

Many Creatures, One Plan

WILDLIFE ACTION PLAN KEEP COMMON ANIMALS COMMON



The N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission has created a Wildlife Action Plan that addresses many of the state's conservation needs for the next decade.

This is the first of a five-part series about North Carolina's Wildlife Action Plan. Each successive story will discuss how the plan is being implemented in a different region, culminating with a final piece about statewide initiatives.

MARCH	INTRODUCTION TO THE PLAN
MAY	MOUNTAIN REGION
JULY	PIEDMONT REGION
SEPTEMBER	COASTAL PLAIN REGION
NOVEMBER	STATEWIDE PROJECTS AND PARTNERSHIPS

Perhaps your first encounter with an Eastern box turtle was in your own back yard as a child. Maybe it was on a walk in the woods. You might have bumped into a box turtle in a moist, low-lying area along the trail. If you are a gardener and can't resist growing cantaloupes, it's possible you've been frustrated by box turtles raiding your melon patch. Of course, all of us have seen box turtles on the highway, often in harm's way as they wander about, lovesick, looking for mates. Everyone has seen one of these creatures, often in the most mundane of places.

In contrast, many of us have watched televised wildlife programs portray endangered

species' desperate struggles for continued existence. Perhaps you've seen a documentary on the red wolves that were introduced into the Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge in eastern North Carolina. Those who have been around for a few years may recall following the story of the tiny snail darter in eastern Tennessee. It was big news when the little fish delayed the completion of the Tennessee Valley Authority's Tellico Dam.

These two animals, despite being very rare and found in isolated places, are familiar to us because they became focal points for the federal Endangered Species Act. Unlike the box turtle, few of us have ever seen one of these endangered species in the wild. They

represent an approach to conservation designed to bring wildlife back from the brink of extinction. A few years ago, the federal government took an action that gave the box turtle something in common with red wolves, snail darters and other threatened and endangered species.

If you were thinking this slow, deliberate creature had somehow made it onto the federal endangered species list, you would, of course, be mistaken. However, the box turtle and many other more common animals are now the objects of their own federal conservation effort. The State Wildlife Grants Program is designed to keep animals like the box turtle from ever needing Endangered

Species Act protection. Each state participating in the State Wildlife Grants Program was required to develop a statewide conservation plan. The result of that requirement in this state is the North Carolina Wildlife Action Plan, a comprehensive management tool developed by the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission with assistance from many partners. Its aim is to help conserve and enhance the state's biodiversity and most important habitats. A key part of its mission is to make sure that common animals like the box turtle stay common.

ACTING ON A CONGRESSIONAL MANDATE

Recognizing that much of our nation's wildlife is at risk of population decline, the U.S. Congress set up the State Wildlife Grants Program in 2001. Each Wildlife Action Plan

submitted was to evaluate the status of the respective state's wildlife species and the habitats in which they live, identifying threats to each species and its associated habitats. Congress required that gaps in knowledge of species status, habitats and threats be identified in the plans.

Each state was required to develop a list of conservation actions that could be used to restore, improve and monitor the status of priority animals and their habitats. The monitoring component allows agencies to evaluate the performance of conservation initiatives. Finally, Congress wanted broad public participation during the development of these conservation plans and in carrying out each plan.

From 2001 to 2005, the Wildlife Commission partnered with more than 50 state and federal agencies, nonprofit conser-

vation groups, universities, private companies and individuals to develop the N.C. Wildlife Action Plan. The plan builds on a long, productive history of conservation efforts by many individuals and organizations in this state and is strengthened by concurrent conservation strategies being implemented by each of the other 49 states. The plan provides a cost-effective, proactive approach to the conservation of entire wildlife communities, including those fish and wildlife species for which management was traditionally underfunded. It is an ambitious plan whose success will be measured by the cultivation of lasting conservation partnerships and by the promise of fish and wildlife resources for future North Carolinians.

