

## Application for Scientific Study in Baxter State Park

**Title:** Effects of forest management practices in the Acadian Northern Hardwood/Conifer Forests of Maine on forest bird communities, with emphasis on species of regional conservation priority and concern

**Name of Researchers:**

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**Researcher Credentials:**

*Dr. Cynthia S. Loftin* has over 20 years of experience partnering with federal and state natural resource managers in research that uses Geographic Information Systems to model spatial relationships of biota and their habitats with an emphasis on system restoration applications.

*Dr. Daniel Harrison* has studied effects of forest harvest practices on forest mammals in Maine's forests for more than 20 years and has long-term collaborative relationships with landowners on whose land many of the study plots in the proposed study will be conducted.

*Dr. Petra Bohall Wood* is an avian ecologist with more than 20 years of experience studying effects of partial harvesting on forest bird communities in the central Appalachian Mountains.

*Mr. Brian Rolek* has extensive experience conducting avian point count surveys in a variety of environments.

**Benefits to be derived from research:**

The Eastern Spruce-Hardwood Forest is the largest physiographic area in the Northeast region ([http://www.blm.gov/wildlife/pl\\_28sum.htm](http://www.blm.gov/wildlife/pl_28sum.htm)). This region, known as the "Northern Forest", supports numerous US Fish and Wildlife Service avian species of high conservation concern including Bay-breasted Warbler, Cape May Warbler, Blackburnian Warbler, Canada Warbler, and Rusty Blackbird that occupy coniferous and mixed coniferous-deciduous forest. Despite significant decreases in spruce-fir acreage in the last century owing to high-grading and conversion to mixed-wood or hardwood forest type, the State of Maine has the greatest acreage of spruce-fir forest in the continental U.S.—more than 40% of the total. As a result, Maine forests have supported a disproportionate share of U.S. populations of a suite of spruce-fir forest birds, e.g., 88% of the entire U.S. population of the Bay-breasted Warbler. Though many of these species have the bulk of their population in Canada, several species are of high conservation concern in the U.S. owing to declining populations. Our study examines relationships between forest bird community composition and forest harvest practices in coniferous forests of the Northern Forest region. The forest harvest approach in Maine shifted with passage of the Maine Forest Harvest Practices Act in 1991, followed by three citizens' initiatives to ban clear-cutting in the 1990s. The result has been a broad-scale shift from even-aged management and clear-cutting (with herbicide application to favor conifer regeneration), to increased reliance on partial harvesting, which now represents >96% of the total acreage harvested annually in Maine. Importantly, this shift has resulted in more than a doubling of the

number of acres harvested annually (more than 500,000 acres) within the commercially managed forests of northern, western, and eastern Maine. The cumulative effect of this footprint over nearly 20 years has resulted in a large decrease in the extent of mature conifer forest remaining in the landscape, along with greatly reduced sizes of residual mature patches of forest, increased predominance of deciduous regeneration, and increased fragmentation.

Mature conifer forest stands deemed to have late successional value currently comprise <2% of Maine's commercial forest landscape. Harvest selection for the valuable large conifers can shift composition of residual forests towards a more deciduous composition, particularly in stands where heavy partial harvesting has been practiced across multiple stand entries. The shifts in forest composition, reduction in extent of mature stands, and the increased fragmentation of mature residual forest patches that have been documented in this region during the past 20 years (Simons 1999, Simons et al. 2010) represent conditions that could limit avian breeding habitat capacity and long-term persistence within this region for numerous high priority species and alter the composition of the forest bird communities historically found in these forests.

