

Virginia 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.

Virginia snapshot

Geography: From the Atlantic Ocean and coastal beaches on Virginia's eastern shores to the towering Mount Rogers and the Cumberland Gap at its southwest corner, the Commonwealth includes every wildlife habitat that occurs naturally from Maine to Florida.

Landscape: Nearly 10% of Virginia is public land—one of the largest percentages of public holdings of any state along the Eastern Seaboard. These lands are managed by an array of federal, state, and local government agencies, often in cooperation with local non-profit organizations. Programs that provide technical and financial assistance for habitat conservation and restoration on private lands are vital to sustaining Virginia's rich and diverse wildlife resources.

Wildlife: Peregrine falcons soar from the beaches to the mountains, making their homes occasionally in Virginia's cities. The incredibly rich diversity of native mussels, with interesting names like elephant-ear, rabbitsfoot, and Tennessee heelsplitter, inhabit nearly 40,000 miles of rivers and streams.

Virginia's planning approach

Virginia's Wildlife Action Plan united its natural resource agencies and citizens through a common vision and concept



Piney Grove Preserve (red-cockaded woodpecker habitat)/Dwight Dyke, VA Dept of Game and Inland Fisheries

for the conservation of the Commonwealth's wildlife and the habitats in which they live. It also provides a means for prioritizing actions and spending for the greatest return. The Action Plan includes 925 species of greatest conservation need, representing a broad array of wildlife, and it focuses on the habitats that support them, such as caves, high elevation forests, coastal marshes and barrier islands. Most importantly, the Action Plan identifies the tasks needed to conserve these species and habitats on a regional basis. While many of these actions are direct on-the-ground activities, priorities for enhancing partnerships and increasing public awareness are also included. The work of conserving wildlife can be challenging, but it is possible, and this Action Plan provides the needed direction.

“The planning and this report represent vital steps that will enable us to keep our common species common and to ensure that the Commonwealth's wildlife and wild places remain for future generations.”
—Virginia Audubon Council Representative John Coe

“During my tenure as a member and as chairman of the Board [of Game and Inland Fisheries], I have had few opportunities to participate in projects that have involved such a wide and diverse array of citizens and constituent groups... Importantly, this initiative allowed us to reaffirm and strengthen our relationships with our long-time conservation partners. It also allowed us to meet new friends... We have all agreed that this ... will guide us together, sharing our limited resources to address the commonly-identified priority needs.”

*– Sherry Smith Crumley
Chairman of the Board of Game and Inland Fisheries*

Primary challenges to conserving wildlife in Virginia

Habitat destruction and fragmentation dominate the list of problems facing terrestrial wildlife in the Commonwealth. For Virginia’s aquatic wildlife, the Action Plan identifies certain agricultural and forestry practices that have greatly affected water and habitat quality. Pollution and habitat changes from industry and municipal development are also critical issues for aquatic species.

Many grassland wildlife species are experiencing dramatic declines in populations because of the loss of grassland and savannah habitats across the Commonwealth. These important habitats are being converted to other agricultural crops (including cool season grasses), are being lost as farms are converted for municipal uses, and are being replaced by other habitats when farmlands are abandoned and allowed to mature into forested lands.

Habitat degradation in the rivers of southwestern Virginia, resulting from certain mineral extraction and agricultural practices, and as well as from the impoundment of these rivers downstream in Tennessee, has significantly impacted this biologically diverse “hot spot” in the United States. Over one-half of the freshwater mussel species found in this watershed are now listed as threatened or endangered. These species, which are important food sources for other wildlife and which serve as filterers in these rivers, are highly dependent on good water quality.

