A HELPING HAND FOR

WILDLIFE

BY EMILY PRESTON

Revised Wildlife Action Plan offers a hopeful outlook for New Hampshire’s threatened species and habitats.

Gliding across the water in my kayak, I pause, listening. The haunting cry of a loon carries across the water from somewhere behind me. But I am intent on the glowing insect that has landed on my bow – a common green darner dragonfly with green head and thorax and bright blue abdomen. This common insect migrates into New Hampshire each spring to forage and breed, leaving a new generation to again fly south for the winter – a long journey for such a small animal.

Seeing a moose grazing on wetland plants in the summer, watching a hawk soar above a ridgeline, admiring the sleek coat of an otter running along a river bank, or laughing at the antics of birds at your feeder – these are all part of the joy of living in New Hampshire. Who is responsible for caring for all these animals? Under state law, the N.H. Fish and Game Department has responsibility for all wildlife species – including insects and other invertebrates. But effectively caring for them takes all of us, and we have a tool to help us do just that: the New Hampshire Wildlife Action Plan.

A Road Map for Conserving Wildlife

The first Wildlife Action Plan was published in 2005 and contained a wealth of information about wildlife, their habitats, threats to both, and actions needed to conserve both the rare species and the common ones. Never before had all New Hampshire wildlife been assessed to discern which species needed our help. The assessment was based on data collected by a large group of scientists from Fish and Game, NH Audubon and other conservation groups and universities, and from citizens involved in programs such as the Reptile and Amphibian Reporting Program (RAARP). The resulting document, about 1,800 pages, included detailed profiles of 118 Species of Greatest Conservation Need and their habitats. There was information on threats to wildlife and habitats and a long list of actions to address them. The actions called for great cooperation, as they involved individuals, researchers, state agencies, conservation commissions, conservation groups, schools and more. Many of these partners had helped with the process of creating the plan, and they jumped right in to start implementing it.
We’ve accomplished a lot in the ten years since the first plan was published. The plan identified blocks of habitat that were in the “highest ranked” ecological condition – supporting rare species or plants, comprising a large block of unfragmented land, or free of structures like roads or dams. Over the past decade, land trusts, towns and agencies have protected 234,000 acres of these important habitats!

Conservation activities in all the New England states to protect New England cottontail rabbits, identified as a Species of Greatest Conservation Need, have been so successful that the US Fish and Wildlife Service determined that those conservation actions, if continued, would preclude federal listing. Volunteer citizen scientists surveyed dragonfly and damselfly species across the state, collecting over 18,000 sightings and allowing us to determine which species were in need of conservation action. Canada lynx were found breeding in Coos County. Core populations of Blanding’s turtles were identified, leading to more specific conservation actions. And we learned interesting differences about our black racer snakes from more southern racers – they need a lot more space!

We’ve made progress, but there are still many challenges. Cottontails still need active management through habitat restoration and captive breeding. Five bat species suffered from a new disease called White-Nose Syndrome, which has reduced populations of at least two species by over 90%. Climate change directly threatens coastal and riverine habitats and species today, and will affect all wildlife over time.

What’s Next for Wildlife?

N.H. Fish and Game and its partners completed a full revision of the Wildlife Action Plan in September of 2015, laying out priorities for the coming decade. Through a process that took almost two years, 100 scientists assessed species and habitats, identified threats and formulated actions. New maps of highest-ranked habitat were created, using new and better data. More than 170 New Hampshire citizens took part in six public input sessions, 123 commented on the draft plan, and over a thousand people provided input through an online survey.

The results? New Hampshire now has 169 Species of Greatest Conservation Need. The plan has detailed information on each species and the 27 types of habitat they rely upon. We assessed over 1,800 threats they face. We have statewide mapping for 24 habitats, including, for the first time, how various types of streams, rivers, lakes and ponds differ, based on what is important for wildlife. Most importantly, the plan outlines more than 100 actions in which everyone can participate.

