

## Lynx and logging share interests

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### Natural habitat is at risk as clear-cutting fades

By Murray Carpenter, Globe Correspondent | April 27, 2009

The good news is that Canada lynx are thriving in Maine. Hundreds of the leggy, snow-loving cats are breeding in the state's vast north woods, perhaps a historic high.

The bad news is that the population is heading for a crash, and logging industry clear-cut practices seem to be the reason.

Strangely, it's not an excess of clear-cutting that is the problem; this time, it's a lack of clear-cutting that is creating environmental worries.

Environmentalists may hate clear-cutting, but lynx love it - because when trees are cleared away, a dense spruce-fir thicket often crops up in their place, and those thickets attract snowshoe hares, the lynx's primary prey.

Biologists say lynx are thriving in Maine because massive industrial clear-cuts following a spruce budworm epidemic 30 years ago have grown into hare-rich thickets. But regulations reducing the size of clear-cuts in the Maine woods - products of state legislation passed in 1989 and amended after a divisive environmental campaign in the late 1990s - are now eliminating those thickets, and eventually, the hares that live in them.

Over the next decade, the unintended chain reaction is expected to dramatically reduce the number of Maine lynx - the only lynx in the Eastern states, and listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act.

"The prognosis for future habitat for lynx is not terribly good," said Mark McCullough, a US Fish and Wildlife Service biologist.

William Krohn, a University of Maine professor who has been studying the state's wildlife for decades, said that with recent reductions in clear-cutting, "We've created something that isn't the optimum for lynx habitat."

Canada lynx are lankier than bobcats, with tufted ears, dangling lamb-chop sideburns, and big feet that act as snowshoes. Lynx populations tend to be cyclical. McCullough said it is hard to count wild cats, but his "very unofficial" estimate of the peak Maine population two or three years ago was 250 to 500 lynx.

Patrick Strauch, executive director of the Maine Forest Products Council, which represents the business interests that own nearly all of Maine's timberland, said extensive clear-cutting has become a thing of the past, as the lumber industry shifts to partial harvesting.

"The Forest Practices Act really began to limit the size of clear-cuts, and as a result, there's very little clear-cutting that occurs today," Strauch said.

Maine Forest Service statistics show that more than 100,000 acres of Maine timberlands were clearcut in 1988 and 1989. That dropped to 54,000 acres in 1994, 18,500 acres in 2002, and 12,000 acres in 2007.

Poorly sited clear-cuts can cause significant environmental harm, including erosion, sedimentation, and warmed and acidified streams. They destroy the habitat of forest-dwelling species and scar the landscape. Outcry over the huge clear-cuts of the 1970s and 1980s led to the logging restrictions in Maine.

Environmentalists who fought for changes in logging say it's an oversimplification to credit aggressive logging with creating good lynx habitat.

"It's probably a little premature to come to the conclusion that that's the only reason we have a healthy [lynx] population now," said Sally Stockwell, Maine Audubon Conservation's director.

But McCullough, the Fish and Wildlife Service biologist, said that like it or not, the massive clear-cuts boosted lynx populations significantly. "The science is very much behind that, and the landscape ecology very much supports that," he said. Lynx can live in mature forests, he said, but at much lower densities than now seen in Maine.

The change in logging industry practices is not the only troubling thing for Maine's lynx population. Climate change could reduce snow cover, pushing lynx habitat farther north. Some lynx are caught incidentally by trappers each year; a federal judge recently ordered Maine to revise its trapping program to reduce the catch. And Maine hares have recently declined in a separate trend that might be associated with their cyclical patterns of abundance.

The changes in forest management affect more than just lynx. Alec Giffen, director of the Maine Forest Service, said regenerating clear-cuts provide habitat favored by many species, including moose, ruffed grouse, and many migratory warblers. "If people care about certain wildlife species, not just Canada lynx, they ought to care about the creation of early successional habitats," he said.

But, he added, plans to use Maine's working forest to help store carbon - so it won't be released into the atmosphere, fueling global warming - will add another factor to forest management. And will not be conducive to more clear-cutting.

"This situation is probably going to become only more complex as we go down the road," he said.

Erin Simons, a University of Maine doctoral candidate, used satellite images to analyze forest-management changes in Northwest Maine and ran computer models to project habitat for lynx and pine marten. (Just as managing for lynx benefits most species that use similar habitat, some biologists say managing for marten benefits most forest-dwelling species.) Not surprisingly, as lynx habitat increased in recent decades, the mature forests that marten and other forest-dwellers prefer declined.

Simons's analysis shows that lynx habitat will soon decline.

Krohn said it's time to start doing more sophisticated planning for wildlife habitat in Maine's working forest, considering which species to manage for, where, when, and in what proportions.

"We now have the tools to assess the options. We can look into the future," Krohn said. "It's an issue of balance more than anything else." ■

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