

Chapter 6.

Implementation of the Minnesota Wildlife Action Plan

Introduction

The Wildlife Action Plan has been implemented in various ways throughout Minnesota by DNR staff and a variety of partners:

- Within the DNR, the Nongame Wildlife Program, the Division of Fish and Wildlife habitat programs, the Scientific and Natural Areas Program, the Environmental Review Program, Subsection Forest Resource Management Planning, and the Minnesota Biological Survey have integrated the plan into their work.
- Local units of government and lakeshore associations are working to protect and restore lakeshores.
- State, national, and county forest managers are assisting with the implementation of research projects to benefit forest SGCN.
- Private landowners, the DNR, the National Wild Turkey Federation, and the Prairie Enthusiasts are restoring southeastern Minnesota bluff prairies, oak savannas, and woodlands for SGCN.
- The Nature Conservancy's multi-partner initiative is developing and implementing the Minnesota Prairie Conservation Plan.
- Audubon Minnesota has established 57 Important Bird Areas across the state.
- A partnership of the Minnesota Department of Commerce-Energy Facilities Permitting and the Minnesota Public Utilities Commission is collecting baseline information on bat fatalities at commercial wind farms in southern Minnesota to inform the siting of future turbines, thereby sustaining bat populations and the public's support of commercial wind farms.
- Nine Species Technical Advisory Teams made up of experts from within and outside the DNR helped prioritize survey, research, and monitoring needs and assisted with the updating of Wildlife Action Plan.
- An Executive Partnership Committee made up of representatives from The Nature Conservancy, the US Fish and Wildlife Service, Audubon Minnesota, Natural Resources Conservation Service, and the DNR assists with the coordination of implementation efforts among their agencies and organizations.

The successful implementation of the 2015–25 Wildlife Action Plan will be ensured through the continued involvement of the existing partners and the development of new partnerships. Two new planning initiatives and one long-standing partnership will join many other partners in the implementation of the plan. These are described below.

The Minnesota Prairie Conservation Plan

The Minnesota Prairie Conservation Plan sets goals to protect the state's remaining native prairie, create prairie core areas and connecting corridors, and enhance the surrounding agricultural matrix

for wildlife by maintaining native perennial vegetation. The plan implements this conservation work using grass-based agriculture in ways that are cost effective and supported by local communities. Organizations and agencies that developed the plan include the Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council, Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources, Minnesota DNR, Minnesota Prairie Chicken Society, Pheasants Forever, The Conservation Fund, The Nature Conservancy, and the US Fish and Wildlife Service.

Staff revising Minnesota's Wildlife Action Plan worked in close partnership with the Prairie Conservation Plan staff to ensure that the two plans are complementary and that the Conservation Focus Area boundaries align with the Prairie Conservation Plan cores. The Prairie Conservation Plan will be a primary partner in the implementation of Minnesota's Wildlife Action Plan in the Prairie Parkland and Tallgrass Aspen Parkland Provinces.

Watershed Restoration and Protection Strategy (WRAPS)

The Minnesota Pollution Control Agency is implementing a watershed approach that includes a process to identify and address the threats to water quality in each major watershed. The Watershed Restoration and Protection Strategy includes monitoring water bodies, collecting and assessing data, developing strategies to restore and protect water bodies, and conducting restoration and protection projects in the watershed. Local units of government including watershed districts, municipalities, and soil and water conservation districts take the lead in developing and carrying out implementation plans. DNR staff participate in the WRAPS and provide opportunities for collaboration to improve watershed health.

Audubon Minnesota

Audubon Minnesota, in partnership with the DNR's Nongame Wildlife Program and others, began implementing the Important Bird Area (IBA) program in Minnesota in February 2003. Fifty-seven IBA sites covering 12,551,345 acres have been designated in Minnesota, 55 of which are represented in the Wildlife Action Network. Subsequently Audubon MN developed Implementation Blueprints for Minnesota Bird Conservation to further direct bird conservation efforts in the state. Audubon Minnesota will continue to be a primary partner in the implementation of the Wildlife Action Plan.

