

# LIVING LANDS

Helping Land Trusts Conserve Biodiversity



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Photo courtesy of Sudbury Valley Trustees



Restoring shrubland habitat for wildlife in Massachusetts

## SHRUBLAND HABITAT MANAGEMENT—BITTERSWEET SUCCESS

An update from a 2007 Living Lands Biodiversity Grant Recipient

By *Laura Mattei*

**N**ever underestimate the determination of oriental bittersweet. That's just one of the many lessons that Sudbury Valley Trustees (SVT) has learned over the past three years as they have tirelessly worked to restore shrubland habitat at their Cedar Hill Reservation in Northborough, Massachusetts.

The project, funded by a Living Lands Biodiversity Grant, centered around a 20-acre patch of former pasture owned by SVT and surrounded by more than 2,500 acres of protected mixed forest, wetlands, fields and woodlands. The Cedar Hill Reservation presented a perfect opportunity to restore shrubland habitat for wildlife, particularly birds, that depend on these ephemeral habitats for foraging, nesting, and cover.

Shrubland habitats were historically part of a dynamic landscape of diverse habitats maintained by wind, fire and floods and human activities such as farming, logging and livestock grazing. Today shrubland habitats are rapidly disappearing as they are developed or mature to forest in the absence of natural disturbance. As a result, the avian species that depend upon shrublands are experiencing greater declines than their forest counterparts. For example, half of the 10 most rapidly declining bird species in Massachusetts are shrubland species including the brown thrasher, eastern towhee, northern bobwhite, American kestrel and field sparrow. SVT's plan was to restore this 20-acre degraded

*(continued on page 2)*

*(Sudbury Valley Trustees, continued from page 1)*  
 pasture in hopes of providing a refuge for this declining suite of bird species.

**Battling Invasives**

The Cedar Hill Reservation was being overtaken by an army of invasive shrubs and vines, such as honeysuckle, multiflora rose, Japanese barberry and oriental bittersweet. Native forbs and grasses were still common throughout but native shrubs were sparse.

SVT's first plan of attack included a large Brontosaurus mower and a partnership with Mass Audubon Extension Service and the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife (MassWildlife). In the winter of 2005, SVT cleared several acres of invasives only to be astounded the following summer to see that bittersweet had exploded and carpeted more than 80% of the cleared area. Although they had anticipated significant regrowth, this was far beyond expectation.

Clearly a new strategy was in order. So, based on a recommendation from MassWildlife, SVT adjusted their plan to include an herbicide treatment, which they applied a year later in the Fall of 2006. In the meantime, they cleared additional

Photos courtesy of Sudbury Valley Trustees



Restored field at Cedar Hill Reservation

acres of brush and collectively treated the cleared acres with herbicide. Although this treatment yielded results, it was not quite as successful as they were hoping for. Again, they went back to the drawing board for one last brainstorm, believing success was right around the corner.

**Bringing in the Experts**

Their final attempt involved pulling out all the stops. SVT found a contractor with invasive plant control and habitat restoration experience who offered a guarantee of 90 percent success within two years. The contractor applied

herbicide last summer and will repeat the application again this year. To increase the effectiveness of the upcoming herbicide treatment, SVT mowed the area this spring and is eager—and

hopeful—to see what success their efforts will bring next year.

**Signs of Encouragement**

The Cedar Hill Reservation project is a labor of love that has seen SVT through three mowing contractors, two herbiciding contractors, and innumerable management techniques. This tenacity is already starting to pay off as their latest breeding bird survey showed strong breeding densities of eastern towhees, and perhaps even more exciting, increased numbers of breeding blue-winged warblers, a result not expected for several years.

Although the path was long and sometimes frustrating, SVT has emerged with a new perspective on the value not only of perseverance but also of flexibility and adaptive management. They plan to continue to tweak their management plan with the hopes of one day supporting the full community of shrubland species at Cedar Hill Reservation—and better yet, have a successful template to apply to future projects.