One example of a new Species of Greatest Conservation Need, or rather a set of species, are four bumblebees – rusty-patched, yellow,
yellowbanded and American (once perhaps the most common species). These insects have declined dramatically over the last twenty years. Suspected causes are many, including loss of flowering plants through changes in agricultural methods that reduce weeds, increased pesticide use – especially neonicotinoids that persist in the environment for a very long time – and climate change. Efforts are underway across the country to help these species. Bumblebees need two kinds of habitat – flowers for foraging and undisturbed ground or grasses for nesting. You can help bumblebees by planting a "pollinator garden" using pesticide-free plants that bloom from early spring through late fall. Bumblebees are great pollinators and can increase yields of crops such as apples. They will fly and pollinate on days that are too cold for honeybees.

New Hampshire’s whippoorwills remain in trouble, too, but recent research shows hope for this species. Dr. Pam Hunt, biologist with NH Audubon, studied the nesting preferences of whippoorwills at Mast Yard State Park and discovered they have a distinct preference for recently harvested forests. Whippoorwills nest directly on the ground, and are thus vulnerable to predators. Forests with sparse trees and plenty of understory shrubs seem to be just the ticket. The open forest allows these birds to fly in search of their insect prey. Many other Species of Greatest Conservation Need also benefit from forest harvests, even intensive harvests, including woodcock, Eastern towhee and black racer snakes.

MAPPING WILDLIFE

The updated Wildlife Action Plan provides two sets of helpful wildlife habitat maps. The first shows different kinds of forest, wetlands and other types of habitats. The second identifies the most ecologically significant habitat for wildlife. These maps help communities identify important areas for wildlife and other natural resources to consider for protection. They help landowners manage habitat. Land trusts use them to help prioritize lands for acquisition. Major funders like the Land and Community Heritage Investment Program (LCHIP) incorporate them into their funding criteria. Learn more at takingactionforwildlife.org.
The Taking Action for Wildlife Program was established to help towns, conservation organizations and landowners implement actions in the Wildlife Action Plan. This partnership between Fish and Game, UNH Cooperative Extension, and the N.H. Association of Conservation Commissions provides technical assistance to communities, conservation organizations and landowners.

The program can help you learn how to conduct a natural resources inventory for a town, get townspeople out and active on town-owned lands, manage habitat for wildlife, and more. The Taking Action for Wildlife team also meets directly with conservation commissions, conservation organizations and landowners to help with projects. Sign up for an email newsletter with new tools and success stories about how communities and landowners are using the plan to help wildlife. Get started at takingactionforwildlife.org.

**TAKE ACTION TODAY!**

Five Ways to Take Action for Wildlife

1. **Plan for wildlife** - Conduct a Natural Resources Inventory that includes wildlife.
2. **Know your wildlife** - Find out what wildlife species are in your town using creative activities to engage residents, like a “bioblitz” or wildlife sightings map activity. Take photos or keep a journal of wildlife observations to get to know your land better.
3. **Make habitat happen** - Protect, restore, or manage habitat on your property to make your land better for wildlife.
4. **Explore outdoors** - Host outdoor events, like a field visit to local wildlife habitats on municipal lands.
5. **Support conservation** - Know your local land trust and work with them to conserve important wildlife habitats in town.

Habitats in need of conservation include our floodplain forests. They are found along streams and rivers and are dominated by silver maples and elm on larger rivers, and red maples on streams. Wood turtles, another Species of Greatest Conservation Need, depend on floodplain areas for foraging and nesting - using a combination of open forest, dense shrub cover and open sandy areas at different times of year. As their name suggests, floodplain forests also provide important storage for flood waters, a growing concern as climate change intensifies storms and associated flooding. Humans have historically converted floodplain forest to agriculture because of the rich soils created by repeated spring flooding. Development flourishes where well-traveled roads follow rivers. Conservation actions include preventing new development in floodplains, restoring buffers along streams and rivers to natural vegetation (which also improves water quality), and controlling invasive plants.

The revised Wildlife Action Plan for New Hampshire can be found on the Fish and Game website at wildnh.com/wildlife/wap.html. Read about particular species and habitats, learn about each of the 11 threat categories, and explore how you can help.

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