

Forest Habitats for Wildlife

Nova Scotia's tall, natural forests, with their shady, damp forest floors, serve as hosts for many seasonal and resident wildlife species. Tiny warblers and flycatchers are but a few of Nova Scotia's 65 birds that spend most of their spring and summer in mature forests before winging their way back to South and Central America. Each forest species has particular nesting and feeding needs in order to raise their young here.

For example, ovenbirds skillfully weave a nest on the ground within large forested areas. It's important for them to locate it far away from woodland edges that attract prowling skunks, raccoons, foxes, crows, bobcats, housecats, and bluejays. Barred owls, on the other hand, are large birds tending eggs and nestlings in old trees with trunks that offer fist-sized openings to enter a substantial hollow space. Goshawks are another sizeable, fierce, forest-hunting species that prefers to nest in deep woods.

Creatures with four furry paws reside in woodlands year-round. They find shelter and food in the forest and under fallen and uprooted trees. Hiding places also include holes in the ground, tree cavities and among mosses and lichens that adorn older trees and undisturbed forest floors. Flying squirrels may find winter accommodation in a nest hole made and subsequently abandoned by woodpeckers. White-tailed deer frequently move in groups to winter in valley bottoms and south-facing slopes sheltered by mature softwood stands. That helps escape the cold. When deep snows limit their travel, nearby access to younger forests for food becomes paramount to their survival.

Falling leaves and temperatures combined with shorter days prompt adult speckled trout to begin moving upstream to cool headwater streams that flow from forests. Spawning in these babbling brooks, they release golden orbs into clean gravel bottoms. The eggs overwinter, with young fish emerging from the gravel in the spring. Young trout remain in small streams over the summer to grow.

Yellow-spotted salamanders roam the forest floor near woodland pools, wetlands and lakes at night in search of spiders, snails, slugs and beetles. Their moist, porous skins depend on clean air and the damp environment found in healthy forests.

“The Path We Share”, Nova Scotia's Natural Resources Strategy, has a Forests plan for 2011-2020. It suggests an ecosystem approach to “maintain healthy forests” in part by “reducing clearcutting to no more than 50% of all harvests”. Do sanctioned clearcuts and the new “partial” cuts maintain habitats for wildlife in ecologically-healthy forests?

“Partial” cuts can mean almost anything under the new policy, from cutting one tree to harvests that leave 60% of the area with chest-high trees, and the remaining 40% totally bare. The policy

effectively transfers the ecologically-degrading clearcutting attributes of dryness, heat and wind exposure to the “partial” cut category. Trees left behind are often short and low-grade. The valuable, long-lived species that developed there over thousands of years and still offer excellent wildlife habitats can be cut. And the new clearcut definition is driving harvesters to cut just beyond the new, deceptive and complicated definition of a clearcut to render it a “partial” cut instead. It's playing with words, not better forest policy and offers no help to mature forest wildlife.

The fast pace of forest harvests still has warblers, flycatchers and others returning to our province only to find previous nesting and feeding sites gone. Finding unoccupied forest elsewhere is unlikely. Many birds adapted to mature forests seek their food in higher, middle or lower portions of tall tree canopies. Young forests lack that critical vertical element. Ovenbirds may return to find a forest fragmented by harvesting, with forest edges nearby. They may have to nest near an edge and lose their eggs or nestlings to a plundering predator.

The average songbird territory is roughly a hectare, or 100 metres by 100 metres. Fit that breeding space into a 20 metre wide buffer strip of trees left along a watercourse. Barred owls may return in late winter to find their large nest tree has been cut down. The adults may survive, but are no longer able to rear young. With the goshawks' hunting forest removed, and a small buffer of trees left around the nest (that can later be partially cut) their territory becomes more suitable for red-tailed hawks. There are fewer and fewer deep woods left for them.

Flying squirrels and many other mammals need standing trees with holes or denning logs on the ground. Moving to a young forest without cavities and old logs is not an option. White-tailed deer that find their wintering area cut may move up or down the watershed searching for a suitable new site. They may be displaced entirely and move some distance to private land near and around towns. If the forest around their original wintering ground is cut and then herbicided to favour softwood growth, that spells starvation for them. Abandoned deer yards are then harvested.

Speckled trout eggs overwintering in woodland streams are frequently sealed over with silt released from legal forest harvest operations. The eggs die for lack of oxygen. The narrow ribbons of special management zones left along waterways are political compromises worked out between forest industries and governments. They do little to protect the natural world and their laws are rarely enforced. When young trout hatch in the spring, massive spring runoffs generated by recent clearcuts and partial cuts can cause water to flush quickly downstream, leaving the streambed dry and young trout dead in the summer.

Yellow-spotted salamander ponds and damp forest environments are exposed to direct sunlight and forest fragmentation by harvests using the current guidelines. Populations can be isolated by cutting patterns. As forest soils and ponds dry out, salamander populations wither and quietly collapse.

To summarize, current partial cut and clearcut harvest methods enact too drastic a change for nature and forest wildlife. The increased sunlight, heat and wind-drying effects on harvested landscapes render them inhospitable for wildlife species that live in forests with mature trees. Thirty and forty year cutting rotations are eliminating the older trees needed by wildlife for survival.

Flattening forests to produce cheap pulp, without factoring air and water pollution into production costs, and the large-scale burning of trees, so-called biomass, to subsidize industry energy costs amounts to single-minded forestry. It's about profit.

It is no "Path We Share" with wildlife.

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