

## **Forests that Work for Landowners and Wildlife**

**By: Ben Larson, Ruffed Grouse Society & America Woodcock Society**

Family forest owners are familiar with the ways that working forests benefit wildlife. Active forest management creates different types of habitats needed by many types of wildlife, particularly forest birds. For example, the wood thrush nests in mature forests, but take their fledglings to young forests for food. Golden-winged warblers nest in young forests or shrubby stands and often take their fledglings to middle-aged stands. Ruffed grouse and American woodcock also need both young forests and older forests in close proximity to one another.

The key for many forest birds is having a mix of forest habitat types within about a mile of each other. It's best to have young forest stands that are interspersed with older stands. Open-canopy stands need to be interspersed with closed-canopy stands. When envisioning this mixed mosaic of age classes and coverage, you can imagine a patchwork quilt or a camouflage pattern across the landscape. The way to achieve this habitat mosaic is through active forest management.

Some areas of Virginia already have this habitat mosaic, but unfortunately, many other areas do not. Mostly because of lack of appropriate habitat, all the birds listed above are 'Species of Greatest Conservation Need' in Virginia and in other states. The Ruffed Grouse Society (RGS) is working with many partners in Virginia and other states to help wildlife rebound by creating habitat mosaics that work for forest wildlife, including non-game birds as well as game bird species like ruffed grouse and American woodcock.

The RGS was founded in Monterey, Virginia. Over our sixty-year history, RGS (later joined by American Woodcock Society, or AWS) promotes good forest management that also creates habitat, on public and private lands, for all types of woodland species. With four chapters in Virginia, members raise money and support habitat projects in many areas of the state. Historically, habitat projects have been mostly non-commercial forest management, such as on stands that don't have enough volume for a logger to do a commercial timber harvest. The Virginia chapters have supported habitat projects on the George Washington and Jefferson National Forests.

To scale up habitat benefits and address the critical decline in grouse, woodcock, and other forest wildlife, in 2020 RGS announced a new model of conservation delivery. The model of working forests will be familiar to family forest owners who often use a portion of timber income for habitat creation, replanting, or the general maintenance of their forests. The model of working forests will involve partnering with public agencies and the forest products industry to create additional habitat from ongoing commercial forest

management. It will also create new funding streams that can be re-invested in more habitat work.



***A woodcock or timberdoodle (left) being banded. The Woodcock Banding Program is permitted by the USGS Bird Banding Laboratory to capture and band woodcock. A hen grouse (right). Photos by Ashley Peters and Steve Oehlenschlager, Ruffed Grouse Society and American Woodcock Society.***

How will RGS & AWS implement this model of working forests in Virginia? The first step was to hire Forest Conservation Directors. Nick Biemiller was hired in 2020 as the Southern Appalachian Forest Conservation Director, working in Southwest Virginia as well as North and South Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee, and Kentucky. Ben Larson was hired in 2021 as the Mid-Atlantic Forest Conservation Director, working in northern Virginia as well as West Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Delaware, and New Jersey. Nick and Ben are building networks of partners and developing projects funded with grants, donations, and corporate partnerships.

