

Delaware Wildlife Action Plan

What is a wildlife action plan?

Congress asked each state to develop a wildlife action plan, known technically as a comprehensive wildlife conservation strategy. These proactive plans examine the health of wildlife and prescribe actions to conserve wildlife and vital habitat before they become more rare and more costly to protect.

Delaware snapshot

Landscape: Delaware is rich in wildlife habitats in spite of its small size, from coastal waters and beaches, to extensive tidal marshes and streams, to forested slopes and flatlands. Some are abundant and widespread, such as the mixed forests found throughout the state. Others, ranging from seepage wetlands to dune grasslands, are rare and scattered.

Management: More than 230,000 acres in Delaware are managed—either publicly or privately—for wildlife conservation, with about 75 percent of this land managed by the State.

Wildlife highlights: Perhaps Delaware's most dramatic natural spectacle occurs each spring on the shores of the Delaware Bay. Here, millions of spawning horseshoe crabs are followed by thousands of migrating sandpipers and plovers that feast on crab eggs, making the Bay one of the largest migratory shorebird stopovers in eastern North America.



Banded Red Knot/DNREC

Delaware's planning approach

The Delaware Wildlife Action Plan provides a general framework and specific strategies for conserving Delaware's native wildlife and the habitats they depend on as vital components of the state's natural heritage. The plan identifies over 450 Species of Greatest Conservation Need—many of them rare, some declining, others still fairly common—and focuses on protecting the forests, streams, meadows, offshore waters and wetlands that sustain them. The plan prescribes

on-the-ground management actions for both public and private lands, strategies for enhancing partnerships and increasing public awareness, and steps to enhance the State's internal capacity to coordinate implementation.

Primary challenges to conserving wildlife in Delaware

Nearly 90 different conservation issues affecting species or habitats in Delaware

“Delaware’s Wildlife Action Plan is a blueprint for a legacy we can leave for our children and grandchildren: forests, fields, wetlands and waterways that teem with wildlife, a landscape that supports the outdoors as a part of family traditions, and a sense of place for future generations.”

– Governor Ruth Ann Minner

were identified in the plan, representing 16 categories, such as agricultural and forestry operations, water use, solid waste disposal, wildlife harvesting, climate change and others.



Habitat Loss/DNREC

Habitat loss, fragmentation or degradation, especially from residential development and related road construction, emerges as the most significant issue for wildlife

conservation. Long confined to northern Delaware and the vicinity of a few cities and towns, the problem has now spread throughout the state. Impacts vary among habitats, with loss and fragmentation most significant in upland forests and non-tidal wetlands,

and degradation—from the destruction of buffers—most significant in tidal wetlands.

Invasive species, nuisance animals and diseases, also threaten wildlife and habitats. The non-native common reed displaces native marsh grasses, while overabundant deer destroy forest wildflowers, and the Dermo parasite decimates oysters in the Bay. Even outdoor cats and dogs off leash may impact some wildlife. In addition to those species already present in Delaware, others nearby—Asian long-horned beetle, chronic wasting disease, water chestnut—can be expected to eventually reach the state.

Working together for Delaware’s wildlife

A group of “key partners” guided development of the Delaware Wildlife Action Plan, providing input on species lists, habitat classification and conservation issues and actions. The group included representatives from State and Federal

“Delaware’s Wildlife Action Plan is our best chance to escape the endless cycle of studies and research and actually do things to help the plants and animals we are pledged to protect. It’s a true call to action and gives us the science and practice for success.”

– John A. Hughes, Secretary, Delaware Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control

| Wildlife | Total number of species | Species in need of conservation | Threatened/endangered listed species |
|---------------|-------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Mussels | 14 | 10 | 6 |
| Snails | 27 | 18 | 0 |
| Crustaceans | 6 | 1 | 0 |
| Arachnids | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| Insects | 405 | 207 | 9 |
| Fish | 99 | 23 | 1 |
| Amphibians | 27 | 9 | 2 |
| Reptiles | 43 | 24 | 6 |
| Birds | 408 | 146 | 24 |
| Mammals | 66 | 18 | 1 |
| Totals | 1096 | 457 | 49 |

** This category was determined by a number of criteria, including rarity both in Delaware and range-wide, sensitivity to decline or other disturbance, and inclusion on certain other lists of species of concern. Generally, these species are indicative of the overall diversity and health of the State’s wildlife resources. Some may be rare or declining, others may be a vital component of certain habitats, and still others may have a significant portion of their population in Delaware.*

Wildlife highlights

| Highlight habitats | Wildlife (examples) | Issue (examples) | Action (examples) |
|--------------------------------|--|---|--|
| Beach and Dune Habitats | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • White tiger beetle • Diamondback terrapin • Red knot | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loss of natural beach dynamics from jetties and groins • Accidental spills of toxins and sewage • Recreational use | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess and monitor the environmental and economic costs and benefits of individual jetties and groins, and remove those that are ineffective or obsolete. • Develop/enhance partnerships with wildlife rehabilitators to improve emergency response. • Work with manufacturers and retailers to develop education and outreach for beach users and boaters about minimizing impacts. |
| Tidal High Marshes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Four-spotted pennant (dragonfly) • Rare skipper (butterfly) • Black rail | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overgrazing by snow geese and resident Canada geese • Excessive nutrients from agricultural runoff • Sea level rise | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase goose harvest on public and private lands as necessary to reduce impacts. • Work with the Department of Agriculture and the Tributary Action Teams to promote the use of Best Management Practices for erosion and sediment control. • Incorporate sea level rise scenarios in all relevant area, habitat and species management plans. |

Recommended actions to conserve Delaware’s wildlife

Rare Skipper on Milkweed/DNREC



Horseshoe Crabs Spawning Pair/DNREC

agencies and from non-profit conservation, land management and academic organizations and institutions. Public input was gathered during several public meetings and through the Division of Fish and Wildlife's website. The key partners group will be expanded into a broader steering committee to guide

implementation of the plan.

"The plan is great for Delaware. It focuses management efforts on protecting animals and habitats that need it the most."

– Michael Riska, executive director,
Delaware Nature Society



Shorebirds in Flight/DNREC

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