

How Young is that Forest?

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THIS MIGHT seem like an odd question. Most people look up at majestic trees reaching the sky and ask “How old is that tree?” Beyond the curiosity of the individual giants, I’d like to draw your focus back to the forested parcel that you own, and to the opposite question, “How young is that forest?”

From the wildlife habitat perspective, the individual tree may be important, but the forested parcel is the critical scale for most survival considerations. This is especially true for the large group of wildlife that needs young forests to survive and reproduce. Among the wildlife that will use young forests are deer and turkeys, but more important are the species that *require* young forests to thrive. These include our state bird, the ruffed grouse, the curious looking American woodcock, the iconic snowshoe hare, the uncommon Appalachian cottontail (not to be confused with its common cousin, the eastern cottontail), the vocally persistent whip-poor-will, and the rapidly declining golden-winged warbler. These forest citizens occupy a wide variety of sites, from wetland bottom forests to bony ridgetop forests, to vast northern hardwood forests, but their common bond is that those forests must be *young* forests.

How young is young?

Young is a relative term that varies based on the growing potential of the site and the particular species of trees on it. In essence, “young” relates more to the developmental state of the forest than its age in years. Young forests can be reverting old fields, abandoned mines or recently harvested forestland. What defines the young forest is the time between seedlings being established and the point when the canopy of new trees shades the understory so much that new seedlings can’t grow. In most of our forests, that is about 20 years.

Over the past century, our forests have been on a continuous trend into older age classes. Trees growing older seems normal, but in the past several decades, we have gone through a significant shift away from younger forests into older forests. The same trend is occurring throughout the Northeastern states. With that shift comes a change in which species of wildlife can flourish, and how many can be supported. Our young forests are now at their lowest percentage since the industrial revolution, and the decline in the associated wildlife is on the same trajectory. And for some, it has become critical.

What can be done?

The Game Commission manages forested Game Lands to create young forests, last year creating about 6,000 new acres of young forest habitat and maintaining another 140,000 acres of young forests and woody openings. The Department of Conservation and Natural Resources and Allegheny National Forest manage additional public land in young forest stages.

However, because more than 85 percent of the state is in private ownership, it’s vitally important for wildlife’s sake that more owners of private land create and maintain young forests on their properties.

There are more than 600,000 forest landowners in Pennsylvania, with the average forest ownership of about 20 acres. This presents a great opportunity for landowners, especially those who can manage 20 or more acres, that want to improve forestland for young forest dependent wildlife to have a real affect on the forest landscape.

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The most common forest management involves cutting existing trees. This can be done by commercial harvests for saw logs, wood chips or firewood, or a non-commercial harvest by a contractor or by the landowner. Depending on landowner goals, many options may be available, ranging from clearcutting, to seed-tree harvests, to thinnings to various shelterwood harvests. The goal is always to regenerate a new crop of trees, and the appropriate harvest depends on the site qualities and trees present. Wildlife and forestry professionals are available to discuss these options with landowners. If you're interested, start by contacting your regional PGC office and asking for the private lands biologist.

Why should I do it?

Pennsylvania has a long history of harvesting forests. It has not always been done sustainably, and in many cases we are still paying the price for poor timber management, but well planned timber harvests are a great way of creating needed wildlife habitat. In the past this type of habitat creation has been called Early Successional Habitat or ESH, and has been done to encourage wildlife that prefer it, like white-tailed deer and black bear, but it is also a habitat requirement for many other wildlife that have declining populations.

How you manage your forest can make a big difference in your local area for many of these wildlife species. And on a larger scale, in combination with other private landowners and public land managers, these habitat projects can create core areas for wildlife on the larger landscape scale, and even at the regional scale.

Pennsylvania will most likely represent the largest component of young forest habitat in the Northeast, and will become the core or last available habitat for many species in the coming decades. But we can't do it alone, we need your willingness to manage your forests to make it happen.

How much does it cost?

In most cases, nothing. The commercial saw log harvest can generate significant revenue, depending on the acreage and tree composition. Commercial chipping can also generate revenue, but usually the area needs to be larger, around 50 acres, for companies to be interested. Non-commercial harvests and thinnings can be done simultaneously with a commercial harvest to balance the cost with the commercial revenue. Finally, there are habitat programs that can help you achieve your young forest goals. If you own a forested or old field area that is wet much of the year, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's "Partners for Fish and Wildlife" has funding to assist with restoring your property to a young forest or non-forested wetland to benefit American woodcock and golden-winged warblers.

Organizations such as the Wildlife Management Institute, Ruffed Grouse Society and Pheasants Forever have experts that can provide technical assistance. If you are a Hunter Access Cooperator with the Game Commission, or are willing to enroll, we currently have funding to fully implement forest habitat projects (greater than 10 acres) on private lands. With this program, contractors are hired by the Game Commission to implement the project, minimizing the workload and expense for the landowner. To get more information on our Hunter Access Program habitat initiative, contact the PGC region office for your area, or the author at the Harrisburg headquarters office.