

Lower Connecticut Land Trust Exchange – Site Visits December 2, 2010

Assessment of Habitat for New England Cottontail Monitoring and/or Habitat Restoration

Site #1: Eightmile/ Zemco – east side of river, Salem CT

This property abuts the eight mile river and includes approximately 15 acres of grassland along the east shore of the river. The area does not currently have extensive shrub habitat that would support core habitat for New England Cottontail. The river corridor overall and the associated shrub vegetation along the shores does provide very valuable habitat and the potential for a dispersal corridor between other suitable patches. Taking this connectivity into consideration, shrub restoration along the river to retain a 100'+ riparian buffer area that is dominated by native shrubs would provide valuable habitat regardless of whether NEC were present. Ideally, the invasive autumn olive, multiflora rose and bittersweet would be selectively removed as native vegetation replaces it.

Recommendation: Habitat Restoration in riparian buffer. Consult with DEP on known locations of NEC in surrounding landscape. Potentially search adjacent shrub habitats for sign of NEC.

Site #2: Eightmile/Zemco-west side of river, Salem CT

This parcel is near the first parcel, but is on more upland habitat. There are a few smallish shrub dominated old fields (4 acre and 6 acre) and an abandoned gravel pit. All of these areas are 'overgrown' with invasive plants, including multiflora rose, oriental bittersweet, and autumn olive as well as greenbriar and other native early successional species. The habitat looks like great habitat for rabbits from a structural standpoint and it would be worth surveying to see if NEC occurs at this site. We should also consult with DEP to see if there are known locations in any adjacent areas. If NEC are present this would be a great location to expand shrub habitat by removing overstory trees in the areas between the fields, but I think it would be important to encourage regeneration of native shrub habitat in these areas, and incorporate a plan to selectively reduce the invasive species over the long term.

Recommendation: Visit the site during the winter to look for rabbit sign. Three separate visits should be attempted, and any fecal pellets collected for DNA analysis.

Site #3: Walden Preserve, Salem CT

This property has a mix of fields of different ages and adjacent shrub and forest habitats. The fields have been selectively treated to prevent encroachment from invasive shrubs. In a field with intermixed native shrubs we observed what appeared to be rabbit browse at the base of blueberry shrubs. The older fields at this site appear to provide great rabbit habitat. There are also some fields that we were

not able to visit that are further from the road, and what appear to be wetland sites that may also provide good habitat.

Recommendation: This site should be actively searched for any sign of rabbits and fecal pellets collected for DNA analysis. If NEC are found at this site there is the potential to provide a significant amount of habitat throughout the preserve including forested and field areas.

Site #4: Burnham Brook Preserve, Salem CT

This site is on an upland ridge and includes a large field adjacent to forested habitats. The property has received CT LIP funds and has engaged in habitat restoration along the field edges to create a soft edge / shrub dominated habitat. A few areas have been cut and will be treated for invasive species to encourage regeneration of native species. We did not see any habitat that looks like it could currently support NEC, but this site has the potential to provide habitat for early successional species in the future, including birds that may make use of the habitat along the field edge during the post breeding season.

Recommendation: Double check to see where this site is in relation to other habitat patches in the surrounding landscape. Having a GPS location would help.

Site #5: Pleasant Valley and Jewett Preserves, Lyme CT

This preserve is primarily forested, but includes a few fields that have been mowed annually to prevent them from being overtaken by autumn olive. There are mature cedar trees throughout both fields, and habitat management along the field edges has been initiated through the CT LIP program. Vegetation has been cut back and invasives are being treated to encourage re-generation of native species. Neither of the fields we visited currently have habitat that would support NEC, although some of the low lying wetland areas we crossed through did look suitable. As the field edges regenerate they will provide early successional habitat but would not in and of themselves be sufficient to support a core population. It would be interesting to look at the amount of shrub habitat available in the adjacent forest understory and interspersed wetlands however, since there may be potential for creation of a mosaic of shrub habitats throughout the preserve that could support NEC. I did not get the impression that there was any interest in letting the fields revert to shrub dominated habitat, but perhaps less frequent mowing would be an option if the olive were treated successfully. I would assume that in the long term these habitats would need to be managed to prevent them from reverting to forest, although there was some discussion about the soils being very dry.