*Laura Mattei is the director of stewardship at the Sudbury Valley Trustees in Massachusetts. For more information, please visit [www.sudburyvalleytrustees.org/](http://www.sudburyvalleytrustees.org/)*

Photo courtesy of Sudbury Valley Trustees



Brontosaurus mower at work

## DEFENDERS ANNOUNCES 2008 BIODIVERSITY GRANT RECIPIENTS

Seven worthy land trusts have recently been awarded Defenders of Wildlife Living Lands Biodiversity Grants. Thanks to generous support from the Biophilia Foundation, the Living Lands Project has provided these small grants to land trusts since 2007. Grants are awarded to projects that protect and restore wildlife habitat and that serve as models of creative and impactful conservation work. The seven selected land trusts were chosen from over 40 proposals for their exceptional biodiversity value and innovative quality.

“Defenders greatly values the work that land trusts do to protect our most important places and we are constantly impressed by their innovative efforts to protect native wildlife and habitat.” said Aimee Weldon, Living Lands Project manager. “We are thrilled to be able to support such worthy projects.”

The 2008 recipients are:

**Kentucky Natural Lands Trust, KY** - to develop sustainable working forest easement or carbon sequestration-based forestry models along Pine Mountain— one of the most diverse forests in the world and the second largest contiguous

forest tract in Kentucky. The trust will design and implement demonstration projects and build staff expertise in negotiating and monitoring sustainable forestry easements, potentially impacting up to 100,000 acres of forest habitat.



Photo courtesy of Thomas G. Barnes

Red-spotted newt eft in the forests along Pine Mountain, KY

**Black Swamp Conservancy, OH** - to restore a 252-acre agricultural property to native grasses and trees in one of Ohio's most critical natural areas, which includes one of the largest remaining native woodlands in northwest Ohio. This will be the Conservancy's first restoration project and will provide valuable experience for future projects.

**Whidbey Camano Land Trust, WA** – to protect and restore significant marsh and riparian forest habitat within a regionally important wetland system in Puget Sound. The land trust will write restrictive easement language and a habitat management plan before transferring the land to the state.

**Southwest Michigan Land Conservancy, MI** - to develop an acquisition and stewardship plan for the conservation of endangered Mitchell's satyr butterfly habitat.

Funds will offset appraisal costs of a 190-acre parcel in the Paw Paw River watershed that supports numerous species and habitats identified by Michigan's State Wildlife Action Plan, including Blanding's turtle, great blue heron, oak savanna and prairie fen.

**North Carolina Coastal Land Trust, NC** - to conduct the first ever growing season burn on the B.W. Wells long-leaf pine savannah in Pender County, a property with significant regional biodiversity value. In

addition, the land trust will develop a long-term management plan for the property and use the project as a demonstration site for adjacent landowners.

**Teton Regional Land Trust, ID** - to expand an avian monitoring program to lands within the Snake River Area of Critical Environmental Concern, a priority conservation area that provides key habitat for at least 25 species of greatest conservation need as identified in the Idaho State Wildlife Action Plan. Monitoring activities will inform and help prioritize conservation planning, land protection, restoration and outreach.

**Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy, MI** - will restore up to 350 acres of native grassland for nesting and migratory upland bird populations within a north-south migration corridor along eastern Lake Michigan. The restored site will ultimately provide nesting and stop-over habitat for many species of upland birds, including several species of conservation concern.



Photo courtesy of Southwest Michigan Land Conservancy

Fen habitat in Michigan

## WILDLIFE VOLUNTEER CORPS—PUTTING BOOTS ON THE GROUND

**D**efenders of Wildlife's new Wildlife Volunteer Corps is a collaborative program that connects Defenders' members with unique on-the-ground volunteer projects across the country. We are interested in collaborating with land trusts and other conservation groups to pair volunteers drawn from our base of more than 530,000 members with local monitoring, restoration and protection projects in need of extra help. In addition to providing and organizing volunteers for your project, Defenders can help get coverage of your story through local and national news media.

