

What is a Shrubland?

Shrublands are thickets of bushes and young trees mixed with scattered grasses and wildflowers. In Maine, typical shrubland plants include dogwood, speckled alder, willow, meadowsweet, and blueberry.

Impenetrable and dense, shrublands often are ignored and undervalued by people. However, for some species of wildlife like the New England cottontail, American woodcock, and Eastern towhee, shrublands provide the best possible cover.



Many large shrublands in Maine are found on old fields and pastures, along powerlines, in gravel pits, and in recent forest openings. These shrublands are a result of human activities— abandonment of agricultural fields, mowing, or timber harvest.

Natural shrublands also exist in Maine, including patches of juniper, coastal shrublands, and scrubby wetlands. Wind, fire and soils create natural thickets.



The shrubs in this beach plum thicket produce fruit that is eaten by many different birds and animals. They also provide homes for reptiles and amphibians, mammals, and migrating birds.

A Vanishing Habitat



In some thickets, low-growing shrubs are the dominant plants, but in others, small trees make up the habitat.

Large shrublands and young forests—those greater than five acres—are rare in Maine. In fact, in the southern part of the state, less than 2 percent of our land contains shrubland habitat.



One reason shrublands are rare is that the vast majority of these habitats are temporary. If an open field is left alone for just a few years, shrubs and young trees grow, forming dense thickets. As the trees continue to grow, they shade out grasses, wildflowers, and shrubs. Within 20 to 25 years, the area that was once a field will become a tall forest.

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, many people abandoned their farms in Maine. As fields went unmowed, shrublands grew in their place and became common. Wildlife that needed shrublands also increased.

By the mid-1900s, wetlands were drained, and towns and cities expanded, especially along the coast, and most old fields reverted to forest. Today, shrublands and the wildlife that need these habitats are becoming increasingly rare.



Wet shrub swamps contain plants like alders and willows, and provide habitat for species such as the spotted turtle.



In the early 1900s, birds like the brown thrasher thrived in bountiful dense shrubby cover.

Species Spotlights

New England cottontail

The New England cottontail is listed as an endangered species in Maine. Currently, populations are scattered among small patches inland and along the coast of York and Cumberland counties. Cottontails are found in dense thickets of shrubs and young trees. During the spring and summer, cottontails feed on leaves, flowers, fruit, grasses, and sedges, and in fall and winter, they eat the stems, buds, and bark of shrubs and small trees. Cottontails need thick cover to escape and hide from predators. Populations of these rabbits have suffered greatly from habitat loss; their range has been reduced by over 80% since the 1960s. To learn more visit www.newenglandcottontail.org.



American woodcock

The American woodcock is a species of greatest conservation need. In the fall, it is found in wet thickets, young forests, and brushy swamps throughout Maine. A long flexible bill allows these birds to probe in the soil and under leaf litter to search for food. They eat mainly earthworms, but also other insects and occasionally seeds. They nest on the ground under thick cover. The woodcock population has decreased since the 1960s, due to forest maturation and urban development. To learn more visit www.timberdoodle.org.



Eastern towhee

Another species of greatest conservation need, the Eastern towhee, breeds in Maine during the summer. It lives along forest edges, in overgrown fields and shrublands, and shrubby areas along powerlines and in backyards. Towhees spend most of their time near the ground. They find food by scratching and turning over leaf litter and feed on soft leaves and flower buds, insects, grass seeds, small fruits and berries, and acorns. Nests are built on the ground, beneath or in shrubs, or in tangles of plants such as grapes, honeysuckle, or greenbrier. The population of the Eastern towhee has decreased because of habitat loss.



Over 100 wildlife species are known to use shrubland and/or young forest habitat for food, raising young or shelter. Typical species include the blue spotted salamander, New England cottontail, yellow warbler, coral hairstreak butterfly, white-tailed deer, and gray catbird.

Shrubland Species of Greatest Conservation Need

These animals rely heavily on shrubland habitats. We need to create and renew habitat for these species through management efforts. (t) = Maine threatened list, (e) = Maine endangered list, and (T) = Federal threatened list.

American bittern	Chestnut-sided warbler	Rusty blackbird
American woodcock	Clayton's copper (e)	Spotted turtle (t)
Black racer (e)	Common nighthawk	Swamp darter
Blanding's turtle (e)	Eastern kingbird	Whip-poor-will
Blue-gray gnatcatcher	Eastern towhee	Willow flycatcher
Blue-spotted salamander	Loggerhead shrike	Wood turtle
Blue-winged warbler	New England cottontail (e)	
Brown thrasher	Olive-sided flycatcher	
Canada lynx (T)	Ringed boghaunter (t)	

For more information about a wildlife species of greatest conservation need, contact the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife at one of the regional offices:

Region A – Gray: (207) 657-2345 Bangor Research Office: (207) 941-4440
Region B – Sidney: (207) 547-5300

How you can help

For information on financial assistance programs that help landowners create or maintain shrubland habitat, contact the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program at (207) 827-6099, or the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service at (207) 990-9100. For more information about easements contact the Maine State Planning Office at (207) 624-7660 or your local land trust. For information about forest management practices on your land, call the Maine Forest Service at (207) 287-2791. If you are interested in managing for New England cottontails, call Rachel Carson National Wildlife Refuge at (207) 646-9226.



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