

Success Comes From Working Together

WISCONSIN YOUNG FOREST PARTNERSHIP PROMOTES STATEWIDE CONSERVATION

By Jeremy J. Holtz

The great inventor and businessman Henry Ford is credited with saying, “Coming together is a beginning; keeping together is progress; working together is success.” His words resonate when I think back on the launch of the Wisconsin Young Forest Partnership. The collaborative effort began over a decade ago as a small group of people with a common goal: improving early successional forest habitat. Today, it is a large, stable partnership that continues to expand in scope and scale to address habitat conservation across Wisconsin.

The road to success wasn’t straightforward, but along the way we learned a lot of lessons.

The beginning: coming together

In the 1990s, declines in American woodcock (*Scolopax minor*) numbers raised concerns about the birds’ future. Breeding woodcock in Wisconsin and throughout the upper Great Lakes region need natural or manmade forest openings for singing grounds and nocturnal habitat in close proximity to heavy cover from early succession growth or second-growth hardwoods with densities of 14,600 to 49,000 stems per hectare (Kelley et al. 2008). Earthworms, their preferred food source, are a critical determinant for woodcock use of such sites.

Representatives from federal and state wildlife agencies, the Wildlife Management Institute (WMI), the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, the Ruffed Grouse Society and others gathered in 2001 to address the bird’s habitat needs and formed the Woodcock Task Force. After much work, the group published the [Woodcock Conservation Plan](#) in 2008. In it, they identified range-wide habitat for breeding, migrating and wintering woodcock, set targets for woodcock populations, and defined habitat acreage goals.

Using this plan, Wisconsin wildlife biologists joined colleagues in Minnesota and Michigan to form the Upper Great Lakes Young Forest Initiative. Together they identified high-priority management zones in the three-state region based on predicted woodcock abundance, potential habitat, proportion of landscape in aspen and land-ownership patterns. They also developed a set of optimum methods or best management practices (BMPs) for creating young forest habitat on the landscape (WMI 2009) through planting of native shrubs and trees, controlled burning, and other habitat management techniques.

These efforts also benefitted other wildlife: birds, such as the golden-winged warbler (*Vermivora chrysoptera*), brown thrasher (*Toxostoma rufum*), and whip-poor-will (*Caprimulgus vociferous*); mammals, like bobcats (*Lynx rufus*) and cottontail rabbits (*Sylvilagus* spp.); and reptiles like bog turtles (*Glyptemys muhlenbergii*) and wood turtles (*Glyptemys insculpta*). The success of the habitat management techniques became part of the WMI’s 2010 publication, [Best Management Practices for Woodcock and Associated Bird Species](#).

Getting landowners on board

An analysis by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources Bureau of Wildlife Management showed that private landowners held important habitat for woodcock and golden-winged warblers. As a result, the agency launched an initiative in 2011 to educate land owners about early successional forest management. The North Central Wisconsin Young Forest Initiative served as a pilot project in six north-central counties with high potential for

▼ The American woodcock population has steadily declined over the last half century due in part to degradation of important early successional habitat that includes quaking aspen (*Populus tremuloides*) and alder (*Alnus* spp.) in Wisconsin. Habitat restoration work for the species laid the groundwork for the birth of the Wisconsin Young Forest Partnership.



Credit: Michele Woodford, WDNR



habitat restoration — Oneida, Langlade, Lincoln, Taylor, Rusk and Price — selected by spatial analysis of predicted woodcock abundance, proportion of area covered by aspen, potential habitat index and ownership patterns (Potter 2010). Areas with significant overlap of these features became conservation focal areas. With grant funding from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and administered by American Bird Conservancy, dedicated staff developed demonstration areas and conducted forest landowner outreach and educational workshops.

In its first year, the project was expanded to develop educational materials, conduct site visits to private forest properties and direct landowners to existing funding sources provided by partners such as WMI and the Ruffed Grouse Society. The Natural Resources Conservation Service Environmental Quality Improvement Program and the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program also contributed significant resources and knowledge to help get the program up and running in its early stages.