To date, we have organized dozens of volunteer events, some attracting as more than 50 people. These have included:

- Spotighting and 'tagging' black-footed ferrets in Colorado and Utah
- Removing invasive plants at Shenandoah National Park in Virginia
- Restoring native trees to a wildlife underpass in the northern Cascades of Washington
- Monitoring endangered ground squirrel populations in Idaho
- Restoring habitat for endangered New England cottontails in Maine

The primary selection criterion is that the project provide a meaningful volunteer experience (i.e. it should be beneficial for wildlife *and* rewarding for volunteers). Although we are not able to support every proposed project, we encourage you to share all of your ideas for consideration.



Planting native trees in preparation for a wildlife underpass, WA

To propose a project contact Aimee Weldon at: [aweldon@defenders.org](mailto:aweldon@defenders.org). For more information about the Wildlife Volunteer Corps visit: [www.defenders.org/take\\_action/wvc/](http://www.defenders.org/take_action/wvc/).

## THE 2008 FARM BILL—WHAT'S IN IT FOR WILDLIFE?

**A**fter a grueling months-long debate, Congress recently approved a \$290 billion Farm Bill, overriding a presidential veto and opposition by Defenders and other conservation groups who were concerned with unfortunate last minute set-backs to many of the conservation programs. Despite a number of disappointing policy changes, there are a few bright spots for wildlife in the nearly \$30 billion conservation title. Read on to see how the programs fared.

### Bright Spots

**Tax Incentive:** Although not permanent, the new bill extends the tax deduction for donated conservation easements until 2009—good news for land trusts and for sustaining the current pace of private lands protection. It also buys us more time to



Prairie grasses

convince Congress that the incentive is working and that it should be made permanent.

**Grassland Reserve Program (GRP):** New funding will allow an additional 1.2 million grassland acres into GRP and new provisions now allow third parties, such as land trusts, to negotiate and hold GRP easements. In addition, lands currently enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program that are set to expire may now be eligible for rollover into GRP.

### Endangered Species Deductions:

A new tax deduction has been established for private landowners who are working to improve habitat for threatened and endangered species on their land, providing a much-needed positive incentive for wildlife conservation.

### Conservation Stewardship

**Program (CSP):** This program, which pays farmers and ranchers

Photo courtesy NRCS

for the good conservation work they are *already* doing and encourages them to adopt additional activities with significant environmental benefit (such as wildlife habitat improvement) is now available nationwide and can enroll over 12 million acres per year.

### **Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP):**

Funding for EQIP, which provides cost-share on practices that improve air and water quality, erosion, and wildlife habitat, has been dramatically increased from \$2.6 billion to \$3.4 billion. New forest conservation and management practices have been added that allow activities such as thinning and prescribed burning. Creating pollinator habitat is now authorized as a priority for incentive payments.



Restored field

### **Farmland Protection Program (FPP):**

Funding for FPP (formerly Farm and Ranchland Protection Program) will more than double by 2012. New provisions clarify the role of land trusts in negotiating and holding easements, expanding the program and making it more user-friendly for landowners.

**Pollinator Habitat:** For the first time, the creation of native pollinator habitat is encouraged in *all* Farm Bill conservation programs and is even authorized for incentive payments under EQIP.

**Conservation Priorities:** The bill includes authority to link implementation of the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program,

Grassland Reserve Program, Conservation Stewardship Program and Conservation Reserve Program to the goals of state, regional, or national conservation plans such as the State Wildlife Action Plans. This is an important first step toward strategic habitat conservation in the most important places for wildlife.

### **Those Less Fortunate**

**Conservation Reserve Program (CRP):** Total enrollment in CRP, one of the most important wildlife conservation programs in the Farm Bill, has been dropped from 39 million acres to 32 million acres, meaning that no new enrollments can be accepted until more than 2 million acres of currently enrolled contracts expire. A couple small successes include adding pollinator habitat creation as a new priority and including all Chesapeake Bay region states as a Priority Conservation Area for CRP (prior focus was only on Virginia, Pennsylvania and Maryland).