Implementation Structures

Division of Ecological and Water Resources

The DNR's Division of Ecological and Water Resources provides staff support and leadership for the implementation of the plan. This work is done in partnership with other DNR divisions and programs and external partners at the state, regional, and national levels. This plan puts greater emphasis than the previous plan on implementation through more formalized structures, as outlined below.

Regional Partnership Meetings

Biennial regional meetings with partners from within the DNR divisions and other agencies and organizations will be held in each DNR region beginning in early 2016. Wildlife Action Plan staff will coordinate with the Division of Ecological and Water Resources Regional Managers and staff in the planning and implementation of these meetings.

The need for a multi-partnership coordination structure was expressed by staff in all four DNR regions during meetings to discuss the revision of the Wildlife Action Plan and Conservation Focus Areas. Examples of regional partners include Tribal Governments, Soil and Water Conservation Districts, US Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service, Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, Bureau of Water and Soil Resources, US Fish and Wildlife Service, US Forest Service, The Nature Conservancy, The Wildlife Society, Ducks Unlimited, and other land managers, including local and regional governments.

These meetings will accomplish the following:

- Provide opportunities to coordinate implementation of on-the-ground habitat conservation projects to meet Wildlife Action Plan objectives.
- Identify, prioritize, and develop Wildlife Action Plan projects to be implemented within one or more of the mapped Conservation Focus Areas. This could include assessing available resources needed to implement projects; selecting projects; reviewing new information on species and habitats that has become available; establishing clear results specific to SGCN or their habitats; developing Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Results-oriented and Time-bound (SMART) objectives; identifying conservation actions; defining project effectiveness; and implementing monitoring to evaluate and report on effectiveness.
- Recommend new Conservation Focus Areas for the region or revise the boundaries of existing Conservation Focus Areas.
- Address opportunities for watershed/landscape project planning within Conservation Focus Areas or the Wildlife Action Network. This can include considering how management objectives and actions at the site level can be coordinated across sites to sustain or enhance landscape-scale biological diversity and improve the ecological functionality of conservation lands and waters.

Division of Ecological and Water Resources Operational Planning

Wildlife Action Plan staff will work with the managers and staff to incorporate the Wildlife Action Plan into the Division of Ecological and Water Resources' operational and work planning:

- As part of annual work planning, Wildlife Action Plan staff will meet with the Division of Ecological and Water Resources Regional Managers and staff to identify priorities for the coming year and assess opportunities and resources available to implement Wildlife Action Plan objectives and conservation actions.
- Similar meetings will be held with the Minnesota Biological Survey and Nongame Wildlife Program managers and staff.
- Additional meetings will be held throughout the year as needed to evaluate progress and identify any issues or barriers to implementation.
- Because Division of Ecological and Water Resources regional staff work closely with staff from other divisions and many external partners within their regions, including local units of government, opportunities exist for involving partners in implementation of the Wildlife Action Plan through programs such as Reinvest In Minnesota Reserve, Conservation Reserve Program,

Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program, Agricultural Conservation Easement Program, and the Minnesota Forest Legacy Program.

- Wildlife Action Plan staff in collaboration with division staff and supervisors will prepare annual work and spending plans to implement the Wildlife Action Plan.

Additional Implementation Actions

Refine and Add to the Wildlife Action Network and Conservation Focus Areas

Meeting the Wildlife Action Plan's goal of ensuring the long-term health and viability of Minnesota's wildlife with a focus on species that are rare, declining, or vulnerable to decline will require increasing the knowledge about SGCN and the priority areas within which to focus conservation actions over the next 10 years. The Minnesota Biological Survey does not yet have animal and native plant community survey data for all of Minnesota. This effort along with other surveys will provide important information for the identification of areas for inclusion in the Wildlife Action Network and the prioritization of Conservation Focus Areas. As this new information becomes available, staff will use the expert-based, GIS methodology described in Appendix E to further develop and refine the Wildlife Action Network, identify new Conservation Focus Areas, and revise the boundaries of existing Conservation Focus Areas over the next 10 years.