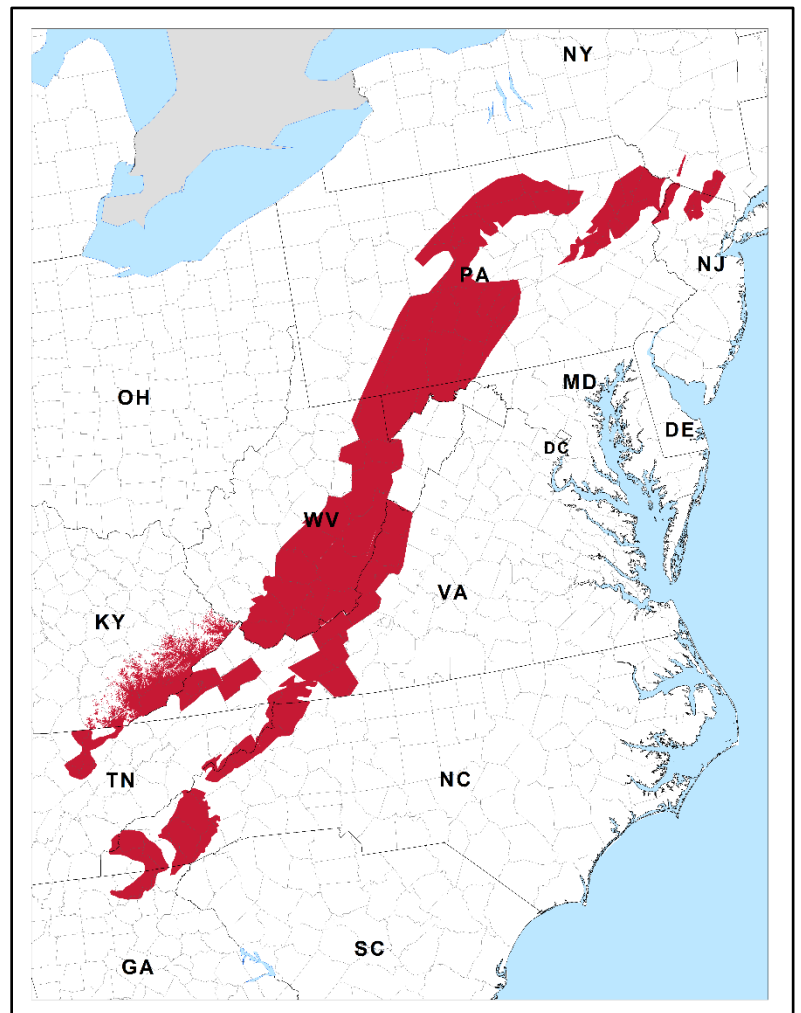
The focus of RGS is on developing landscape-scale projects, 2,500 to 25,000 acres in size, usually anchored on state or federal land, plus nearby private lands owned by interested landowners. Where forests are dominated by single-aged, closed-canopy forests—as they are across much of the central and southern Appalachian hardwood forests—the goal is to

create a habitat mosaic with a healthier mix of age classes and forest structures. Over time, with appropriate management, the goal is to have 25-30% of stands in older or mature forest conditions, 15-20% in young forest conditions, and 50-60% in middle-aged stands. These landscape-scale habitat projects are called dynamic forest blocks or dynamic forest restoration blocks.

The RGS is working with a range of partners to improve habitat and forest resiliency at landscape scales on private as well as public lands. To scale up habitat work on the George Washington & Jefferson National Forests, Nick Biemiller partnered with the Forest Service to hire a shared silviculturalist to assist with forest management project planning and implementation across the Clinch Ranger District, Mount Rogers National Recreation Area, and Eastern Divide Ranger District.

To work with private landowners in Virginia, RGS has a forester, Charles Faires, working within the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in North Carolina who will begin working with landowners in southwest Virginia. Interested forest landowners can contact Charles directly (412-443-0905; [charlesf@ruffedgrousesociety.org](mailto:charlesf@ruffedgrousesociety.org)).

Partners at Indiana University of Pennsylvania and the American Bird Conservancy also have a forester working with private landowners interested in improving forest health, and in the process, creating habitat for golden-winged warblers (GWW, see the map for the NRCS Working Lands for Wildlife-Golden-winged Warbler Initiative priority Virginia counties I in red). Interested forest landowners in these priority counties can contact Chris Peters (540-569-4650; [Christopher.Peters@usda.gov](mailto:Christopher.Peters@usda.gov)).



**USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service's Golden Winged Warbler prioritization map. Source: [https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE\\_MEDIA/nrcseprd1288210.png](https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_MEDIA/nrcseprd1288210.png)**

RGS is developing other partnerships as well. For example, RGS recently signed an agreement with the Association of Consulting Foresters (ACF) to advance mutual interests in forest management and improving habitat.

In Virginia and other states, the forest products industry will be a key partner in scaling up habitat improvements. Getting work done on the ground at scale simply requires markets to pay to cover most of the costs of implementing management. Markets for low-value hardwood and pine are particularly critical because they can make it viable to remove small-diameter trees necessary to create more open-canopy stands and young forest habitats. Thankfully, there are markets for low-value wood in much (though not all) of Virginia.

The RGS looks forward to collaborating with agencies, foresters, landowners, and forest product companies to create more wildlife habitat.

If you are interested in participating in a landscape-scale partnership in southern Virginia, Nick Biemiller can be reached at [nickb@ruffedgrousesociety.org](mailto:nickb@ruffedgrousesociety.org), and for landscape-scale partnership opportunities in northern Virginia, Ben Larson can be reached at [benl@ruffedgrousesociety.org](mailto:benl@ruffedgrousesociety.org).

***Ben Larson is the Forest Conservation Director for the Mid-Atlantic Region.***