

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Louisiana serves as a permanent or temporary home to over 900 species of vertebrate animals and an unknown number of invertebrates. From its diverse coastal marshes to its interior pine-dominated landscapes, the state offers habitat to a variety of wildlife in numbers seldom exceeded elsewhere. These rich areas provide refuge to 24 million migrant songbirds on a typical spring day and 5 million waterfowl during an average winter. They're home to some 200 rookeries of wading birds and seabirds, some arguably the largest in North America.

Biologically diverse as it may be, many of the species and habitats critical to wildlife are declining. Through the development of the Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy (CWCS), we have reviewed the status of all wildlife species known in Louisiana, and have identified 240 species of concern that need specific conservation attention. This list of 173 vertebrates and 67 invertebrates is not limited to nongame species. Bobwhite Quail, Northern Pintail, and King Rail are examples of hunted species that are also in decline. Data indicate that the take from hunters is not the cause of this decline. Alternatively, habitat loss is the true source of the decline of these species and numerous nongame species. Factors that threaten habitat also influence populations of these declining species, and these threats must be addressed in order to stop the declines.

In an attempt to meet this challenge, the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) broadened its constituency base in the development of the Louisiana CWCS. In addition to continuing its relationship with the sportsmen community, LDWF began dialog with new partners and constituents. LDWF's success in managing species of game animals (hunted, fished, and trapped species) has been due largely to our cooperation with hunters, anglers, trappers, and groups representing them. It has been necessary to develop new partnerships with organizations, individuals, and federal and state agencies whose missions may impact wildlife and with whom we have had little or no interaction. It became evident early in the development of the CWCS that confirming and expanding these relationships would be key to creating a plan that would successfully reverse the declines of species of conservation concern.

Through a process described in detail in Chapter 3, LDWF and its cooperators developed this CWCS. More than 7,500 person-hours have been spent within the last year alone identifying species in decline, assessing threats to these species and their habitats, and developing more than 325 actions (strategies) to help stop the declines of species in conservation need. Using a modified version of software developed by The Nature Conservancy (TNC), habitat viability and threats analyses were completed for each of 38 terrestrial habitats in six ecoregions, 12 aquatic basins, and marine systems identified in this Strategy. A decision tree developed internally allowed LDWF to prioritize the habitats in each ecoregion for conservation actions. Of the 18 threats discussed, the following four threats were commonly identified as primary factors affecting these terrestrial habitats throughout the state:

- Habitat destruction or conversion
- Habitat fragmentation
- Habitat disturbance
- Altered composition and structure.

A similar list of threats appeared repeatedly across aquatic basins. These threats included:

- Modification of water levels/changes in natural flow patterns
- Sedimentation
- Habitat disturbance
- Nutrient loading
- Altered composition and structure

The threats arose from an array of sources discussed in Chapter 3.

The conservation actions or strategies were developed in seven focus group meetings held across the state with invited conservation organizations, forestry and wildlife associations, federal and state agencies, industry, universities, and private citizens. The strategies are presented by species, habitat, partner, threats and other groupings in Chapters 4 and 5, and Appendices N and O.

The development of new partnerships and the expansion of existing ones will be critical to implementing the Louisiana CWCS. The list of conservation strategies identifies 19 partners (six federal and five state agencies, as well as conservation organizations, non-government organizations (NGO), forestry, and industry). These are presented in Chapters 3 and 6. Some 105 strategies link us and our partners in conservation. The Louisiana CWCS emphasizes the importance of landowners in stopping the decline of species of conservation need. Some 42 strategies direct the agency to work with landowners. This represents nearly 13% of all strategies in the CWCS, and highlights the crucial role landowners will play in the implementation of the CWCS. Landowners, along with other partners, will be key to conservation in Louisiana in the years to come. The people of Louisiana will have greater opportunities than they have ever had to influence conservation of the state's wildlife and fisheries resources.

The Louisiana CWCS conservation priorities are presented in Chapter 7 and in Appendix M. Terrestrial habitats are addressed by ecoregion. During implementation, LDWF will assimilate the habitat priorities with conservation strategies developed for each habitat type. This will provide direction for conservation actions over the next ten years. As new data are developed and new issues arise, annual monitoring will allow for adapting the plan to changing conditions. Our pine forests, especially those associated with longleaf pine, are among the habitats in need of critical attention, and are identified in Chapter 7 as high priorities in the ecoregions where they exist. The Louisiana CWCS provides conservation actions that we and our partners will take to insure survival of these and other habitats and the species they house. In aquatic systems, we lack data to thoroughly assess what species conservation actions are needed. Therefore, aquatic research is a conservation priority.

The State Wildlife Grants (SWG) Program will be used to support research and status surveys for species of concern and the habitats that support them. LDWF will create and maintain a database, to be updated yearly, containing information on all wildlife research and monitoring activities occurring in Louisiana, and is committed to hiring a full-time person at the project manager level to monitor the success of the strategies identified in this document.

Success of the Louisiana CWCS will rest on implementation of the various conservation actions or strategies developed in the writing of the plan. These strategies present explicit and concise approaches to addressing the identified threats to Louisiana's species of conservation concern and their associated habitats. The conservation actions or strategies fall into several categories including:

- Land protection efforts
- Information management
- Partnerships
- Education and outreach
- Technical interactions
- Restoration efforts
- Surveys and research
- Monitoring
- Conservation design

In order to accurately measure the success of these strategies, a series of performance indicators was devised (Tables 8.3 through 8.7). These performance indicators give concrete, quantitative measures on which LDWF can base its evaluation of the success of the CWCS. A specific schedule for reporting on the implementation of strategies and a database of the corresponding performance indicators is essential. Tables 8.8 and 8.9 present the schedules for accomplishing these tasks.

This document presents a plan that will guide the conservation efforts of the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries over the next 10 years. It is ambitious, measurable, and necessary to focus the attention of our employees, our partners, and our public on the needs of those species in decline. Our challenge will be to continue the communications we currently have with our constituents and begin new dialog with the partners that can help us implement the ideas expressed in this plan. We must work together to assure a productive future for the wildlife we all value.

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