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## BREEDING SEASON CONCERNS AND RESPONSE TO FOREST MANAGEMENT: CAN FOREST MANAGEMENT PRODUCE MORE BREEDING BIRDS?

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**Resumen.** – *¿Preocupaciones de temporada y respuesta a la gestión forestal: gestión forestal puede producir más de aves de cría?* – Las Reinitas Cerúleas (*Setophaga cerulea*), una de las especies de aves que ha declinado más rápidamente en Norte América, están asociadas con doseles heterogéneos de bosques maduros de hoja ancha. Sin embargo, la edad de la mayoría de bosques que se han regenerado por segunda o tercera vez en el este de Norte América no es suficiente para que ocurra una mortalidad natural de los árboles que mantengan un dosel estructuralmente diverso. Investigaciones previas sugieren que el manejo de los bosques por medio de la tala selectiva puede crear condiciones aptas como las del hábitat reproductivo de la Reinita Cerúlea. Llevamos a cabo un estudio para examinar la respuesta de la Reinita Cerúlea a la variación de la perturbación del dosel debido a tala de árboles. Específicamente, tres tratamientos de tala y una parcela no talada como referencia fueron replicados en siete áreas en cuatro estados Apalaches de 2005-2010. Comparamos la respuesta demográfica de la Reinita Cerúlea antes y cuatro años después de la tala. En general en todas las áreas de estudio, la Reinita Cerúlea se mantuvo estable en la parcela no talada e incremento significativamente el primer año después de taladas las parcelas de tala intermedia. Durante los tres años posteriores a la tala, la densidad territorial para las parcelas de tala intermedia se mantuvo significativamente grande en comparación a las parcelas de referencia. Sin embargo, en las parcelas de referencia los nidos tuvieron una mayor sobrevivencia que en las parcelas no taladas. La única excepción fue la sobrevivencia de los nidos entre las parcelas de referencia y las de tala intermedia en los sitios del norte que no difirieron. Nuestros resultados indican que talas intermedias probablemente benefician a la Reinita Cerúlea en alguna parte de su distribución reproductiva. Sin embargo, investigaciones adicionales son necesarias para examinar el efecto de la tala sobre el fitness y estimar las implicaciones a nivel de población. En particular para saber si: ¿El efecto de un gran número de individuos anidando compensa el bajo éxito reproductivo, en sitios de tala intermedia? Hasta que los investigadores provean información al respecto, recomendamos que las decisiones de manejo sean basadas en condiciones locales, particularmente en bosques donde la población de la Reinita Cerúlea sea alta.

**Abstract.** – *Cerulean Warblers (*Setophaga cerulea*)*, one of the fastest declining avian species in North America, are associated with heterogeneous canopies in mature hardwood forests. However, the age of most second and third-growth forests in eastern North American is not sufficient for natural tree mortality to

maintain structurally diverse canopies. Previous research suggests that forest management through timber harvest also may create conditions suitable as Cerulean Warbler breeding habitat. We conducted a multi-state study that examined Cerulean Warbler response to varying degrees of canopy disturbance created by operational timber harvest. Specifically, 3 harvest treatments and an un-harvested reference plot were replicated on 7 study areas in 4 Appalachian states in 2005-2010. We compared pre-harvest and four years post-harvest demographic response of Cerulean Warblers. Over all study areas, Cerulean Warbler territory density remained stable in un-harvested reference plots and increased significantly the first year post-harvest on intermediate harvest plots. By year 3 post-harvest, territory density remained significantly greater for intermediate harvest than reference plots, and marginally greater for light and heavy harvests than reference plots. However, un-harvested reference plots had greater nest survival than most harvest treatments. The one exception was nest survival between reference plots and the intermediate harvest on the northern study areas did not differ. Our results indicate that intermediate harvests likely benefit Cerulean Warblers in some portions of the species' breeding range. However, additional research is needed to better examine fitness consequences of timber harvests and to estimate population-level implications. In particular, does the greater number of nesting individuals, particularly in intermediate harvests, compensate for lower nesting success? Until researchers provide such insight, we recommend management decisions be based on local conditions, particularly in forests where Cerulean Warbler populations are high.