The early response was very positive. In its first two years, the project generated significant interest from public and private forest landowners. Over 700 landowners attended workshops, talked to staff by telephone, received packets of information by mail, retrieved information from the initiative's website, or arranged to have a professional biologist or forester visit their property. By the end of the trial period, 155 previously unengaged landowners started to receive written management plans for an aggregated 20,000 acres of forest habitat. With that success, the existing partner agencies and organizations saw the potential to develop a more formal partnership that could advocate for and promote management of early successional forest habitat more widely in the state.

As the word on the project's success spread, other agencies and organizations also showed interest in engaging with the effort and formalizing a working relationship. The group developed a new organizational structure and drafted a memorandum of understanding that allowed all the partners to pool their resources to more broadly promote statewide young forest habitat conservation. These negotiations culminated with the formation of the Wisconsin Young Forest Partnership (WYFP) in December 2013.

Keeping together is progress

The overarching goal of the WYFP today is to establish a landscape-scale conservation approach that can deliver young forest habitat on suitable lands



Credit: Jeremy Holtz, WDNR

— regardless of ownership — across Wisconsin. As it got started, the founding members looked back to glean lessons learned and recognize successes in order to identify objectives for the new partnership (See box, page 35). Contributions at the local level included better timber and vegetation management. The improved habitat also led to outdoor recreational opportunities to view and pursue wildlife. These activities not only benefitted local businesses, but they also increased the number of people taking part in bird counts, which helps WDNR document species in the state and contributes to range data.

We promote WYFP's activities to Wisconsin residents as a means to support diverse forest landscapes and create young forest in designated conservation areas. In addition, we encourage using BMPs for wildlife species that could directly or indirectly benefit from such habitat management.

Until the formation of this partnership, commercial timber management practices and natural disturbances created young forest habitat; but, the locations, sizes and distances between these forests were random. This unmanaged approach also created islands of habitat with large gaps between areas that reduced the value and sustainability of these habitat islands. In a statewide-landscape approach, habitat is created in a sustainable manner that also provides connectivity for wildlife species found there.

The WYFP strives to manage young forest habitats where appropriate. This means habitat management outreach is focused on those early successional species that require periodic disturbance to remain vigorous,

▲ **WDNR forester Jean-Michel Gillen discusses forest management options with David Kohlbeck, a private forest landowner in Oneida County, Wis., in fall 2014. A cornerstone of the Wisconsin Young Forest Partnership's private land outreach program is that every landowner comes away with sound advice and a written habitat management plan.**



Credit: Chris Thielman, WDNR

▲ Ruffed Grouse Society Regional Biologist Gary Zimmer, retired, stands on the deck of a forestry mower after giving a brief demonstration in a dense stand of regenerating aspen on the Woodboro Lakes Wildlife Area in Oneida County, Wis. Staff members from the Wisconsin Young Forest Partnership attended the demonstration to learn the practical application of recommended management practices and how to effectively communicate them to private forest landowners.

▼ Eleven months after aspen trees were harvested on the Woodboro Lakes Wildlife Area in Oneida County, Wis., in June 2015, the natural regeneration and rapid regrowth of the harvested stands make this an appealing habitat management option for private forest landowners. Several “leave trees” tower above the new growth, which are feeding areas and song posts for golden-winged warblers and several other bird species. A five-year-old aspen stand is visible in the background.



Credit: Jeremy Holtz, WDNR

not on climax-successional species or old-growth forest. In defined conservation focal areas, we intensify habitat management efforts for both woodcock and golden-winged warblers. The goals of these efforts are those set by the American Woodcock Step Down Plan (Cooper 2008) and the Golden-winged Warbler Conservation Plan (Roth et al. 2012).

How working together works

When the WYFP was formed, the founding members did not want its survival to rely on support for any single member organization or agency. They also wanted to operate by consensus with fewer legal strictures than those of joint ventures. To do so, they agreed to a list of reference terms, somewhat similar to bylaws, setting up the basic structure and procedures for the group. One of them was that any organization could participate in the general partnership, but only a partner that signs the memorandum of understanding could have a representative on the steering committee.