Recommendation: Evaluate larger property for additional opportunities?

Site #6: Czikowsky Preserve, Lyme CT

This parcel is adjacent to the eight mile river and includes a small field along the river that then transitions up slope to some open old fields and historic homestead covering 4 acres in total. There is some shrub habitat that includes invasive species intermixed with natives, and the field apparently supports a rare plant. There is also extensive deer browse in the field. The remainder of the property is forested with the exception of a 1.5 acre field. Extensive open space abuts the property to the north.

Recommendation: This area along the river appears to be maintained in shrub habitat by periodic flooding and could encouraged to revert to more dense shrub habitat by excluding deer and selectively treating non-native invasive plants, but this may not be conducive to ongoing protection of the rare plant population, so that should be discussed. It would be beneficial to have the shrub habitat along the river to serve as a dispersal corridor. Restoration of upland areas would serve to provide a larger area that could serve as more substantial shrub habitat if rabbits were able to disperse to this site from occupied sites. It is also possible that small numbers of rabbits currently exist here, but the habitat is limited. Before an investment in habitat restoration on the upland areas we should evaluate the surrounding landscape for the potential to provide additional patches of shrub habitat.

Site #7: Bamforth Preserve, Haddam CT

This site is primarily a grassland that will continue to be managed for grassland birds through burning and inter-seeding of native plants. The southern end of the field is adjacent to a wetland that does have some understory habitat but it is not thickly shrubby. The transition between these habitats is very shrubby, but is dominated by non-native invasive species.

Recommendation: the areas around the field edge would not be sufficient to support a viable population of NEC. If the shrub habitat were expanded along the southern end of the field it would have the potential to support small numbers of rabbits, but it would not be a self sustaining population unless additional habitat were identified / created within a reasonable dispersal distance. It would be worthwhile to see where this property sits in relation to known occupied sites, and other early successional habitat.

Site #8: Nedobity Preserve, Haddam

This site is on a hillside surrounded by developments on three sides. The habitat currently consists of two fields that are farmed for hay annually. There are narrow hedgerows of shrubs and some shrubs in the understory of adjacent forest but it does not currently have suitable habitat for NEC. We did not cross the street to look closely at the adjacent forested parcel.

Recommendation: in order to provide sufficient habitat for rabbits at this site both fields would need to be transitioned to shrub dominated habitats. This would change the character of this site dramatically,

and would only be advised if there were known NEC occupied sites in close proximity that would benefit from the expansion of suitable habitat.

Site #9: Saraceno Preserve, Haddam

This parcel is along a steep hillside dominated by oak forest with a mountain laurel understory. There is a small field at the base of the hill but it is directly adjacent to Rte 154. On the top of the slope the laurel becomes very dense and then transitions into a powerline ROW that is dominated by mature laurel.

Recommendation: I would not recommend management at this site, since the road would be a barrier to dispersal in one direction, and the dense laurel understory in the forest seems to shade out any understory shrubs and forbs that would be available for food or cover. The exception would be if there were known occupied sites within dispersal distance along the powerline. In that case it may make sense to attempt to improve habitat conditions somewhere on the preserve.

Site #10: Falls River Preserve, Deep River, CT

This 60 acre parcel is dominated by wetlands with extensive beaver activity. As a result there are abundant shrubs and meadows at varying stages of succession. Since the site is also adjacent to larger forested tracts this could be an ideal place to provide for NEC habitat. We did not see any obvious sign of rabbit browse, but sign of deer and beaver. The majority of the shrubs were native, although I believe there was quite a bit of Japanese Honeysuckle in the understory.

Recommendation: This area should be searched multiple times this winter to try and determine whether there are NEC at this site. The site would require minimal maintenance to continue to support NEC if they are there, but we could explore the area in more detail to see where habitat might be improved if NEC were located.