**Key words:** Cerulean Warbler, breeding habitat, timber harvest, nest success, territory density, body condition.

The Cerulean Warbler (*Setophaga cerulea*) is a neotropical migratory songbird that has gained widespread attention as a species of conservation and management concern. The species has experienced range-wide declines over the last 40 years (Sauer *et al.* 2008), especially in historically high-density areas of the Appalachian Mountains (Hamel 2000). In eastern North America, breeding habitat for Cerulean Warblers is characterized by heterogeneous canopies in mature hardwood forests, which occur naturally in the Appalachians due to topography and large-scale disturbances including fire, wind events, ice storms, and insect outbreaks. Though natural tree senescence once played an important role in creating heterogeneous canopies (Lorimer 1980), particularly in old-growth forests, the age of most second- and third-growth forests in Eastern North America is not sufficient for natural tree mortality to maintain structurally diverse canopies (Lorimer and Frelich 1994). Forest management also may be used to create forest conditions favored by Cerulean Warblers and other disturbance-adapted species (e.g. Wood *et al.* 2005, Bakermans and Rodewald 2009).

However, prior to extensive use of silviculture to enhance habitat for such species, detailed habitat selection and demographic studies are needed to ensure that such actions do not have unintended negative consequences.

Here in, we present the results and their implications from a 6-year Cerulean Warbler breeding grounds study conducted by members of the Cerulean Warbler Technical Group as part of the Cerulean Warbler Conservation Initiative (Dawson *et al.* 2012). Specifically, we investigated the extent to which silvicultural techniques differing in canopy removal might serve as tools to manage habitat for Cerulean Warblers in the central Appalachian Mountains, USA. We selected 7 study areas within the core Cerulean Warbler breeding range of the central hardwoods' mixed-mesophytic forest region (Fig. 1). Study areas were located in West Virginia (n = 3), Tennessee (n = 2), Ohio (n = 1), and Kentucky (n = 1), each within a matrix of mature hardwood forest. We selected study areas based on the presence of Cerulean Warbler breeding populations and the potential to implement silvicultural prescriptions via partial timber harvest. We randomly assigned 4 silvicultural treatments to 4 20-ha plots at

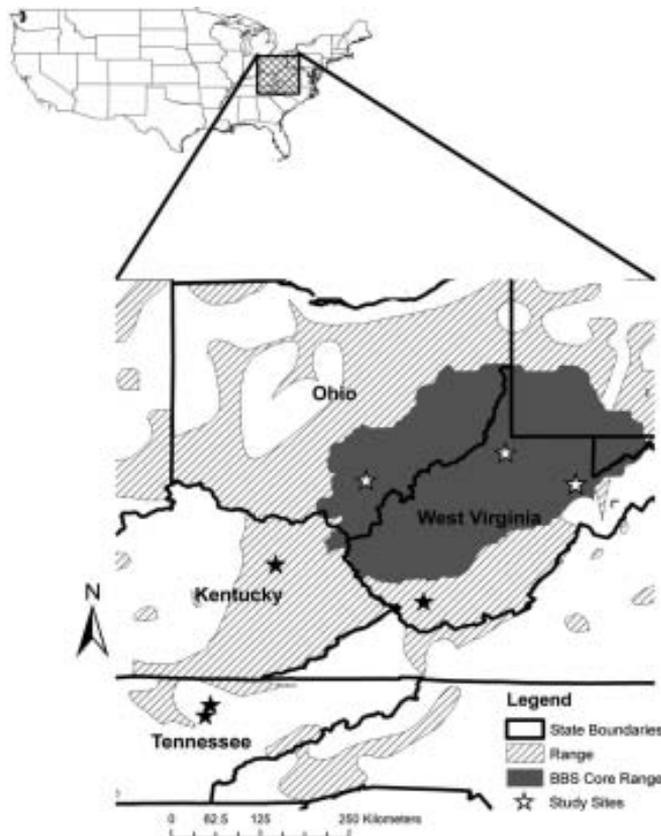


FIG. 1. Locations of seven Cerulean Warbler Forest Management study sites in the Appalachian Mountains. All sites were located within the core of the Cerulean Warbler breeding range. Map symbols indicate estimated range of the species, as “Range” the estimated breeding range of the birds based upon Dunn and Garrett (1997, Hamel 2000), and as “BBS Core Range” based on the analyses of Breeding Bird Survey data conducted by Baldy (2005).

