

Preserve Wildlife Habitat

“ . . . a decline or elimination of one or more wildlife species from an area has associated consequences. It is more than just a simple decline in local wildlife; it is a disruption of the balance of nature which has far reaching impact”

Unplanned Development

When we think of wildlife habitat loss, the common assumption is that development is the cause and more development will surely further erode the remaining habitat. This is not entirely wrong, but it is more accurate to say that unplanned development is a major cause of wildlife habitat loss. Unplanned development results in the elimination and/or fragmentation of natural habitats. Fragmentation of habitat occurs when roads, utility corridors, buildings, and parking areas break the landscape into smaller blocks, leaving less undeveloped space for wildlife. As undeveloped space is reduced, various forms of wildlife begin to disappear because they no longer have the habitat size sufficient to support their existence in the area.

Almost all of the non-marine animal species on the Maine Endangered and Threatened Species List are native to southern and coastal areas of the state, the same areas that are under the most development pressure.¹ As development pressures increase, wildlife species that are unable to adapt begin to disappear from the landscape. In a completely developed landscape the wildlife population is diminished to gulls, English sparrows, skunks, pigeons, raccoons, and a few others that are able to adapt to urban living. The disappearance of wildlife from a landscape is also a signal that other environmental changes are occurring, such as diminished water quality and a reduction in plant species. Some species found in Bremen such as the bald eagle and musk turtle are already on the threatened and endangered species list, and over fifty-five percent of all frogs, toads, and salamanders are listed as rare, threatened, or endangered in at least one northeastern state.⁵ These creatures need all the protection we can provide. The more you think about this, the more you realize it is true that the existence of all life is linked.



Table 1² shows the amount of undeveloped land necessary to support various wildlife species. It should be noted that most of the animals can survive in a smaller block than optimum if suitable undeveloped corridors are available to allow movement through developed areas to adjacent undeveloped blocks. Suitable corridors are different for different species. Areas that provide cover, terrain such as ridge lines, and riparian areas along streams and wetlands are generally good corridors.

Table 1

Habitat Block Size Requirements For Wildlife in Maine

	Tier 5 1 - 19 Acres	Tier 4 20 - 99 Acres	Tier 3 100 - 499 Acres	Tier 2 500 - 2500 Acres	Tier 1 Undeveloped
Raccoon	Raccoon	Raccoon	Raccoon	Raccoon	Raccoon
		Hare	Hare	Hare	Hare
					Coyote
Small Rodent	Small Rodent	Small Rodent	Small Rodent	Small Rodent	Small Rodent
	Porcupine	Porcupine	Porcupine	Porcupine	Porcupine
					Bobcat
	Beaver	Beaver	Beaver	Beaver	Beaver
					Black Bear
Squirrel	Squirrel	Squirrel	Squirrel	Squirrel	Squirrel
	Weasel	Weasel	Weasel	Weasel	Weasel
		Mink	Mink	Mink	Mink
					Fisher
	Woodchuck	Woodchuck	Woodchuck	Woodchuck	Woodchuck
		Deer	Deer	Deer	Deer
Muskrat	Muskrat	Muskrat	Muskrat	Muskrat	Muskrat
				Moose	Moose
Red Fox	Red Fox	Red Fox	Red Fox	Red Fox	Red Fox
Songbirds	Songbirds	Songbirds	Songbirds	Songbirds	Songbirds
		Sharp-Shinned Hawk	Sharp-Shinned Hawk	Sharp-Shinned Hawk	Sharp-Shinned Hawk
				Bald Eagle	Bald Eagle
Skunk	Skunk	Skunk	Skunk	Skunk	Skunk
		Cooper's Hawk	Cooper's Hawk	Cooper's Hawk	Cooper's Hawk
		Harrier	Harrier	Harrier	Harrier
		Broad-Winged Hawk	Broad-Winged Hawk	Broad-Winged Hawk	Broad-Winged Hawk
			Goshawk	Goshawk	Goshawk
		Kestrel	Kestrel	Kestrel	Kestrel
			Red-Tailed Hawk	Red-Tailed Hawk	Red-Tailed Hawk
		Horned Owl	Horned Owl	Horned Owl	Horned Owl
			Raven	Raven	Raven
		Barred Owl	Barred Owl	Barred Owl	Barred Owl
		Osprey	Osprey	Osprey	Osprey
		Turkey Vulture	Turkey Vulture	Turkey Vulture	Turkey Vulture
		Turkey	Turkey	Turkey	Turkey
Most Reptiles	Most Reptiles	Reptiles	Reptiles	Reptiles	Reptiles
	Garter Snake	Garter Snake	Garter Snake	Garter Snake	Garter Snake
Most Amphibians	Most Amphibians	Amphibians	Amphibians	Amphibians	Amphibians
		Wood Frog	Wood Frog	Wood Frog	Wood Frog

The group of animals presented for each acreage level assumes that development along the block perimeters (roads) is heavy enough to prevent movement of animals between adjoining blocks of open space. Reproduced from the Maine Environmental Priorities Project.

In Bremen we are lucky to have large contiguous tracts of undeveloped land which support numerous forms of wildlife. If we plan future buildings and roads properly, we can retain what many other towns have lost or are losing. Simply put, proper planning means preserving enough undeveloped land to support the environment and wildlife we already have. Along with protecting undeveloped property, we must also be sensitive to various nesting sites,

deer wintering areas, and feeding areas necessary to various animals and birds. More detail on this may be found in the Wildlife Habitat section of the Bremen Comprehensive Plan.

Part of proper planning is to identify and protect unfragmented blocks of land of at least 125 acres. These blocks do not necessarily have to consist of just a single parcel, but can be multiple connected parcels of undeveloped land. Additionally, we should identify and preserve larger tracts of at least 2,500 acres.

