

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

With extensive coastal marshes, islands, native prairies, and diverse coastal and interior forests and savannas, Louisiana provides habitat for an enormous variety of fish and wildlife. Louisiana's abundant and diverse wildlife includes 64 mussel species, 35 crawfish species, 140 species of reptiles and amphibians, 70 mammal species, 450+ bird species, and hundreds of inland and marine fishes. Louisiana provides refuge to millions of migrant landbirds on a typical spring day and five million waterfowl during an average winter. Louisiana supports approximately 200 wading bird and seabird colonies, some of which are among the largest in North America for certain species. Louisiana also supports some of the richest and most diverse fisheries in the United States, both recreational and commercial.

Despite the extensive and diverse habitat that Louisiana provides, many species are experiencing declines or are at risk. Louisiana is not alone in this regard, as the situation is similar nationwide. In recognition of this fact, the State and Tribal Wildlife Grants (SWG) Program was created by federal legislation in November 2001. The SWG Program is administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Division of Federal Aid, which also oversees the highly successful Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration programs.

The SWG program was established "for the development and implementation of programs for the benefit of wildlife and their habitat, including species that are not hunted or fished," with the goal of preventing species from being federally listed as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The inclusion of species that are not hunted or fished is a crucial aspect of the SWG program, as many of these species previously had no existing source of funding. In fact, the SWG program has now become the primary federal funding source for nongame conservation nationwide. Another crucial aspect of the SWG program is the focus on proactive conservation measures designed to preclude future ESA listings. This is important because conservation is often more effective and efficient before species undergo declines sufficient to warrant ESA action.

Congress stipulated that each state fish and wildlife agency that wished to participate in the SWG program develop a Wildlife Action Plan (WAP) to guide the use of SWG funds. The Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) developed the 2005 Louisiana WAP, which was submitted for approval to the National Advisory Acceptance Team in October 2005 and subsequently approved in December of that year. The WAP is the roadmap for nongame conservation in Louisiana and must be reviewed and revised every ten years to ensure that it remains an effective tool for conservation planning and implementation.

The 2005 Louisiana WAP was developed by LDWF in coordination with other stakeholders of Louisiana's natural resources, and LDWF again took the lead in the 2015 revision of the Louisiana WAP. Beginning in 2012, LDWF began a comprehensive review and revision process that has culminated in this document. As with the creation of the 2005 WAP, for the 2015 revision, LDWF involved a broad base of conservation

stakeholders and technical experts in the process of updating the Louisiana WAP and in reviewing the draft revised WAP prior to finalization. Although LDWF was the lead agency in developing the 2015 WAP, this document is intended to be used by all conservation stakeholders in the state.

As with the development of the 2005 WAP, the initial step in revising the WAP was a review of the status of Louisiana's fish and wildlife species. This process enabled LDWF to update the Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN) list, which provides the framework on which the WAP is constructed. The 2015 revision process has yielded a list of 345 SGCN, including 123 invertebrate and 222 vertebrate species. SGCN have been added for every taxonomic group, with the largest increase in invertebrate taxa. This includes mollusks, crustaceans, and non-crustacean arthropods (e.g., insects, spiders, etc.) and reflects an effort to be more inclusive of these often-overlooked species. The 2015 SGCN include a handful of game species, although the vast majority of SGCN are nongame species. In addition to these 345 animal SGCN, a list of 350 rare plants is included in the 2015 Louisiana WAP. Although plant species are not currently eligible for SWG funding, these species are included to raise their conservation profile, as well as in the hope that a funding source for these organisms may emerge within the next ten years.

After updating the SGCN list, the next steps in the revision were to review and update (1) threats to SGCN, (2) research and survey needs for SGCN, and (3) conservation actions needed to improve the status of SGCN. Threats to SGCN were classified using the hierarchy provided by Salafsky et al. (2008), in order to improve consistency with other states. Briefly, these threats include:

- Residential and Commercial Development
- Agriculture and Aquaculture
- Energy Production and Mining
- Transportation and Service Corridors
- Biological Resource Use
- Human Intrusion and Disturbance
- Natural System Modification
- Invasive and Other Problematic Species
- Pollution
- Geological Events
- Climate Change and Severe Weather

Over 500 research and survey needs and conservation actions are identified for SGCN in the 2015 WAP. By addressing these research needs and implementing the listed conservation actions, the status of Louisiana's SGCN can be improved. These lists are not presented as the only conservation needs for our fish and wildlife, but are intended as a starting point. The conservation landscape is constantly changing, and new opportunities and priorities may arise at any time.

Also of critical importance to the implementation of the WAP, and, ultimately the improvement in the conservation status of SGCN, is habitat conservation. Accordingly, a significant portion of the 2015 WAP is dedicated to detailed descriptions of the habitats upon which SGCN depend, as well as the assessment of threats to those habitats and conservation actions needed to address said threats. Additionally, habitats that were not included in the 2005 WAP have been added during the revision process. An additional 250+ research needs and conservation actions related to habitats are also provided in this revised WAP.

One theme that will emerge to readers of the Louisiana WAP is the importance of private lands in the conservation of our fish and wildlife resources. This is due to the fact that over 90% of the state is privately owned. Clearly, successful conservation will not be achievable solely by focusing on public lands. Indeed, the cooperation of conservation-minded private citizens will be critical to effective conservation of Louisiana's natural resources. LDWF has an excellent track record in working with landowners, and such efforts will need to be expanded moving forward. The maintenance and expansion of existing partnerships will also be critical to successful implementation of the Louisiana WAP, because LDWF cannot achieve the lofty goals of the WAP acting alone. Over 50 current or potential partner organizations are mentioned in the 2015 Louisiana WAP, and meeting the conservation needs of all SGCN will require partnership and collaboration with all of these entities.

A major addition to the 2015 WAP is the identification of priority geographies for the conservation of SGCN, which are known as Conservation Opportunity Areas (COAs). We expect that designation of COAs will help focus conservation action where it is most needed and also increase coordination and cooperation between LDWF and partners in the implementation of the WAP. These COAs represent an initial effort at identifying priority areas and, with the help of Louisiana's conservation stakeholders, will be further refined in the coming years.

Monitoring the implementation of the WAP is also critically important, because the identification of conservation actions that are highly successful, along with those that are less effective, will help to improve our efforts in both the short-term and long-term. Chapter 9 provides details on how LDWF will monitor the effectiveness of the conservation actions identified in the 2015 WAP, as well as overall success of the WAP. Adaptive management will be a major component of this approach and will allow us to continually refine our conservation efforts.

The SWG Program will continue to support research, survey, and conservation efforts for SGCN and the habitats that support them. However, SWG funding is currently not guaranteed from year to year, and ongoing national efforts, though not yet successful, to secure dedicated long-term funding for nongame conservation will be crucial to the ultimate successful implementation of not only the Louisiana WAP, but all WAPs nationwide. The success of the Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Programs demonstrate the potential game-changing nature of such dedicated funding – the ability of

wildlife and fisheries agencies across the nation to more adequately plan and execute multiyear, landscape scale conservation projects.

The 2015 Louisiana WAP will guide the conservation efforts of LDWF over the next 10 years. We expect this plan to garner increased support for the conservation of SGCN from additional state agencies, federal agencies, non-governmental organizations, academia, industry, and the public. Ultimately, the successful conservation of Louisiana's invaluable natural resources will only be achieved by all stakeholders working towards a shared goal and common vision for our future.