

Guidelines for Managing Utility Rights-of-way for Birds and New England Cottontails
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Shrubland birds - The following guidelines are intended for sustaining habitat for early successional bird species that require low, woody vegetation dominated by shrubs. Most bird species that require open grassland habitat dominated by grasses and forbs are unlikely to occur on powerline rights-of-way (ROWs) except in areas where the powerline crosses large grasslands because these species require large expanses of their preferred habitat. They generally do not occur on narrow corridors of grassland habitat found on utility rights-of-way running through other habitats, so they do not regularly occur on mowed powerlines.

1. Shrubland specialists require habitat dominated by shrubs with a low density of trees or no trees. Some species such as Blue-winged Warbler and Indigo Bunting are more abundant in habitats with a mosaic of dense shrubs and herbaceous vegetation. ROWs managed by Integrated Vegetation Management can therefore provide appropriate habitat for these species. Most of these species have shown major population declines throughout the Northeast during the past 50 years, and much of their remaining habitat is on powerline corridors managed with Integrated Vegetation Management to create a stable shrub community. When vegetation is managed on corridors, the shrub cover should not be reduced by more than 30%.
2. Shrubland specialists tend to have lower densities in both very narrow powerline corridors (as demonstrated by comparisons of ROWs in the range of 15 – 78 m in width in central Massachusetts) and in very wide corridors (as demonstrated for a range of 43 – 155 m in width in southeastern Connecticut). Although ROWs with an intermediate width support a higher density of breeding shrubland birds, wide corridors may support a greater total number because they cover a larger area. Narrow corridors have both a low density and low overall abundance, however, so these sites might be more appropriate for creating and maintaining herbaceous habitats that support pollinators.
3. Both density and nest success of shrubland specialists tend to be lower on ROWs that traverse heavily developed areas or agricultural areas than on ROWs that traverse extensive forests. This is probably due to the greater density of nest predators and parasitic cowbirds on ROWs close to residential development or farmland. Sustaining shrubland habitat along powerlines that run through large expanses of protected forest should therefore be a high priority. Some large forest blocks with ROWs that warrant this type of management are listed below. Powerline corridors in residential and farming areas might be appropriate sites for maintaining meadow vegetation that supports a high diversity of herbaceous plants and pollinators.
4. Habitat can be improved by removing invasive, introduced plants that frequently do not provide good food sources for shrubland birds. Poison ivy and greenbrier should not be removed, however, except when they are directly interfering with access to poles.

These are native species and they are important sources of food and shelter for shrubland birds.

New England cottontails - The guidelines for managing habitat for New England cottontails along powerline corridors are generally consistent with the recommendations for shrubland birds with the following exceptions:

1. The survival rate of New England cottontails increases as the area of continuous shrubland increases. Wider powerline corridors are therefore probably better than narrower corridors, and there is no evidence for an optimum intermediate width. Also, even very narrow corridors are important to New England cottontails for dispersal between shrubland areas, however. This is less important for shrubland birds, which readily colonize even extremely isolated habitat patches.
2. In New England cottontail management areas, it is not advisable to simultaneously remove large areas of multiflora rose and other invasive shrubs if this leaves the local cottontail population without sufficient cover. And as for shrubland birds, total shrub cover should not be reduced by more than 30% during management.
3. When gravel pads are installed on powerline ROWs, a 25-foot vegetated corridor should be retained to permit safe passage of rabbits past the pad.

Regions that are particularly important for shrubland bird conservation:

The following areas encompass large blocks of forest where conservation of birds on powerline corridors should have an especially high priority. All of these areas are traversed by powerline corridors. Important Bird Areas are recognized as especially important for protecting bird species of high conservation concern. Forest Focal Areas are regions where the goal is to preserve large blocks of continuous forest in order to sustain a high diversity of forest birds and other organisms, including species that are currently common in the state. Many of these species will decline if forest fragmentation occurs everywhere in the state.

Landscape-level Important Bird Areas:

Lyme Forest Block – ROWs in East Lyme, Lyme, East Haddam
Meshomasic Forest Block – ROWs in Hebron and Glastonbury
Natchaug Forest Block – ROWs in Hampton and Chaplin
Shepaug Forest Block – ROWs in Washington
White Memorial Conservation Area – ROWs in Litchfield

Forest Focal Areas:

Greater Bent – ROWs in Newtown and Southbury
Salmon River – ROWs in East Haddam and Haddam
Cockaponis – ROWs in Litchfield, Harwinton, and New Hartford
Naugatuck State Forest/West Rock Ridge/Sleeping Giant – ROWs in Oxford, Beacon Falls, Naugatuck, and Hamden