Our study is evaluating the broad array of forest harvest practices applied in conifer forests of the region and describing the bird communities (species composition and densities) they host. Target species for this project include species of high conservation concern for the USFWS such as Bay-breasted Warbler, Cape May Warbler, and Canada Warbler. We are targeting conifer-dominated forest stands that were harvested during the past 17-40 years with a variety of practices as well as stands that have not been harvested in at least 60 years. Some of our study stands are part of a long-term, ongoing study on forest harvest effects on forest carnivores and their prey (Simons 2009, Scott 2009, Robinson 2006, Fuller and Harrison 2005, Homyack et al. 2004, 2005, 2007, Fuller et al. 2004, Payer and Harrison 2000, 2003, 2004). In this study, we are documenting the forest bird communities in a selection of these stands as well as several newly identified stands. This project will assess cumulative effects of multiple harvest intensities, the broad-scale shift to partial harvesting, and the resulting shifts in landscape composition occurring over the recent decades on breeding habitat availability for high priority avian species and the forest bird community as a whole. We are using the same methods to examine avian communities in conifer stands on refuges and adjacent lands in eastern Maine (Moosehorn NWR), eastern New Hampshire (Umbagog NWR), and northern Vermont (Nulhegan NWR) to put our research conducted in northern Maine into a broader scope of regional context.

#### **Detailed Description of Research:**

Specific objectives of our study are to:

- 1) Relate avian diversity and abundance to stand quality (indicated by stand vegetation structure and composition) in forests that have been harvested with a range of intensities along a temporal gradient within multiple landscapes across the Northern Forest region. These relationships will inform efforts to assess regional habitat capacity for forest birds in the Northern Forest region and will inform descriptions of suitable forest conditions for sustaining priority species at desired population levels.
- 2) Identify forest attributes and management techniques that are beneficial to our focal species to inform silviculture practices, and quantify relationships between avian community composition and forest harvest pattern in the landscape. These relationships will inform efforts to assess regional habitat capacity for forest birds in the Northern Forest region based on landscape-scale habitat components and patterns.
- 3) Examine trends in regional and national surveys of USFWS priority bird species and

relationships observed between avian species and forest conditions documented during this study to assess the degree to which forest conditions might be limiting habitat availability for these birds.

4) Assess the role that conservation lands in the Northern Forest region can play in providing habitat for priority forest birds and serve as demonstration areas for forest management practices that benefit these species.

Our previously established research sites outside the Park are part of an ongoing study on forest harvest effects on forest carnivores and are 15-20 ha in size. These study areas are 15-20 stands partitioned into harvest selection intensity and age categories ranging from no harvest, to selection harvest, to shelterwood harvest, and including regenerated clearcuts (17-40 years post-cut). This design allows data to be analyzed along a compositional and structural continuum to avoid arbitrary binning of data among harvest categories. These sites represent regenerating clearcuts 17-40 years post-harvest (n=17), selection harvests (n=8), and shelterwood overstory removals (n=2); vegetation in these areas were last measured in 2008 and 2009. Overstory removal within these stands was 0-98%, and the harvest history spans clearcuts that were harvested as early as 1973 to overstory removals as recent as 2003. Given that 11 of 13 stands representing mature mixed and conifer conditions have been harvested since our last vegetation surveys in 2008, we would like to add additional stands of mature forest that have not been harvested for >60 years.

**We would like to establish study areas (n=5 to 10) in the Scientific Forest Management Area (SFMA) of Baxter State Park that are mature softwood and mixed stands >60 years post-harvest. Because few sites remain elsewhere on the landscape that meet this age criteria, sites on Baxter are critical to allow assessment of the mature forest end of the disturbance gradient that exists on the landscape. Our initial focus will be within the SFMA, however, we also request permission to establish 2-3 study areas of mature softwood stands within the uncut forest matrix in the Preserve area of the Park to examine relationships between mature forest extent and the avian community.** Site selection, ground truthing of selected stands, and bird surveys with auditory point counts and remote acoustic recorders will occur during April-July 2013-2015. We will collect vegetation structure and composition data (e.g., overstory basal area, canopy closure, species, understory composition and structure, coarse woody debris condition) during July and August (estimated time on ground for vegetation surveys is 1-2 days per stand), and we will not remove or cut vegetation during these surveys.