Among the measures used to protect/preserve wildlife habitat are easements, outright acquisition, acquisition through a bargain sale, land donation, and multiple lot requirements.

Conservation Easements

A conservation easement³ is a legal agreement between the landowner and a land trust that permanently limits the uses of the land in order to protect its conservation value. The land owner continues to own and use the land and may sell it or pass it on to heirs. When an easement is written, the landowner does give up some rights associated with the land; however, these are rights that each individual landowner agrees to. Every easement is written to satisfy the desires of both the landowner and easement holder (land trust). In some cases a portion of a property is exempted from the easement and therefore has no restrictions. Easements may also specify that specific types of structures may be built in specific locations on the property. Land covered by an easement is not required to allow public access. To sum it up, while an easement will protect the land's conservation value, it can be flexible enough to also meet the financial and personal goals of the landowner.

An additional benefit to creating a conservation easement that meets federal tax code requirements is the associated federal income tax reduction provided for in the recently enacted Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008. Under this Act, the owner of a qualifying easement may take a tax deduction equal to 50% of their adjusted gross income for the current year and fifteen additional years. For example, a landowner who has \$50,000 in adjusted gross income puts property valued at \$1 million in a conservation easement. The new rules allow that landowner a deduction of \$25,000 for the year of the donation and then for an additional fifteen years. That is a total of \$400,000 in deductions.⁴

In order to qualify for this tax benefit the easement has to be established prior to December 31, 2009. For more detail on the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008, see the Land Trust Alliance web site (www.lta.org).

Land Acquisition

Acquisition by local government or a land trust⁵ is another way to insure protection of wildlife habitat on a property. Funds to purchase property can be raised through public appeal, appropriation of town funds, or application to private foundations or public funds. The State of Maine administers funds which can be used for land acquisition. Some of them are: The Land and Water Conservation Fund, administered by the Maine Department of Conservation; Maine

Outdoor Heritage Fund, administered by the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife; and Land For Maine's Future Program, administered by the State Planning Office. Information on federal grants for land protection is available through the USFWS Gulf of Maine Coastal Program. Maine Coast Heritage Trust and The Nature Conservancy may be contacted for information on private funding sources.

A bargain sale provides both income and a tax benefit to the seller and lower than market value price for the buyer. In this scenario the land is sold for less than fair market value, giving the seller a tax deduction based on the difference between the land's fair market value and its sale price. The benefit to the land trust (buyer) is a more affordable price.

If an owner wants to control land during his or her lifetime, but make sure it is protected after death, it can be donated to a land trust in a will or through a reserved life estate. Both options permit a land owner or other designated person(s) to live on and use the land during their lifetime. At the end of the owner's or designated person's life-title to the property goes to the land trust. The reserved life estate has provisions for an income tax benefit for the land owner at the time the reserved life estate is established.

Protective Measures

As noted earlier the idea is not to stop development, but to stop unplanned development. A popular conception is that establishing minimum lot sizes will help conserve wildlife habitat and a rural atmosphere. Actually, the opposite is usually true. Minimum lots of, for example, five acres do create private space for the landowner, but over time enough of those five-acre parcels create a low density suburban development and counter any efforts to preserve rural character and wildlife habitat.

An alternative that may overcome the minimum lot size problem is the establishment of multiple lot requirements for Bremen. One set of lot size/building requirements would be applicable in areas designated as rural, while the balance of the town would have a different set of development requirements. Building requirements in the rural sections of town would be designed to conserve wildlife habitat, whether it is woods, field, swamp or other landscape type.

An additional way we can help protect wildlife habitat is to be aware of and defend those areas already designated as high-value animal habitat such as deer wintering areas. These areas are shown on map number two produced by the Beginning With Habitat program. Local ordinances should be worded to encourage landowners and/or applicants to contact Maine Natural Areas Programs, a division of the Maine Department of Conservation (www.state.me.us/doc/) and Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife (www.mefishwildlife.com) prior to submittal of development applications to determine potential habitat impact and steer development away from sensitive areas.

We all have to understand that the loss of any wildlife species may not in itself be a major detriment, but it certainly is a sign of a general decline in the health of our environment and eventually in our own health. What benefits wildlife also benefits the air we breathe, soil and

water quality, and plant life. Likewise, whatever is detrimental to wildlife is also detrimental to all other life forms.

To sum it up, a decline or elimination of one or more wildlife species from an area has associated consequences. It is more than just a simple decline in local wildlife; it is a disruption of the balance of nature which has far-reaching impact. If, for example, a carnivorous predator species is eliminated from our landscape the species formerly preyed upon will now increase in numbers. Some of those species are going to be herbivores which, through increased numbers, will at some point significantly reduce or eliminate their own food supply. Some of that food supply will be flowering plants. The lack of flowers will reduce our bee population which in turn will reduce the production of plants needing pollination. At this point our own food sources become affected. This is just one example of how all life is connected and why we need to act to prevent irreversible problems in the future.

A recommendation is for the citizens of Bremen to pursue ways to insure protection of wildlife habitat and to ask that neighboring towns follow our lead and establish protective guidelines for their properties. The five means of protection cited earlier in this document can serve as a starting point for that discussion.

Remember, all living things are in this together.

Objectives

- Preserve existing wildlife habitat in Bremen.
- Discuss habitat preservation with people in contiguous towns.

1. Designing Communities to Protect Wildlife Habitat and Accommodate Development, Patterns of Development Task Force/Maine Environmental Priorities Project, July 1997, p. 5
2. Ibid., p. 9.
3. Ibid.
4. Conservation Options for Private Landowners produced by Land Trust Alliance, www.lta.org
5. Patterns of Development Task Force, op. cit.