WINTER BUFFER MAINTENANCE

Jared R. Parks

During the winter season of 2006/07, I had the pleasure of working on a field study conducted by University of Maryland PhD candidate Peter Blank. The study was a companion to his work evaluating nesting bird communities in grass buffers on the upper Eastern Shore of Maryland. Grassland and shrub/scrub bird populations, including the bobwhite quail, have seen some of the largest population reductions of any habitat group in the Country. The winter surveys were designed to measure winter bird use of mowed and un-mowed Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) buffers. CREP buffers, a classification under the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), are linear buffers planted along waterways intended to protect water quality and wildlife habitat. According to the USDA, Farm Service Agency publication "The Conservation Reserve Program", CRP is the Nation's most successful wildlife conservation effort, establishing habitat that is twice as large as the National Wildlife Refuge System and all State-owned wildlife areas in the lower 48 combined.

Over the course of the winter Pete and I surveyed each site 3 times, counting every bird we encountered in the buffers. The study design was simple. Pete asked the farmers to hold off mowing portions of the buffers until the spring. Unlike many studies where statistical analysis is necessary to determine whether or not the results are clear, the results of this study were undeniable. Birds prefer un-mowed buffers. Ninety-eight percent of all birds counted during the winter study were in un-mowed buffers.

Results such as these have clear management implications. The CRP and CREP program rules typically restrict mowing or burning (a much less used management strategy) to a single instance outside of the primary nesting season which, for Maryland, is defined as between April 15 and August 15. Most grassland and shrub/scrub breeding birds do tend to nest between these dates, though many species continue nesting well into September while the American goldfinch tends to start nesting much later with a peak in August and early-September. Many farmers and land managers tend to mow their buffers as soon after August 15th as possible. Though consistent with program requirements, mowing in mid to late August may have a negative affect on birds that are still breeding, but, more importantly, and as the study results show, the mowing clearly has an effect on winter habitat.

Grassland habitat management is no easy thing here in Maryland where all of our terrestrial land cover is naturally inclined towards being forest. This tendency makes mowing (or burning) an integral management practice for grassland and shrub/scrub habitats. Equally important, and required in CRP maintenance, is suppression of invasive vegetation such as Canada thistle, Johnson grass, sweet gum, and red maple. Pete's recommended management strategies (USDA publication Wildlife Insight No. 90 "Bird Community Response to Herbaceous Buffers in Maryland") were reasonable and practical. Assuming that invasive vegetation is being properly managed, his first recommendation is mowing as late in the spring as possible, preferably March. Second, if it is not practical to mow in the spring due to concerns such as saturated ground, mow on a 2-3 year rotation leaving a portion of each buffer un-mowed each year. With a very simple shift in management strategies, this fantastic Federal program could make even greater strides in protecting these dwindling bird populations and may even help the bobwhite quail make a much desired come-back here in Maryland.