenges from organizations more interested in the politics of forest conservation than the practice thereof. This legislation was an attempt to accomplish what the National Forest Management Act (NFMA) could not.

After the passage of NFMA in 1972, Senator Hubert Humphrey, D-Minnesota, a staunch advocate for responsible environmental policies, stated that the legislation would move forest management out of the courts and back to the forests where it belonged. Almost 40 years later, perhaps this laudable objective is a bit closer to reality. The Ruffed Grouse Society continues to work with its colleagues in the wildlife conservation community toward that critical goal. ■