Maintain Species Technical Advisory Teams (STATs)

The DNR will maintain existing Species Technical Advisory Teams to provide guidance on surveying, monitoring, and implementing conservation actions for SGCN. The DNR will establish an invertebrate advisory team(s) to provide recommendations on how to most effectively implement invertebrate conservation including developing guidelines for prioritizing survey or monitoring efforts. Species Technical Advisory Teams will also participate in the review and revision of the SGCN list in preparation for the 2025 Wildlife Action Plan.

Maintain and Enhance the Capabilities of Minnesota's Natural Heritage Information System (NHIS)

SGCN and native plant community data are stored in Minnesota's Natural Heritage Information System (NHIS). This information system is considered the most current and comprehensive source of information on the state's rare wildlife resources and their habitats. Survey and observation information on Minnesota's wildlife species and the ecological communities that support wildlife populations is managed so that the information is available to land managers, state and federal agency staff, local governments, planners, researchers, and others as they make decisions that will affect Minnesota's wildlife resources.

The DNR's Data Governance and Decision Support Program considers the collection, management, and use of quality information as fundamental to DNR's work. Effectively implementing Minnesota's Wildlife Action Plan will require additional resources to develop standardized data collection and management protocols and to train staff to enter data into the system in a timely manner so that the demands of a growing user base can be met. In addition the capabilities of the current system need to be expanded to adequately incorporate species and habitat monitoring information.

Develop Web-based Resources

Develop new and update current web resources, such as updating the Rare Species Guide and developing Wildlife Action Network and Conservation Focus Area GIS-based maps to assist partners with the implementation of the plan and reporting on its effectiveness.

Participate in Multistate, Ecoregional, and International Conservation Partnerships

Wildlife Action Plan staff will participate to the extent resources allow in conservation initiatives directed at the implementation of Wildlife Action Plans at multistate, ecoregional, and international scales, such as the State Wildlife Competitive Grant program and the US Fish and Wildlife Service's regional Landscape Conservation Cooperatives (Upper Midwest Great Lakes, Plains and Prairie Potholes, Eastern Tallgrass Prairie and Big Rivers). These and other regional initiatives (such as the Midwest Association of Fish and Wildlife Agency State Wildlife Action Plan Technical Committee) are essential to effectively conserving SGCN and their habitats in a changing climate and for assessing and reporting on the effectiveness of Wildlife Action Plans at landscape scales.

As resources allow, participation will also continue in international conservation initiatives that sustain or enhance habitats for Minnesota SGCN, such as the Southern Wings Program.

Communicate with Groups That Enhance Opportunities for the Public to Enjoy Wildlife

Wildlife Action Plan staff should communicate at least annually with representatives from groups such as those listed below to discuss opportunities to enhance opportunities for the public to enjoy SGCN and other wildlife and participate in their conservation.

- DNR, Division of Parks and Trails
- DNR, Scientific and Natural Areas Program
- DNR, Project Wet and Project Wild
- Bell Museum of Natural History
- Minnesota Science Museum
- Minnesota Zoo
- conservation organizations and local governmental units implementing citizen science or other programs
- regional and local parks and environmental learning centers

Invest Current Funds and Seek Additional Funding

- Direct the development, administration, and implementation of State Wildlife Grant-funded projects.
- Identify funding needs for SGCNs, initiate or supervise efforts to obtain outside funding for implementation of the Wildlife Action Plan by developing and defending proposals, and work with national partners to secure permanent federal funding for program implementation by participating in activities not defined as lobbying.
- Issue requests for proposals when funding is sufficient.