

Vermont



What is Early Successional Habitat?

It is habitat with vigorously growing grasses, forbs, shrubs and trees which provide excellent food and cover for wildlife but need disturbance to be maintained. Examples of early successional habitats include weedy areas, grasslands, old fields or pastures, shrub thickets (e.g. dogwood or alder), 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*.



The American woodcock (left) or “timberdoodle” is a true early successional specialist using many different successional stages of habitat.

“Soft mast” or fruit bearing trees and shrubs are valuable food sources associated with early successional habitat. Apple (e.g. old orchards), chokecherry and blackberry are just a few examples (below).

Why is it important?

Early successional habitats are of concern because Vermont is slowly losing these areas to forest succession, development and other changes in land use. Think about all the old farmland on the Vermont landscape that is growing into mature forest; as this happens, fields, orchards and young forest are lost. The wildlife species that depend on those open habitats are being lost as well. While some species such as black bear (and many others) don't require early successional habitat, it provides a valuable feeding area (think berries and apples) that can help improve their condition.

In Vermont, the species of concern with declining populations that are often highlighted include grassland birds (e.g. bobolink), shrubland birds (e.g. towhee and chestnut-sided warbler, pictured at top of page) and reptiles (e.g. green and rat snake).



Grassland birds generally need large fields (10 or more acres) combined with delayed mowing that allows successful nesting. Shrubland birds need low, thick woody cover for nesting and snakes forage in these productive early successional areas for insects, frogs, and small mammals.

Besides declining species there are a variety of other wildlife that will seek out these areas for the excellent cover and quality of food they provide. Songbirds, turkey, grouse, deer, rabbit, bear, fox, native bees and many more species are drawn to old fields, thickets, and young forest where there is an abundance of flowering plants, browse, insects and soft mast (fruit). Important soft mast would include species such as raspberry, blackberry, cherry, apple, elderberry, hawthorn, dogwood, serviceberry, blueberry and viburnums.



Old Fields/Pastures (above) and Young Forests (left) are different types of early successional habitat. Some wildlife will use both while others will only use one type. Old fields generally provide long term habitat while young forest is typically good habitat for about 10-15 years after cutting. Low, thick woody cover is critical for both habitats.

What can I do?

Manage your land for wildlife and provide these important habitats. Determine what your land currently provides for habitat and how it may be improved. The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has various programs available that can provide the help of a professional resource manager and funding assistance for habitat improvement practices to help you meet your goals. Vermont NRCS has a strong focus on early successional habitats due to their importance in the region. NRCS partners with the Vermont Department of Fish and Wildlife and Vermont Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation to work with private landowners to improve habitat and forest management on their lands.

**For more information visit the NRCS web site - <http://www.vt.nrcs.usda.gov/>
Or call your local USDA Service Center in the phone book under U.S. Government, Agriculture Dept.**