In general, the WYFP operates by consensus, but in the case of a vote, one vote is allowed per partner. The result is a fairly robust and involved steering committee that elects three members from its ranks who serve as an executive committee. This group conducts the day-to-day business of the partnership and determines which issues can be handled outside of the steering committee and which must be brought to a meeting for deliberation. As an organization, WYFP does not employ any staff or hold funds; all members are employed by their respective agencies and organizations and conduct partnership business within the scope of their regular duties.

As with all natural resource management programs, we measure accomplishments in quantifiable terms. We might report hectares cut or burned, linear kilometers of road or firebreak installed, and estimates of the number of individual animals or breeding pairs of birds. More recently, we started tracking other parameters such as acres treated, landowners contacted, management plans written and workshops conducted. These numbers are reported to partners on a semiannual basis.

Natural resource professionals know, however, that “working together” is not always a utopic existence where nothing ever goes awry and there are never any philosophical disagreements. WYFP tries to distribute the work and credit equally. Our partners come from private industry and the non-profit, NGO



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realm as well as county, state, and federal agencies (See box below). They all have different priorities, responsibilities, funding levels, focal/target species and staff availability. Inevitably, we have minor disagreements and occasional strife as each partner strives to balance their own particular resources. Sometimes partners compete for the same limited funds or disagree over priority wildlife species or preferred timber species of focus. But we always come back to the table, lay out the concerns, and with the help of the executive committee, work to find common ground that all parties find amenable.

Success comes from how we continue to move forward together after moments of strife and in spite of disagreements. Our partners can all be counted on for letters of support, attendance and participation at meetings, and matching or leveraging grants when needed. They provide funding to the greatest possible extent to operate the partnership, hire project staff and contractors, update our website, conduct site visits, write plans and complete field work. While no single partner has unlimited or unrestricted funds, at the end of the day the aggregated dollars add up to enough to provide years of landowner support, assistance and habitat management. One partner might only have a couple thousand dollars for publications or web support; another might have several thousand dedicated to habitat work. And still others might only be able to provide staff time for mailings or site visits.

After starting as a small pilot project with a \$15,000 grant, WYFP has grown to a healthy functional partnership that has the ability to leverage significant funds and resources. Partners have each leveraged funds, either on their own or through grants, to put more than \$1 million to work for landscape conservation in Wisconsin.

Ford was right

I am confident that Henry Ford considered the number of automobiles coming off the assembly line a measure of his success. His quote, however, is a testimony to the fact that working together as a group to accomplish an objective is indeed a measure of true success.

Any one of our partners may have had either the funding to do some habitat work, some staff time to dedicate to communicating with landowners, or knowledge or expertise in the areas of marketing, outreach, and species or habitat management. In

the realm of stewardship, these fall under the three categories of time, talent and treasure. The success of working together as a partnership lies in bringing together all three categories. Not only are accomplishment benchmarks attained, but stability and longevity appear more likely when the workload and costs are spread across the collective. When one partner loses a funding source or experiences staff turnover, typically another steps up to help provide stopgap dollars or interim staff time to help keep the partnership moving forward.

The strength of the Wisconsin Young Forest Partnership truly dwells in the participation of each organization and representative; none of us had all the necessary resources on our own. We have made our share of mistakes and needed to make adjustments to turn small failures into successes. ■



The Workings of a Wisconsin Partnership

The Wisconsin Young Forest Partnership takes a landscape-level approach to creating early successional forest habitat. Its four goals are to:

- Create young forest habitat for high conservation priority declining wildlife species such as American woodcock and golden-winged warbler.
- Increase active forest management on private lands.
- Support local economies by promoting a healthy timber industry.
- Improve outdoor recreation opportunities to view and pursue wildlife.

Partners include: Louisiana Pacific, Wisconsin Wildlife Federation, Natural Resources Conservation Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Forest Service, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, Wisconsin County Forest Association, American Bird Conservancy, National Wild Turkey Federation, Pheasants Forever, Ruffed Grouse Society/American Woodcock Society, Wildlife Management Institute, The Forestland Group LLC, Society of American Foresters – Wisconsin Chapter, and Wisconsin Bird Conservation Initiative.

To learn more, visit WYFP's website at <http://www.youngforest.org/wi>. There you can check out a three-part outreach video, read landowner testimonials and see the variety of wildlife species that rely on early successional habitat.