

# Rhode Island 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.

## Rhode Island snapshot

**Geography:** Rhode Island's wildlife is remarkably diverse considering that it is the smallest state in the nation and supports the second highest human population density. From the highlands in the northwest to the open waters of the Atlantic Ocean, Rhode Island has thousands of resident and migratory aquatic and terrestrial faunal species.

**Landscape:** Hosting almost 100 natural vegetative community types, the state's land and waterscapes support a spectrum from rare and endangered species to the most common and abundant. Rhode Island supports almost 900 vertebrate wildlife species and an estimated 20,000 invertebrates along the scenic coastline of Narragansett Bay and throughout the upland forests typical of the New England region.

**Wildlife:** Included in this natural diversity are 23 mammal species, 129 bird species, 21 reptile and amphibian species, 34 fish species and 157 invertebrate species that Rhode Island DEM DFW has identified as "in greatest conservation need" (GCN). These 364 GCN species are supported throughout the state in 64 different types of key habitats.



Carrion provision/RIDEM

## Rhode Island's planning approach

This Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy (CWCS) process identified threats to these important species and habitats, and it identified habitat loss and degradation from human population growth, with its associated impacts, as high on the long list of threats. This plan outlines a series of actions prescribed for the next decade to address these threats and to effectively conserve Rhode Island's important wildlife resources.

The CWCS planning process began with an exhaustive inventory of existing natural resource information, programs and stakeholders. This broad and inclusive approach was taken to compile and represent information on the status of wildlife conservation in the state and the diversity of public and private stakeholders. It included a review of other programs and efforts in the state, region and nation. Information on the full array of wildlife was researched, solicited and compiled. This information is presented as a summary of the status of wildlife species and their habitats in the state, and as the foundation for identifying species of greatest conservation need and their key habitats.

*"The role of the states in identifying and working in partnership to preserve, protect and increase habitats that sustain wildlife, bird and plant species is vital for ensuring the future of resource protection in our nation. The State Wildlife Grant Program provides critical annual funding and technical assistance to enable the states to take the lead in restoring high value species habitat and maintain healthy native populations. I am thrilled with Rhode Island's work in developing and implementing the Rhode Island Wildlife Conservation Strategy, and I believe it highlights important needs within our state to ensure a continued and beneficial coexistence between recreation, the economy, and the prosperity of Rhode Island's wildlife resources."*

*– U.S. Senator Lincoln Chafee*



American Redstart/Jay Osenkowski

The resulting product provides the vision and direction for effective and efficient wildlife conservation in Rhode Island, including collaboration with the conservation community and citizens alike for the next decade. It is designed to respond and adapt to current needs and to be evaluated at regular intervals in order to provide the most appropriate and effective conservation for wildlife in greatest need of conservation in Rhode Island.

### Primary challenges to conserving wildlife in Rhode Island

In Rhode Island, regional and localized threats add to national and international threats such as climate change, habitat conversion, overfishing and pollution. Development, human disturbance, catastrophic oil spills, and inadequate funding for surveys and management threaten the region's shorebirds. The state's forests

and their fauna are threatened by habitat loss, fragmentation, residential development, pests and pathogens, climate change, acid deposition, and invasive plant species. General or statewide threats that were identified in multiple plans and by stakeholder input include:

- Habitat loss and fragmentation from lack of conservation planning and coordination (resulting in land conversion, etc.)
- Habitat loss from inadequate-sized reserves (including poor landscape context, loss of connectivity, etc.)
- Habitat fragmentation from lack of focal area approach to conservation
- Lack of GCN species and key habitat data needed for incorporation into the comprehensive strategy
- Lack of research to guide threat assessment and prioritization of conservation planning
- Lack of strategy to implement landscape-level biodiversity and water quality/quantity monitoring to support planning and assessment
- Lack of strategy to support priority research

