Why are birds in successional habitats declining?

In a natural setting, forested areas are periodically cleared by fires, severe storms, wind shears, and other disturbances. This natural disturbance regime creates a landscape mosaic in which there is always a mix of habitat types available to wildlife; areas that were disturbed very recently (grasslands), areas disturbed within the last several years (successional/scrub), and areas that have not been disturbed for many years (forests). With modern fire suppression, and the loss of many natural areas to agricultural, residential and commercial uses, successional habitat is becoming harder to find. As a group, successional habitat birds have declined more than species in any other habitat type except for grasslands over the past four decades.

How large do successional areas need to be for nesting birds?

Unlike grassland- and forest-specialist birds, many successional habitat species do not require large tracts of land in order to breed successfully. Even areas less than an acre can provide important bird habitat, although larger sites are likely to attract more avian diversity. Also unlike grasslands or forests, long linear patches can be suitable for management as scrub bird habitat. Sites larger than 20 acres may be better off being managed as grasslands or forests, especially if they are adjacent to larger patches of similar habitat.
How can successional habitat be managed?
If an area is being managed to remain as successional habitat, a form of disturbance must be used periodically to re-start succession, or to remove larger tree species that would ultimately dominate the habitat. Where appropriate, controlled burns are an effective method of management. Alternately, successional areas can be mowed every three to ten years using a brushhog or similar device. Selective removal of larger tree species (those that grow to reach heights over 25 feet) when saplings begin to grow can greatly extend the period in between needed disturbances. This type of management is often practiced in powerline rights-of-way to prevent growth of anything that could interfere with the powerline, but it is applicable to any area where maintaining successional habitat is a management goal.

What about controlling invasive plants? Aren’t many successional areas overrun with them?
Left untreated, the amount and type of invasive plants that will colonize successional areas varies greatly with site conditions, including the soil type, type of vegetation on nearby properties, and amount of sun the site receives. Many of the best successional habitats are found in sites that have soils that are less hospitable to large trees, including extremely wet or dry soil types. In areas with infertile soils, shrubs may dominate for many years even in the absence of active management. Controlling invasives aggressively in the first two years of a conversion to successional habitat will dramatically reduce the long-term effort needed for management.