

Introduction

Wildlife and wildlife habitat are part of Maine’s way of life. Maine is known for its natural areas, which provide opportunities for experiencing and supporting a diversity of wildlife. The natural environment is part of Maine’s heritage. Increasingly, the pattern of development called sprawl is threatening this resource.

Why Should We Care?

Wildlife habitat (the place where animals live) provides the food, water, and protection that animals need to live and reproduce. Wildlife habitat is often considered an indicator of overall environmental health. Healthy wildlife habitats generally mean a healthy environment, for both animals and people.

People also benefit from natural areas (i.e. wildlife habitat) in a variety of ways, including:

- Recreation
- Increased property values
- Community character
- Flood protection
- Enhanced air and water quality
- Aesthetic and noise buffers
- Insect pest control

From an economic standpoint, wildlife habitats provide for opportunities such as hunting, trapping, fishing and wildlife viewing which generates over 1 billion dollars of yearly income for Maine communities.

More importantly, we should care about wildlife habitat for the sake of generations to come. Passing on a diverse and healthy environment to our children, and grandchildren, is up to us.

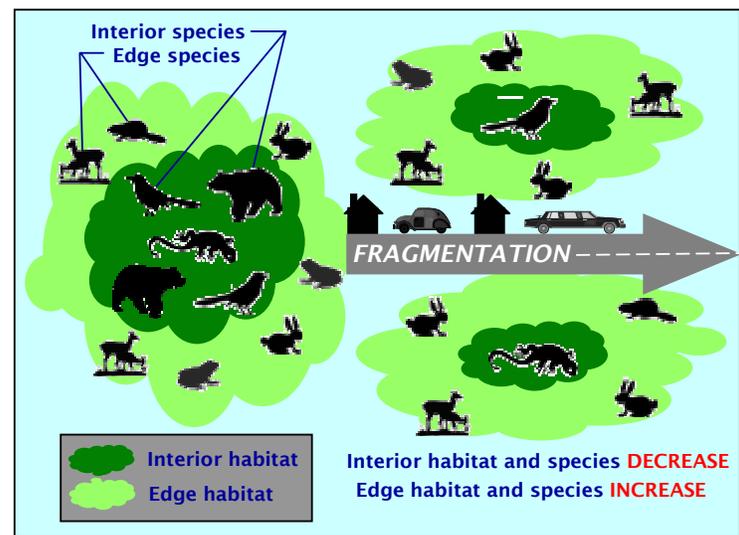
Many Maine communities are currently at a critical point where proactive measures are needed to sustain viable, wildlife habitat, for today and for the future.

Sprawl and Wildlife Habitat

Large, contiguous natural areas, such as grasslands and woodlands, are necessary for supporting healthy, diverse populations of wildlife. Generally, the larger the unfragmented block of land the greater the diversity of wildlife it can support. Sprawl, we now realize, in addition to replacing habitat with development, also fragments (i.e. breaks apart) wildlife habitat, and disrupts, and sometimes eliminates, wildlife travel corridors between habitats used for feeding or breeding.

When habitat is fragmented it changes, and often limits, the type of animals that can live there. Wildlife species respond differently to fragmentation depending on their tolerance to change. Habitat *generalists* like deer, blue jays, and raccoons, can readily adapt to changes in habitat. Conversely, the wood thrush, Blanding’s turtle, or meadowlark are habitat *specialists*, vulnerable to even the seasonal loss or degradation of habitats on which they depend. Too often, species are eliminated from an area because they are unable to move or adapt to change.

Fragmentation occurs in a variety of ways. Often there are several stages. Roads, buildings and power lines *divide* habitats, blocking or filtering animal movements and changing the plant types.



Adapted from Defenders of Wildlife graphic

Example of habitat fragmentation.

Information and Tools for Citizen Planners

Smaller developments further *perforate* habitat, creating additional edge habitats (see below) and further changing plant types. As perforations increase, **interior habitats** (core blocks of habitat) become even more vulnerable and segregated until only small isolated patches of habitat remain. These isolated patches often become areas that limit individual movements and prevent successful breeding.

Another consequence of sprawl is an increase in the number of **edge habitats** – the area where two habitat types meet (see illustration above). Edge habitats can occur naturally (e.g. where field and forest meet) or can occur from development such as roads and/or buildings. Edges tend to favor generalist wildlife species such as deer, raccoons and skunks, and exclude species that are more sensitive to predators, competition, noise and light pollution, or runoff contaminants. *By subdividing large natural areas into smaller, scattered pockets, sprawl increases edge habitat. The effect on wildlife is profound.*

What Can Be Done?

Change is inevitable, and development will continue to occur, so sustaining viable wildlife habitat will require education, proactive planning and community support.

The first step in building support for maintaining long-term, functional wildlife habitat is public education. **Citizens need information** to better understand and appreciate the vast array of physical, economic, ecological, cultural, and spiritual benefits and values of wildlife habitats. The partnership of state agencies and non-government organizations contributing to the *Beginning with Habitat* program has developed a variety of materials to help educate the public about the value of wildlife habitat. See: <http://www.beginningwithhabitat.org>

Proactive planning can mean either getting involved or considering appropriate management tools, or both. Land trusts and conservation commissions are an excellent way for people to get involved in their local area. For a listing of the 88

(and counting) land trusts statewide, visit the Maine Land Trust Network at: <http://www.mltn.org/>

Local decision makers also need tools that help identify important wildlife habitat, and can help implement appropriate growth and no-growth areas. On a broad scale, protecting viable wildlife habitat begins with identifying and protecting unfragmented blocks of at least 125 acres, with a minimum 50-75 acre core interior habitat, and linking these blocks with connecting corridors. At the same time there should be support for protecting large blocks (2,500-5,000 acres) to sustain regional-scale habitat needs. The *Beginning with Habitat* program (see website address above) can help with identifying these types of areas, and also provides other tools to help communities protect wildlife habitat.

Finally, **community support is needed** for planning initiatives regulating development in key block and corridor habitats such as the plan recently approved in Brunswick (see box); for supporting habitat connectivity when development occurs; for promoting land conservation policy initiatives; and for extending conservation planning outlooks beyond the typical 10-year comprehensive plan.

COMMUNITY SUPPORT FOR WILDLIFE HABITAT PROTECTION

The **Town of Brunswick** made a significant contribution towards advancing municipal and wildlife habitat planning in 2004 with the unanimous acceptance by the Town Council of a management strategy for future open space conservation. The strategy, as outlined in *A Proposed Approach for Wildlife Habitat and Corridor Protection* (December 2003), encourages development to mesh with a pre-identified network of habitat blocks and connecting corridors capable of supporting a wide range of forest dependent wildlife. The strategy also outlines an extensive menu of planning options that provide appropriate carrots – rather than sticks – as development incentives in appropriate growth zones and that avoid or limit development in quality wildlife habitats. To view the strategy go to <http://www.brunswickme.org/planning/index.htm> and under Special Projects click on "Review Draft Report of the Rural Smart Growth Advisory Committee".

With proper planning and land use management we can succeed in preserving a natural environment that functions as habitat for an abundant and diverse array of wildlife, and contributes to the quality of life we desire in Maine.