North Carolina proved to be a leader in the national effort to develop the plans, becoming

HABITAT IS WHERE IT'S AT The Wildlife Action Plan strives to protect dozens of species, including the examples on this map, by placing emphasis on habitat conservation. By protecting the areas in which animals live, the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission hopes to increase populations of rare and endangered animals and keep numbers of common animals strong.



- 1 - GREEN SALAMANDER
- 2 - SPOTTED SKUNK
- 3 - NORTHERN FLICKER
- 4 - SILVER-HAIRED BAT
- 5 - MARBLED SALAMANDER
- 6 - CAPE FEAR SHINER
- 7 - TAR RIVER SPINYMUSSSEL
- 8 - COTTON MOUSE
- 9 - TRICOLORED HERON

MAP AND ILLUSTRATIONS BY BILL TIPTON

written by CAROL PRICE and SCOTT VAN HORN

the first state to submit a completed Wildlife Action Plan in the fall of 2005. The plan was ranked in the top 12 nationally by a panel sponsored by a national conservation organization. With continued support and cooperation from the broader conservation community and a commitment from its citizenry, the Wildlife Commission hopes North Carolina will maintain its leadership role as the Wildlife Action Plan is implemented.

The team assembling North Carolina's Wildlife Action Plan had several key

understanding among the state's citizens. Finally, the plan advocates sustaining and improving existing regulations and programs that conserve habitats and their associated plant and animal communities.

SERVING THE GREATEST NEED—AT HOME

The State Wildlife Grants Program mandated that the focus of the Wildlife Action Plan be the state's priority species of highest conservation need. The commission worked with expert biologists statewide to identify 371 priority species. These are the birds, mammals, reptiles, amphibians, fish, mollusks and crustaceans that are currently targeted for conservation action. The plan does not directly address marine species, but references the Coastal Habitat Protection Plan developed by the N.C. Division of Environment and Natural Resources. The Wildlife Action Plan identifies the federally listed threatened and endangered wildlife in North Carolina, but because the focus of the State Wildlife Grants program is more common species such as whip-poor-wills, alligators, hognose snakes and American oystercatchers, these types of animals comprise the majority of the plan's priority species.

There are more than 58 species of freshwater mussels in North Carolina, and 43 are on the priority list. Better stewardship of our state's waterways is the primary remedy for conservation of all these species. The Wildlife Action Plan describes all 17 river basins and 23 types of habitats that can be found across the state. The plan matches each priority species to the habitat type or river basin where it is found, identifies the most important challenges facing each habitat, and details the critical actions required to protect and conserve these habitats. This is the basic framework underlying the Wildlife Action Plan. Priority wildlife can now be specifically targeted by carefully considering conservation or management options within essential habitats.

Much of the conservation vision of the Wildlife Action Plan was integrated into the

The plan aims to protect animals such as rare Eastern diamondbacks, common Eastern box turtles and relatively common loggerhead shrikes, as well as habitats such as mysterious Carolina bays.

