



**Natural Heritage
& Endangered Species
Program**

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Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife

**Prairie Warbler
*Setophaga discolor***

State Status: **None**
Federal Status: **None**

SPECIES DESCRIPTION: The Prairie Warbler is a neo-tropical migrant of scrub oak-pitch pine barrens and areas of brushy secondary growth. It can be found breeding from the upper Gulf Coast north to the Ohio Valley and northeast into New England. Prairie Warblers winter in low scrub throughout the West Indies and south Florida. They eat mostly insects and spiders, but will also take mollusks and sometimes fruit. In Massachusetts, autumn migration begins in July, with birds returning to breeding grounds in late May.

DISTRIBUTION AND ABUNDANCE: The Prairie Warbler occurs in every county in Massachusetts, with a major population concentration in the scrub oak-pitch pine barrens of Plymouth County. Elsewhere it is uncommon to fairly common in areas of dry secondary growth.

Breeding Bird Survey data shows that the population of Prairie Warbler has experienced an overall decline of 2.0% from 1966 to 2002. Some of the most significant declines have occurred in the Ohio Hills region (4.5%) and in much of the species' southwestern range. Declines in other areas have resulted in the species being listed as state-endangered in Michigan, and the subspecies *d. paludicola* being listed as special concern in Florida. One region that has seen a significant increase to the population is northern New England (6.4%), although southern New England has decreased (3.1%), with Massachusetts populations declining by 1.06%.

The Prairie Warbler is considered a Tier I Conservation Priority by Partners in Flight, and is listed as a Watch List Species by the National Audubon Society.

HABITAT DESCRIPTION: The Prairie Warbler nests in areas of brushy second growth, dry scrub, low pine-juniper, pine barrens, and burned-over areas. The species is not sensitive to patch size, and often is found breeding

in dense shrub vegetation associated with regenerating clearcuts and power line rights-of-way.

In Massachusetts, the Prairie Warbler is commonly found on the southeastern coastal plain in scrub oak and pitch pine barrens, especially those that are periodically burned. Away from the coastal plain it is found in disturbed areas with heavy secondary growth, such as clearings beneath high-tension lines, overgrown pastures, and near brushy gravel pits.

THREATS: The major threat to Prairie Warbler populations in Massachusetts is loss of suitable habitat due to landscape conversion and succession. This species is also a frequent host to the Brown-headed Cowbird. Although shrubland birds as a group do not appear to be as sensitive to patch-size as other groups of birds, the indirect effects of suburban sprawl can be important through the magnified risks on ground nests from predation (domestic cats, raccoons, etc.) and cowbird parasitism.

Management for the Prairie Warbler should seek to maintain habitat diversity in the region, specifically to increase the array of woody plant communities in mid-seral stages of secondary succession. Steps must also be taken to preserve blocks of pine barrens where major concentrations of the species persist. In pine barrens and oak scrub associations, fire is an important management tool. Prairie Warblers benefit from controlled burning, but the frequency of burns must be considered closely. Managing utility rights-of-way has enormous potential for increasing habitat availability for shrubland birds, and capitalizing on these already existing and essentially permanent shrublands should be encouraged whenever possible. In landscapes that are primarily forested, early successional forest patches should be included in rotational forest management where several small and several large early successional patches are rotated

A Species of Greatest Conservation Need in the Massachusetts State Wildlife Action Plan

Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife

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through the forest matrix. Where suitable habitat currently exists, efforts should be made to protect the landscape from development.

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Updated 2015

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