



**Natural Heritage
& Endangered Species
Program**

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Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife

**Eastern Towhee
*Pipilo erythrophthalmus***

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

SPECIES DESCRIPTION: The Eastern Towhee is a ground-foraging passerine associated with scrubland, brushy ecotones, and areas of early woody regeneration. It breeds throughout the eastern United States into southern Ontario, and is considered a short-distance migrant in the northern reaches of its range. The northern limit of its winter habitat is generally from the mid-Atlantic States west through Ohio, though annually some individuals will attempt to winter in southern New England. Typically, Eastern Towhee is a double-brooded species, building its nest on the ground or very low in dense tangles.

DISTRIBUTION AND ABUNDANCE: The Eastern Towhee is distributed across the entirety of Massachusetts wherever suitable breeding habitat is found. The Eastern Towhee has declined steadily in recent decades in North America, and may be declining more rapidly than any other bird species in North America. Breeding Bird Survey results show that the population of Eastern Towhee has fallen in 18 states and in one Canadian province. The most severe drop in population was in New England, where the annual rate of decline between 1966 and 1989 ranged from 5.5-10.2 percent annually for different states.

Banding data for migrating birds at Manomet Bird Observatory (Manomet, MA) also indicate that the abundance of Towhees has dropped. In the spring of 1970, an average of 4.5 Towhees were captured for every day of banding, but by the spring of 1988 the average had dropped to less than one individual per day. This was the greatest reduction in abundance for any of the 52 species that are regularly banded at Manomet.

HABITAT DESCRIPTION: The Eastern Towhee is an edge-associated generalist that occupies varied mesic and xeric habitats characterized by dense shrub-small tree cover and a well-developed litter layer. This species

occupies mid-to-late stages of secondary succession with the greatest densities occurring in open field thickets and later stages of second growth, but it is sometimes present in climax forest where the understory is well developed.

In Massachusetts, Eastern Towhees are most numerous in the scrub-oak and second-growth forests of Plymouth County, Cape Cod and the Islands. They particularly favor areas where moorland is succeeding to scrub-oak barrens; however, as the oaks mature, towhee numbers decline. Elsewhere the species is found throughout the state wherever there is secondary growth or forest openings.

THREATS: The major threat to Eastern Towhee populations in Massachusetts is loss of suitable habitat due to landscape conversion and succession. Though 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, jays) and cowbird parasitism.

Management for Eastern Towhee should seek to maintain habitat diversity in the region; specifically to increase the array of woody plant communities in midseral 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. Towhees benefit from controlled burning, but the frequency of burns must be considered. 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

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

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management where several small and several large early successional patches are rotated through the forest matrix. Where suitable habitat currently exists, efforts should be made to protect the landscape from development.

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