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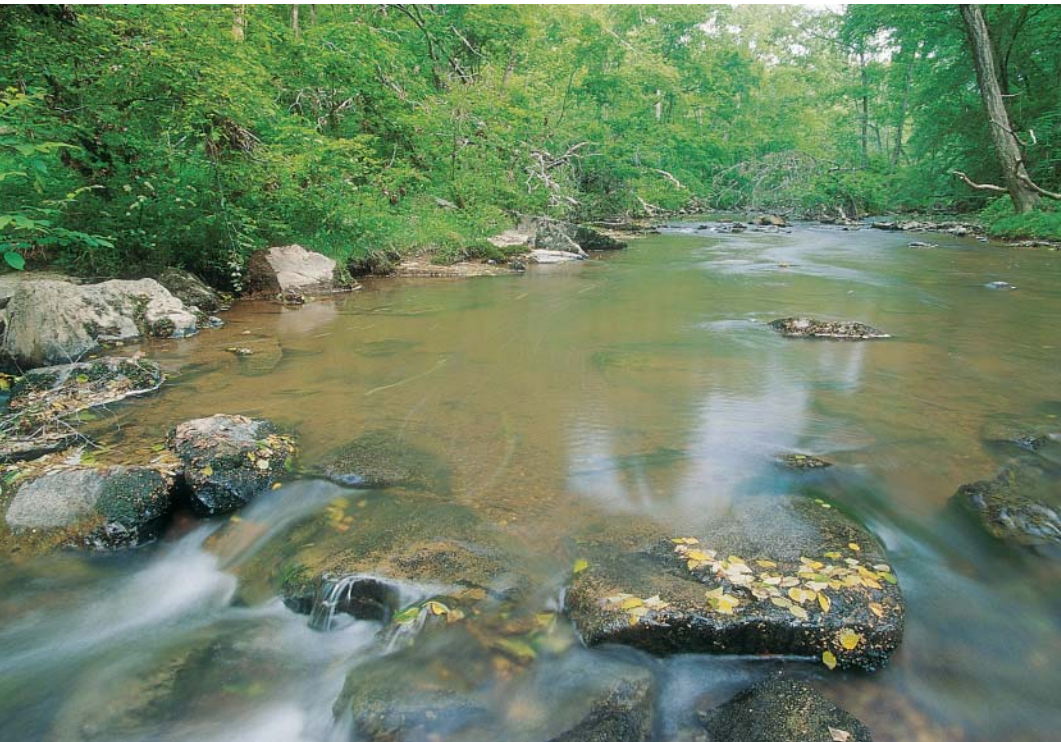
THE PLAN: A NOT-SO-EXTREME MAKEOVER

Since its humble beginnings in the 1940s, the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission has practiced habitat conservation in ways that benefited box turtles, songbirds, nongame mammals, freshwater mussels and other animals found in the Wildlife Action Plan's list of priority conservation species. The commission created a nongame program in the mid-1980s to focus directly on many of these priority conservation species.

The plan was put together with the input of many other individuals and groups with a long history of doing conservation in North Carolina. Not surprisingly, much of the work that has been done and is ongoing is identified in the plan. It is the hope of the Wildlife Commission that the plan will better prioritize its future efforts, better coordinate its conservation programs and better leverage the work done by the commission and the broader conservation community. In every sense, the plan represents an important refinement of an existing program.

To read the plan, visit www.ncwildlife.org and click on "N.C. Wildlife Action Plan" under the Features header on the front page.

principles in mind. Because conservationists have long known that the way to conserve species most efficiently is to conserve habitats, the team wanted the plan to encourage thinking and acting on the habitat scale, affecting multiple species simultaneously. They also recognized that to be effective, conservation must be everybody's job—the more people that know about wildlife conservation, the more likely they are to care. Consequently, the plan emphasizes support for conservation education efforts aimed at fostering that



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Piedmont streams will benefit from conservation efforts detailed in the plan, as will the Brimley's chorus frog and the marsh rabbit.



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MELISSA MCGAW

habitat/river basin framework, but there were exceptions. North Carolina is being developed at a rapid rate. A section on urban wildlife management was included to emphasize that with a little proactive cooperation and planning, urban areas can be wildlife friendly. Since most of the state's wildlife resources are not found on public lands, a section pertaining to private-lands management was included to provide guidance for landowners wishing to engage in conservation on their property.

Land acquisition by direct purchase is another important conservation tool. The plan includes a section on land conservation strategies to review the uses of land acquisition, identify the players in North Carolina and discuss opportunity areas and planning. This section provides two excellent case histories

from the Sandhills and the Onslow Bight. A final section on education, outreach and recreational strategies addresses the plan's aggressive education priorities and goals.

Together, the habitat/rivers sections and these four statewide conservation strategies provide the Wildlife Commission with a tangible conservation vision that can be shared with other agencies and citizen groups that are also committed to conservation of wildlife resources. The Wildlife Action Plan can serve as a consistent, statewide blueprint for building long-term partnerships to carry out conservation actions in North Carolina.