Taxa	Species found in RI	State listed	Federally listed	S1 & S2 Ranked	S3 Ranked	G1 & G2 Ranked	GCN Species
Mammals	91	12	8	8	3	1	23
Birds	427	58	4	75	28	0	129
Reptiles & Amphibians	46	13†	4	9	3	2	21
Fish	306	2	1	7	8	0	34
Invertebrates <small>(estimated 20,000 +)</small>	396†	56	1	56	17	1	157
<b>Totals</b>	<b>870†</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>155</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>364</b>

† As listed in RI DEM

Key: S1 Rank = Critically imperiled in the state

S2 Rank = Imperiled in the state

S3 Rank = Vulnerable to extirpation or extinction in the state

Species ranked S4 Rank = Apparently Secure, S5 Rank = Secure or unknown (for invertebrates) are not shown

G1 Rank = Critically imperiled across its entire range (i.e., globally)

G2 Rank = Imperiled across its entire range (i.e., globally)

### Wildlife diversity of Rhode Island- species richness by taxa

Highlight habitats	Wildlife (examples)	Issue (examples)	Action (examples)
<b>Pitch Pine/ Scrub Oak Barrens</b>	Pine barrens buckmoth, Oblique-lined tiger beetle, Eastern hognose snake	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fragmentation, development, plant succession</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop habitat management plans for barrens on public lands.</li> </ul>
<b>Shrublands</b>	New England cottontail, Blue-winged warbler, neotropical migrants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Vegetation succession</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop forest regeneration programs to create successional habitats.</li> </ul>

### Recommended actions to conserve Rhode Island's wildlife

- Lack of advocacy for environmental review
- Lack of authority from and enforcement of current regulations
- Lack of advocacy for comprehensive wildlife conservation
- Broad scale temporal and spatial climate change

Some of these general statewide threats reflect landscape-level land-use trends in Rhode Island. The state's cultural history has played an important role in shifting land uses over time, leading to changes in the abundance and distribution of various habitats. As true historically as for

other New England states, Rhode Island's natural landscape has been significantly altered by the increase in human population and associated human activities. The colonists quickly cleared the state's forests (which dominated the landscape) and converted them to farms, but by the 1850s, when the state's agricultural production was eclipsed by the country's westward expansion, the abandoned fields gradually reverted to forest. Forest recovery peaked in the 1950s and has been declining ever since; by 1998, only 59% of the state was forested. During the 1990s, the human population grew by 4.5% to 1,048,319 inhabitants, making Rhode Island the second most densely populated state in the nation. Yet the state



Wilbur Woods River/Jay Osenkowski

ranks 9th in the nation in percentage of forest cover, making the state one of the few places in the world where so many people live within the forest.



Wood Frog (*Rana sylvatica*)/Jay Osenkowski

communication, coordination and integration. Close coordination with the Teaming with Wildlife and Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies committees as well as local, state, regional, and national conservation partners was maintained in order to capitalize on advancements and encourage integration and future coordination through the implementation of this SWG CWCS. Coordination cut across traditional program divisions to encourage integrated natural resource priority setting to result in mutually beneficial efficiency and economy of scale. It fostered the broader “system” approach that identified and addressed wildlife species in broader habitat associations and more holistic assemblages representing biotic communities for more effective conservation.

For aquatic species and habitats, this CWCS process identified loss of habitat value for wildlife through hydrologic impacts such as water withdrawals for irrigating agricultural fields and golf courses, non-point source pollution from development and urban runoff, and point source pollution from municipal and industrial discharges as primary, overarching threats across many habitats within Rhode Island. Increased sedimentation and pollution from adjacent land use changes/development was another important multi-habitat problem needing conservation action.

### **Working together for Rhode Island’s wildlife**

A wide array of stakeholders participated in the development of the process as well as the resulting lists of wildlife species and habitats, threats and conservation actions. Extensive input was provided by natural resource staff throughout the RI DEM DFW. The resulting process engaged a broader network of individuals and entities and sparked increased

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