



## Conservation Practice Overview

### Early Successional Habitat Development/Management (Code 647)

Early Successional Habitat Development/Management is management of plant succession to develop and maintain early successional habitat to benefit desired wildlife and/or natural communities.



#### Practice Information

Early successional habitats are typically transitional and require different levels of disturbance to be maintained. Examples of early successional habitats include weedy areas, grassland, old fields, shrubby thickets, and young forest. If these habitats are not mowed, brush hogged, burned, cut, grazed or disturbed in some other fashion, they will eventually become forest over time. Grasslands will revert to old fields. Old fields will eventually grow into young forest. Young forest will grow into mature forest. This process is referred to as *succession*. As such, grasslands, old fields, and young forests are often referred to as *early-successional habitats*. Some sites such as wetlands, sandy sites and ledge areas can support a relatively stable shrub cover; however, most shrub communities in the northeast are successional.

Early successional habitats are of concern because many species that depend on these habitats are experiencing population declines across the Northeast. This is probably due to a variety of factors but changes in land use and the vegetation succeeding toward mature forest has resulted in less available quality habitat for these species.

#### Grasslands and Grassland Birds

“*Grasslands*” is a broad term that applies to many open land habitats but in general these are areas that are dominated by grasses with some forbs and have no or very few trees or shrubs. Their use by wildlife will depend on the habitat patch size and configuration as well as the vegetation height, density, and composition.

Grassland habitats in Vermont are important for grassland nesting birds and a variety of other wildlife such as pollinators, meadow voles, fox, turkey, deer, green and rat snakes, wood turtles, hawks, rabbits, frogs and others. Grassland birds are the focus of most management plans because a number of these species have experienced significant population declines at the continental scale over the last fifty years. Grassland bird species in Vermont include somewhat common species such as bobolink and savannah sparrow and more rare species such as Eastern meadowlark, grasshopper sparrows, upland sandpipers and short-eared owls. Grassland birds are area sensitive which means which means they prefer and select large areas of contiguous habitat for breeding. Large grassland blocks are prioritized for management.



Grassland Habitat in the Champlain Valley

#### Old Field

“*Old Fields*” is a broad term that applies to many open, transitional habitats (transitioning from field to forest) but in general these are areas that are dominated by forbs, grass and shrubs and small trees. The use of these habitats by wildlife will depend on the habitat patch size and configuration as well as

the vegetation height, density, and composition. The proportion of woody vegetative cover is also important for various species.

Old field habitats in Vermont are important for *shrubland* birds. Old fields are also used by a variety of other wildlife such as pollinators, cottontail rabbit, deer, snipe, turkey, bobcat, green and rat snakes, frogs and many others. Shrubland birds are the focus of many management plans because like grassland birds many birds in this group are in decline. Shrubland bird species in Vermont include common or locally common species such as common yellowthroat, white-throated sparrow, field sparrow, Eastern towhee, American woodcock, brown thrasher, and more rare species such as prairie warbler, golden-winged warbler, and vesper sparrow. Priority is given to managing large blocks or managing within large blocks of similar habitat as some shrubland birds are “area sensitive.”



This old field has a mosaic of habitats with grasses, forbs, shrubs and young trees that provide for a variety of wildlife.

## **Shrublands and Young Forest**

“*Shrublands and Young Forest*” are terms that apply to transitional habitats (transitioning to more mature forest) but in general these are areas that are dominated by small trees (seedlings and saplings) and shrubs with some grass and forbs. The vegetative make up of shrub and young forest habitats is variable based on the management history, soils (poor or rich, wet or dry), previous or existing vegetation and many other factors. Their use by wildlife will depend on the patch size and configuration as well as vegetation height, percent woody vegetation cover, density, and composition.

Shrub and young forest habitats in Vermont are important for *shrubland* birds; shrubland birds use shrub and young forest areas with or without open herbaceous areas. These habitats are also



Young forest with dense woody vegetation, large woody material and snags provides excellent habitat.

important for a variety of other wildlife such as pollinators, black bear, deer, moose, snowshoe hare, bobcat, garter snakes, frogs and others. Research has shown that mature forest songbirds and their young use young forest following nesting. This may be due to good cover and/or abundant food resources (insects, berries, etc.).

Priority is given to managing large blocks (5 or more acres) or managing within large blocks of early successional habitat. This approach will provide quality habitat that will lead to enhanced reproduction and survival.

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## **Common Associated Practices**

### **314 Brush Management**

For further information, contact your local NRCS field office.

Natural Resources Conservation Service

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