THE PLAN AND NORTH CAROLINA'S FUTURE

North Carolina is home to a rich diversity of wildlife. As more people move to the state, we must be prepared to meet the challenges of balancing human and wildlife needs. The biggest threats to wildlife are the loss and degradation of their habitat. Animals need safe places to live, gather food and raise their young. Through the proactive strategies in the Wildlife Action Plan, we can keep animals from becoming endangered or extinct. While conservation efforts directly benefit wildlife, protecting land for animals doesn't just help creatures—it is good for people, too.

Clean air and water for wildlife also means a healthier place for us to live. Pollutants pose a threat to all living things. Our drinking water comes from rivers and underground wells. A clean environment gives humans and animals safe and beautiful places to live, play and grow. Natural landscapes where animals live can also provide important protection for people. Marshes, barrier islands and vegetation along stream banks can lessen the damaging impacts of hurricanes and floods. Wetlands are natural filters for drinking water that we pump from underground.

Protecting animals and their homes now will ensure that we leave a rich natural heritage to enchant and inspire generations to come. The shared memories of family camping trips, hikes to waterfalls and discovering box turtles in the backyard are a legacy we owe our children. ♡

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STATE WILDLIFE GRANTS: MATCH OR MISS OUT

The State Wildlife Grants Program that required the development of the Wildlife Action Plan in order to receive funds also has another very important catch to it: money. The federal grants available through the program are matching grants—that is, state agencies must raise an equal amount of money to the amount requested in order to receive the grant for a given year.

In the past, the grant has been a three-to-one match—if North Carolina comes up with \$100, the feds will chip in \$300. That match ratio changes in 2007 to one-to-one: For every \$100 a state raises, the State Wildlife Grants Program will add \$100. So the \$100 that resulted in a \$400 budget last year now only amounts to \$200. States now must raise twice as much money to keep their budget the same.

The Wildlife Diversity Program, which handles nongame and endangered animals for the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission, has only two sources to raise matching funds: a tax check-off and license plate sales. The tax check-off is located at block 26 of your North Carolina income tax form. It reads "Contribution to the N.C. Nongame and Endangered Wildlife Fund" and is a straight donation that the N.C. Department of Revenue forwards to the Wildlife Commission. The license plate features the Endangered Wildlife Fund's logo of a cardinal on a dogwood flower and is available through the state Division of Motor Vehicles. Each plate purchase results in a \$10 donation to the fund each year.

Currently, the Wildlife Diversity Program does not have enough funds on hand to match the federal dollars available at the new match ratio. Furthermore, those federal dollars are subject to federal budget constraints and are not guaranteed. Finally, full implementation of North Carolina's Wildlife Action Plan will require much more funding than is currently available through the State Wildlife Grants Program, so Teaming With Wildlife continues to work toward long-term wildlife funding. It is critical for conservation-minded citizens to continue to donate through the tax check-off.

"We absolutely cannot afford for people to get the perception that now that we have State Wildlife Grants that we're financially set," said Chris McGrath, statewide coordinator of the Wildlife Diversity Program. "The check-off dollars are declining. That perception could lead to further declines which could mean that we aren't able to match all of the federal dollars available, but more importantly, we are not able to implement the priority actions identified in our Wildlife Action Plan."



TEAMING WITH WILDLIFE

Teaming With Wildlife is a coalition of more than 4,500 organizations working to prevent wildlife from becoming endangered by supporting increased state and federal funding for wildlife conservation. This coalition includes wildlife managers, conservationists, hunters and anglers, businesses and many others who support the goal of restoring and conserving our nation's wildlife.

Historically, state fish and wildlife agencies have been on the front lines of conservation as stewards of wildlife. Effective state and local conservation work requires creative problem solving, including public and private partnerships, community will, ample funding, research, and dogged determination to work out practical management strategies. Teaming With Wildlife is committed to helping this happen.

With the leadership of state fish and wildlife agencies, wildlife action plans will bring together a diverse group of conservation partners including conservation organizations, hunter and angler groups, and state and federal agencies. The Teaming With Wildlife coalition supports these efforts, which will ultimately benefit both wildlife and people.

To find out how you can get involved with Teaming With Wildlife or supporting North Carolina's wildlife conservation efforts, visit www.teaming.com and click on "State Wildlife Action Plans."



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