### **Wetland Reserve Program (WRP):**

The good news is that new funding has raised the total enrollment cap for WRP to more than 3 million acres (up more than 700,000 acres). The bad news is that land must now be owned for seven years prior to WRP enrollment (up from twelve months) and easement payments to landowners are now spread over an extended period. This delays and risks loss of project opportunities for land trusts and landowners. Enrollment remains restricted to areas directly connected to or associated with larger wetlands. Riparian corridors, which have significant value to wildlife and water quality, especially in arid regions, were not made explicitly eligible for WRP.

### **Healthy Forest Reserve Program:**

This program was established to promote biodiversity conservation, threatened and endangered species recovery and carbon sequestration.



Wetlands on farmland

The new bill now has a permanent easement option but drops overall funding.

### **Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP):**

The WHIP program may have fared the worst in the new Farm Bill. Once available to all private landowners, WHIP is now disappointingly restricted to agricultural lands and non-industrial private forestlands. This excludes land trusts and others from accessing critical funds for wildlife habitat improvement projects on lands not in agricultural use. New project annual caps of \$50,000 also prevent large-scale conservation projects. On the positive side, 25 percent of WHIP funding can now be used for long-term projects (15 years or longer), up from 15 percent.

**Sodsaver:** This new program was developed to discourage landowners from breaking additional native prairie lands for agricultural use. Unfortunately, the approved program restricts Sodsaver to just the prairie pothole region and allows individual states the authority to “opt-in”, meaning hundreds of thousands of acres of unbroken prairie could be lost, particularly with growing pressure to grow crops for biofuels.

Although the new Farm Bill is far from ideal for wildlife, conservation overall is well funded and modest improvements have been made to protect wildlife in at least a few programs even if others have taken a step back. The Farm Bill remains an important, albeit imperfect, resource for land trusts.

## DUKE ENVIRONMENTAL LEADERSHIP PROGRAM GIS WORKSHOP

Check out this opportunity to brush up on your GIS skills and apply them to your conservation work:

### GIS-Based Analyses for Conservation Management July 21-25, 2008

Please [register](#) by July 7, 2008

#### Course Description:

The Duke Environmental Leadership Program is offering a new GIS short-course for conservation managers. The course will cover the spectrum of GIS capabilities including where to find common sources of geospatial data, how to build working databases, perform fundamental tasks in conservation management



Map courtesy of Southwest Michigan Land Conservancy

and manage conservation projects for the long-term using a GIS framework. Students will learn these concepts in the context of a relevant conservation project that includes identifying focal species or habitat targets, prioritizing where to work on the landscape, assessing success and adapting management strategies.

For more information on this and other upcoming courses, please visit: [www.nicholas.duke.edu/del/continuing](http://www.nicholas.duke.edu/del/continuing)

Or email: [del@nicholas.duke.edu](mailto:del@nicholas.duke.edu).

## Living Lands—Helping Land Trusts Conserve Biodiversity

Living Lands is a Defenders of Wildlife project working to increase the capacity of local land trusts to protect, enhance and restore native wildlife habitat and biodiversity.

The Living Lands Project assists local land trusts in making strategic decisions about where to work to conserve high-priority native habitats and species and how to work to use effective land stewardship to restore and manage native habitats for their long-term benefits.

Through this project, Defenders of Wildlife is collaborating with

the Land Trust Alliance to assist local land trusts through a variety of approaches, including technical and financial assistance.

The Living Lands project also involves individual land trusts, state and federal agencies, conservation groups and other groups and individuals that support land trusts in their habitat conservation efforts.



If you would like to be removed from our e-mail list, please send a message to [livinglands@defenders.org](mailto:livinglands@defenders.org)

*Vision: A network of land trusts, working with private and public partners, to protect, restore and manage our living lands for biodiversity.*

*Mission: To support and increase the capacity of the land trust community to conserve biodiversity on private lands through financial and technical assistance*

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