Working together for Virginia’s wildlife

The Virginia Wildlife Action Plan was developed with input from a wide array of public and private agencies and organizations. A steering committee composed of representatives of state and federal agencies, private conservation organizations, and land management

Wildlife	Total number of species	Species in need of conservation*	Threatened/endangered listed species
Mussels	89	63	36
Snails	?	96	7
Crayfish	?	14	0
Insects	20,000+	290	9
Fish	210	97	20
Amphibians	74	32	4
Reptiles	61	28	8
Birds	374**	96	12
Mammals	85	24	10
Other Invertebrates	?	185	5
Totals	20,893++	925	111

** Each state is using its own criteria for this category. Virginia focused on species that demonstrated some level of rarity or risk of imperilment (e.g., subject to habitat loss, impacted by pollution, currently at low population levels, etc.). These species were further grouped into four tiers of relative imperilment, with the top tier including those of “critical conservation need” and the fourth tier including those of “moderate conservation need.” The list does include some wildlife officially listed as threatened or endangered within the Commonwealth.*

*** Includes breeding and most migratory birds.*

Wildlife highlights

Highlight habitats	Wildlife (examples)	Issue (examples)	Action (examples)
Barrier Islands Ownership: mix of public/private	Piping plover (bird), American oystercatcher (bird), Northern diamond-backed terrapin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recreational use • Predation by introduced species 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with partners and local communities to provide greater outreach to beach users about the need to minimize impacts. • Remove introduced predators, particularly foxes and raccoons, on public and private lands as necessary to reduce impacts.
Upper Tennessee watershed (Clinch, Powell, and Holston Rivers) Ownership: mix of public/private	Birdwing pearl mussel (freshwater mussel), Wounded darter (fish), Eastern hellbender (amphibian), Clinch River crayfish (crayfish)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sedimentation • Channel and shoreline alteration • Organic pollutants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide incentives to private landowners to restore and maintain shoreline and stream habitats. • Protect vegetated stream buffers to limit sedimentation. • Work with government agencies and industries on strategies to reduce contaminant discharges.
Grassland Ownership: mix of public/private	Grasshopper sparrow (bird), Upland sandpiper (bird), Eastern slender glass lizard (reptile)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Habitat fragmentation and degradation • Exotic species 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve incentives to private landowners to restore and maintain large patches of grassland habitats. • Restore warm season grasses and reduce the use of cool season grasses.

Recommended actions to conserve Virginia's wildlife



Assateague Island/
Dwight Dyke, VA Department
of Game and Inland Fisheries

“I am particularly pleased with the outcome [of the Virginia Wildlife Action Plan] because it is the result of the work of hundreds of Virginians... Through this partnership, we were also able to identify a wide array of needs that we must address if we are to continue our roles as stewards of these resources...

This strategy presents a challenge to each and every Virginian. We cannot follow this new course or uphold our duty to conserve the Commonwealth’s biological diversity without the support of our citizens and the financial assistance of our elected officials... I hope that you will find your niche and do your part.”

*– W. Tayloe Murphy, Jr.
(former) Virginia Secretary
of Natural Resources*

entities provided guidance throughout the development of the plan. Technical committees comprised of more than 50 scientific experts from around Virginia provided input into the development of the list of species of greatest conservation need, the identification of the habitats that support them, the problems these resources face, and important conservation actions needed to address these threats. Key partners from public and private interests will become part of the steering committee that is guiding the implementation of the plan; all agencies, groups and organizations interested in wildlife conservation can participate in the implementation working groups.

An important component of the development of the Virginia Wildlife Action Plan was the participation of citizens from around the state. Efforts to involve Virginians included numerous presentations to groups throughout Virginia, news releases, periodic mailings, fact sheets, radio and newspaper interviews, and a dedicated project Web site. In fact, the Wildlife Action Plan project Web site was used as the primary tool for soliciting comments from the public. Twenty-two meetings were held across the Commonwealth, attended by nearly 200 individuals representing over 100 agencies and organizations and themselves. At these meetings, participants were asked to identify what, in their opinions, was working well in Virginia in wildlife conservation and what needed improvement in this area. They were also asked to identify and rank the top issues facing wildlife and habitats in their communities now and in the next decade, along with local solutions to address those problems.



Tennessee River watershed mussels/
VA Department of Game and Inland Fisheries

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