Historical (1970-2007) changes in landcover and forest structure in Maine have been assessed by Simons (2009) and by Legaard and Sader (*in prep*) based on a satellite time series, which will be used to infer broad-scale habitat implications of the stand-scale relationships that are observed during this proposed study. Data collected during the study will reside at the USGS Maine Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit and the University of Maine. Data will be available for other purposes in consultation with the USGS Maine Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit and the University of Maine. Copies of all published reports will be provided to the Park. In addition, data and data summaries of information collected within the Park boundaries will be made available to the Park based upon a time table agreed upon by the Research team and Park staff.

#### *Sampling Methods:*

We will take a hierarchical approach to extensively and intensively survey forest stands during mid-May to late-June, the breeding season for forest birds in this region. Vegetation data

available from previously studied as well as newly selected stands will be related to avian metrics. The 5-10 newly selected stands in the SFMA and 2-3 in the Preserve will contain 3-5 sampling points each, dependent upon stand size. These additional stands will be sampled with point count surveys, and basic vegetation data will be collected such as tree stem density by size class and species. We will establish avian point count stations with  $\geq 250$  m between points. Each point will be surveyed twice in each of the 2013, 2014, and 2015 breeding seasons with standard 10 min point count surveys (Ralph et al. 1993). All individuals seen or heard will be recorded by species. Points will be sampled between a half hour after sunrise and 1030 on days with appropriate weather conditions. Observations will be categorized into five detection types (calling, displaying, flyovers, singing, visuals), and sex will be determined if possible. We will record detections by distance categories and one-minute time intervals to calculate detection probabilities (Farnsworth et al. 2005). We will deploy acoustic recorders periodically throughout the surveys and use the recording to assess bird song detectability by our survey crew, as well as to identify birds calling in the study stands outside the survey periods. We will use program DISTANCE to estimate density (Thomas et al. 2010) for species with a large enough sample size. For other species, we will calculate indices of relative abundance.

Because we will sample a wide range of habitat conditions resulting from a variety of harvest types and ages, we will use regression analyses to relate vegetation data to avian metrics. We also will explore a classification and regression trees (CART) approach for analyses. Context of the study areas will be described with spatial land cover data layers created in 2008 in Maine (LeGaard and Sader *in prep*) and publically available land cover layers for the other study areas. Updated land cover data will be identified as they become available, or the land cover data will be updated with ground truthing as appropriate. If data layers quantifying amount of mature forest in the landscape are deemed accurate, we will use program TITAN (Baker and King 2010) to calculate relative abundance thresholds for this metric for individual species and for the overall avian community. To evaluate response of the avian community to forest change in a broader context, we will seek out and assemble point count data sets for the Eastern Spruce-Hardwood Forest physiographic area collected over the last ~10 years. We will explore using available National Land Cover Data to examine change in mature forest to harvested forest to compare with these point count data. Survey data will be compared with archived data from the Park where available as well as with data from previous surveys conducted by Manomet Center for Conservation Sciences in mature and harvested forests in study areas in southwestern Maine. We also will examine our survey data in the context of regional breeding bird survey and population trend data to assess potential causes for regional trends based on stand- and landscape-scale habitat relationships identified during this study.

#### **Areas of the Park for the Research:**

We would like to identify ~5-10 mature (>60 years old) stands in the SFMA and 2-3 in the Preserve where we will conduct bird and vegetation surveys as described above. Site selection will be in consultation with the Resource Manager, the Park Naturalist, and other appropriate Park staff.

#### **Impact on the Park:**

There will be no effects of the sampling protocol on the Park's resources. We will mark our survey points with wooden stakes and surveyors flagging to quickly relocate study plots; these stakes and flags will be removed at the end of the study. No flagging will be placed within view of existing roads and walking trails.

#### **Budget:**

Our project is funded by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Cooperative Forest Research Unit, the U.S. Geological Survey Maine Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit, and the University of Maine. We are not requesting funds from Baxter State Park.

**Timetable for Research and Completion of Application:**

Field research will begin during 2013, 2014, and 2015 in early May and continue until September each year. The final project report and student PhD dissertation will be completed by December 2016.

**Date:** 31 December 2012

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