Zoar Valley Multiple Use Area Demonstration Forest Fact Sheet
October 2024

What is the Zoar Valley Multiple Use Area Demonstration Forest project?
The New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) is working closely with partners at Audubon New York to implement a U.S. Forest Service Landscape Scale Restoration grant. The project is designed to restore habitats for rare bird species at Zoar Valley Multiple Use Area while supporting sustainable forestry practices to help mitigate the effects of a rapidly changing climate, improve the resiliency of area watersheds, and drive sound land-use policies.

DEC is committed to ensuring New York State's forests are sustainable, biologically diverse, functional ecosystems that prioritize and optimize ecological benefits. The demonstration project will enhance habitat for rare and important bird species, including cerulean and black-throated blue warblers and wood thrush, which are Species of Greatest Conservation Need.

The project will provide ecosystem-wide benefits that will improve habitat and water quality, produce quality timber, increase forest resiliency, and sequester carbon by growing and cultivating specific forested areas. The project aims to promote increased interest in forest management and show that forest management and ecosystem health improvement work can be done hand in hand.

Longer term, the project aims to improve and enhance forest health and habitat through sustainable forest management practices. Prescribed forest management treatments, including tree cutting, will help accomplish ecological complexity by creating and enhancing vertical diversity with a healthy mix of tree sizes and ages in the forest while maintaining many of the larger trees to enhance nesting, perching, and foraging for birds.

Where and how many acres will be impacted by the demonstration project?
Work will be implemented entirely outside of the 1,492-acre Zoar Valley Unique Area and the total project acreage will not exceed 92 acres. The final size and location of this project area within the Multiple Use Area is not yet finalized. To ensure protection of the Unique Area, a buffer was established between the project site and the Unique Area to prevent encroachment. Buffers were also established along intermittent streams within the project site to protect soil and water resources.

Will some or all trees across the final project site be removed?
The Unit Management Plan recommends promoting growth of a varied mix of trees – by size, age, and species -- through a variety of science-based forest management activities including selective tree removal as necessary. These selective removals are different than clearcutting with regeneration which is also a viable forest management

option guided by DEC policy, but not anticipated to be used for this project. This diversity will protect the health of the forests in the Multiple Use area, building resilience and ensuring the vitality and health of the forest.

Are you cutting old growth trees?
Old growth trees will NOT be cut. This project is located outside of the Zoar Valley Unique Area, which is home to old growth trees and Cattaraugus Creek.

How will removing certain trees create climate resiliency and other benefits?
Diverse forests are more resilient, meaning they are better equipped to withstand stressors like extreme weather events and forest pests and pathogens, such as spongy moth. Recent land use history indicates that areas of the Multiple Use Area were cleared and used for agriculture as recently as 60 years ago, far below the age commonly considered old growth.

Forest diversity initiatives like this demonstration project can increase carbon sequestration, improve water filtration, reduce flooding, and expand habitat for birds and other wildlife. Forest management practices may involve the selective removal of shelterwood and seed trees, removing certain canopy trees to maximize sunlight that reaches the forest floor. The proposed management will create forest conditions that increase species and habitat diversity, enhancing the overall forest ecosystem near the old growth trees found at the Zoar Valley Unique Area.

Why are some trees marked with paint in some areas of Zoar Valley Multiple Use Area?
Trees have been marked at the Zoar Valley Multiple Use Area to indicate opportunities for forest management consistent with DEC's Unit management Plan. The 2021 Unit Management Plan identifies portions of the 1,486-acre Zoar Valley Multiple Use Area for active management over a period of 10 years. This includes maintaining the American chestnut plantation (20 acres) and grassland habitats (160 acres), as well as forest management activities like this demonstration project. The approximately 400 acres proposed for active forest management within the Multiple Use Area over a period of 10 years include forest thinning (105 acres), habitat management (185 acres), and converting conifer plantations to native hardwoods (104 acres).

How does active forest management help birds?
A number of New York's forest-dependent birds are experiencing drastic population declines, and therefore the quality of their breeding habitat is a conservation priority to help their populations grow. Forest-breeding birds in New York have varying nesting and brood-rearing habitat needs. Forest birds like black-throated blue, hooded, and mourning warblers, and ovenbirds require small trees and shrubs in the understory for nesting. These species build their nests directly on the ground or in vegetation that is only a few feet high. Other species need young or newly regenerating forest to nest within, like indigo buntings, eastern towhees, chestnut-sided warblers, and common yellowthroats.

Further, many birds that nest within mature forest move to areas of young forest with their newly fledged nestlings. This is because the dense young forest conditions offer protective cover habitat and plentiful food resources like insects, fruits, and seeds.

These habitat conditions are critical to ensuring the fledglings are eating well and are fit and healthy ahead of their long and arduous fall migration to their wintering grounds. At the Zoar Valley Multiple Use Area, there is little-to-no forest habitat diversity, leaving forest breeding birds without the conditions necessary to successfully nest and raise young. The Unit Management Plan recognizes the importance of providing diverse habitats within the Zoar Multiple Use Area.

Who is leading this work?
DEC experts are leading this demonstration project consistent with our publicly reviewed Unit Management Plan and forest management best practices. DEC partnered with Audubon on a statewide effort to educate forest landowners and managers about the techniques and approaches necessary to build healthy, climate resilient forests in support of the state's climate and forestry management goals.

Additional resources:

- NYSDEC Forest Action Plan: https://extapps.dec.ny.gov/docs/lands_forests_pdf/nysfap.pdf
- Niagara Frontier Unit Management Plan: https://extapps.dec.ny.gov/docs/lands_forests_pdf/niagarafrontierdraftump.pdf
- NYSDEC State Wildlife Action Plan: https://extapps.dec.ny.gov/docs/wildlife_pdf/swapfinaldraft2015.pdf
- Securing Northeast Forest Carbon: https://www.northeastforestcarbon.org/