each study area: light, intermediate, and heavy canopy disturbance, as well as an unharvested reference plot. Each treatment included a 10-ha harvested area (except on reference plots), and two 5-ha buffers of undisturbed forest on either end of the harvest to examine edge effects. Light harvest mimicked forests disrupted by multiple tree-fall gaps; we reduced basal area (BA) and overstory canopy cover (CC) on these treatments by approximately 20% (residual BA =  $21.3 \pm 1.0$  [SE]  $\text{m}^2/\text{ha}$ ; residual CC =  $60.9 \pm 5.5\%$ ). Intermediate harvests mimicked more

severe natural disturbances such as fire, wind events, or larger tree fall gaps; here we reduced BA and CC by approximately 40% (residual BA =  $14.3 \pm 1.2$   $\text{m}^2/\text{ha}$ ; residual CC =  $45.5 \pm 6.4\%$ ). Heavy harvests emulated severe natural disturbances such as strong wind events, severe ice-storms, landslides, or more intense fire; we reduced BA and CC by approximately 75% (residual BA =  $6.3 \pm 1.1$   $\text{m}^2/\text{ha}$ ; residual CC =  $18.2 \pm 4.3\%$ ). We left control plots undisturbed throughout the life of the study (BA =  $26.9 \pm 1.3$   $\text{m}^2/\text{ha}$ ; CC =  $73.2 \pm 5.2\%$ ). On all treatments,

disturbances were applied uniformly across the 10-ha stand. Overstory species composition was largely unchanged by the disturbances and residual stands on the intermediate and heavy treatments were comprised of dominant and co-dominant trees. We compared Cerulean Warbler territory density two years pre-harvest (2005, 2006) and four years post-harvest (2007–2010). Additionally, we compared nest survival and male age structure and condition (using body mass and wing-mass residuals) of captured males four years post-harvest.

Although mean densities of Cerulean Warblers remained stable on unharvested reference plots across all study areas (Boves 2011, Boves *et al.* 2013), numbers on reference plots were consistently lower than on experimental harvest plots following treatment. During the first year post-harvest, Cerulean Warbler density on the intermediate harvest increased significantly and by a greater amount than on the other harvest treatments or on the reference plots. In year 2 post-harvest, density on the intermediate harvest remained higher than on other harvest treatments and reference plots, and density increase was marginally greater on light harvest than reference plots ( $p < .10$ ). By year 3 post-harvest, density increase was significantly greater for intermediate harvest than reference plots, and marginally greater for light and heavy harvest treatments than reference plots. In year 4 post-harvest, densities on intermediate and heavy treatments remained higher than on the reference plots. Density declined on the light harvest treatment and was no longer different than that on the reference plots. Territorial male age structure did not differ among treatments, but male body condition was better in harvested treatments compared to unharvested plots (Boves 2011).

Nest survival of Cerulean Warbler was a function of site, year, and silvicultural treatment (Boves 2011, Boves *et al.* 2013). After accounting for regional and annual differences in nest survival, Cerulean Warblers in the unharvested

controls had greater nest survival and more fledglings per successful nest than those in harvested treatments. Because nest survival was greater on southern (Tennessee) than northern sites, we treated the two regions separately in analyses related to treatment effects. In southern sites, nest success was higher on the unharvested reference plots than on light ( $\chi^2_1 = 15.02, P < 0.0001$ ), intermediate ( $\chi^2_1 = 4.41, P = 0.04$ ), or heavy treatment plots ( $\chi^2_1 = 15.02, P < 0.0001$ ). In northern sites, nest success on the unharvested reference plots was marginally higher than on the light harvest plots ( $\chi^2_1 = 3.50, P = 0.06$ ) or in the buffers ( $\chi^2_1 = 3.12, P = 0.08$ ), but similar to the intermediate harvest plots.

Although patterns of density and body condition suggested that Cerulean Warblers are attracted to harvest-generated disturbances in mature forest ecosystems of the Appalachian Mountains, the lower nest success in harvested plots raises the possibility that recent harvests may function in some cases as ecological traps. Additional research is needed to better examine fitness consequences of timber harvests and to estimate population-level implications. In particular, does the greater number of nesting individuals, particularly in intermediate harvests, compensate for lower nesting success? For example, we detected an average of 10.5 territories/10ha on intermediate harvests (10.5 territories  $\times$  0.34 nest success  $\times$  2.6 average young fledged per successful nest = 9.3 young/10ha) compared to 4.25 territories/10ha on unharvested plots (4.25 territories  $\times$  0.42 success  $\times$  2.25 average young fledged per successful nest = 4.0 young/10ha) across all northern sites. In this example, the greater number of young produced and better adult condition (assuming adult condition contributes to higher annual survival) on intermediate harvests may substantially outweigh higher nesting success observed on the unharvested reference plots. Ultimately, we recommend management decisions be based on local conditions, particularly in forests where Cerulean Warbler populations are high.

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