

Endangered and Nongame Species Program
Monthly Report for 16 May – 15 June, 2021

Staff:

John Heilferty, Chief
Kathy Clark, Supervising Zoologist
Jeanette Bowers-Altman, Principal Zoologist
Christina “Kashi” Davis, Environmental Specialist II
Amanda Dey, Principal Zoologist
Gretchen Fowles, GIS Specialist
MacKenzie Hall, Environmental Specialist II
Emily Heiser, Assistant Biologist
Sharon Petzinger, Senior Zoologist
Bill Pitts, Senior Zoologist
Kris Schantz, Principal Zoologist
Robert Somes, Senior Zoologist
Brian Zarate, Senior Zoologist

Administration – J. Heilferty

In May, the state began easing restrictions related to Covid-19. Field work that accommodates the remaining restrictions is being conducted, but most staff continued to work from home when possible.

ENSP staff are finalizing the 2022-2024 grant proposals in the new federal Tracking and Reporting on Actions for Conservation of Species (TRACS) format in preparation for review and ultimately, input into TRACS online.

Landscape Project – J. Heilferty

No new report.

Habitat Change Analysis Project (HCAP) –S. Petzinger

No new report.

Technical Guidance & Policy/Planning – all staff

K. Clark coordinated with USFWS Regional permits office on bald eagle permit issues.

J. Bowers-Altman and R. Somes completed an assignment as part of the DEP’s Invasive Species Management Plan Steering Committee.

J. Bowers-Altman continued reviewing scientific collecting permit applications relating to freshwater mussels for the upcoming season.

Biotics Database – G. Fowles

Biotics staff continue to work on developing the NJ Wildlife Tracker online submittal application in collaboration with the Bureau of GIS, that will work as seamlessly as possible with new customized batch upload tools for the Biotics database. The batch upload tools needed to be updated but are now working properly and drafts of all of the elements of the new NJ Wildlife Tracker application back-

end are mostly complete and staff are now working on testing and tweaking before a soft release anticipated in July.

ENSP now has two temporary services staff on board to help with Biotics data management after several months of struggling with lack of staff to adequately handle the incoming data flow, backlog, and conversion over to an all-electronic system. Computers are also in for the staff and G. Fowles is working with the help desk to get them set up with the necessary programs and access to work remotely. A. Mitchell with the Division of Land Resource Protection is also helping with Biotics on a part-time basis. As the temporary service employees' computers get set up properly, they are working through organizing the backlog of data that has built up, and G. Fowles and A. Mitchell are working on training them on Biotics methodology.

G. Fowles is also working with a Rutgers student to revamp and update the bald eagle foraging model so that it runs more efficiently, and we can update the nests and foraging model in the latest SOA version to reflect newer data.

Connecting Habitat Across New Jersey (CHANJ) – G. Fowles, B. Zarate, M. Hall

B. Zarate led a webinar on terrapin road barriers with DOT maintenance staff and the Wetlands Institute. G. Fowles led and the CHANJ team participated in a bi-monthly Roads and Wildlife Working Group meeting on June 10, with colleagues from the Div. of Land Resource Protection and NJDOT. G. Fowles reviewed videos obtained by a WCC volunteer of wildlife using a structure under Rte. 287 and fence modifications were discussed. The group continued discussions about reducing plastics and wildlife-hazardous materials in erosion control led by K. Schantz, P. DiMeo gave a presentation on H&H 101 with follow-up discussion about flooding calculations when reviewing structure design and we will continue the discussion at the next meeting, and B. Zarate and P. Scelsci gave a recap of the terrapin road barrier webinar earlier in the month. The need to get existing terrapin barrier projects into the Roads Wildlife Mitigation Projects Database was discussed.

The CHANJ team collected additional mammal tissue samples from volunteers across the state for gene flow analyses. G. Fowles updated the layers using the newest USA Protected Areas dataset in the CHANJ and Action Team Web Viewers. M. Hall wrote and sent out a CHANJ listserve post in early June highlighting the New York Times article, "[How Do Animals Safely Cross a Highway? Take a Look.](#)", as well as the "[Road Wildlife Mitigation Projects](#)" across NJ represented in our interactive CHANJ Mapping.

G. Fowles gave a talk on the CHANJ project and B. Zarate participated at the Virginia Safe Wildlife Corridors Collaborative meeting on June 11 (virtually), having been invited as VA is currently working on developing habitat connectivity mapping and tools per legislation the state adopted to protect wildlife corridors.

G. Fowles and B. Zarate participated in a meeting with NRCS, the Sourlands Conservancy and Friends of Hopewell Valley Open Space (FoHVOS) to discuss advancing habitat connectivity work in the Sourlands region on private land. G. Fowles conducted a subsequent GIS analysis identifying parcels in the region that overlap with CHANJ mapped Cores and Corridors and then identified which parcels represented open space vs. privately owned and the sizes of those parcels, which was shared with Sourlands Conservancy, FoHVOS, and NRCS. NRCS will use the analysis to send out a mailer to identified private landowners to invite them to an informational meeting about CHANJ and possible funding availability for habitat work. This represents a systematic, targeted approach to shoring up habitat connectivity in the region.

Habitat Conservation Management on Public Lands – All staff

The 30-day public comment period for draft addendum to the Sparta Mountain WMA Forest Stewardship Plan ended on May 23, 2021, and the addendum is being finalized. In summary, the addendum was sent to over 25,000 recipients and we received 46 comments from 43 different individuals/groups in return. Almost half of the comments received originated from a form letter objecting to logging state lands. Nine comments were in support of forest management. Five groups submitted comments: NJ Highlands Coalition, NJ Forest Watch, Sierra Club – NJ Chapter, Beaver Lake Realty Club, and NJ Audubon. There were falsehoods in many comments submitted, particularly by those opposed to logging state lands. The Sierra Club's comments contained the most egregious falsehoods, claiming logging at SMWMA will impact endangered deep forest birds like the northern harrier, pied-billed grebe, black rail, and upland sandpiper. While all the birds mentioned are endangered, none of them use forested areas, occur on Sparta Mtn, or be impacted by cutting trees.

Species Status Review – K. Clark

ENSP staff gave presentations on the pending status changes to the Endangered & Nongame Species Advisory Committee (ENSAC) at their May meeting. The ENSAC affirmed their support for ENSP procedures with regard to status reviews and updates.

State Wildlife Action Plan – All staff

Summaries of the Conservation Focal Areas (CFAs) were revised to update amounts and types of land cover and shared with OFWIS to include in updated on-line links to CFAs.

K. Schantz provided select ENSP biologists with an applicable subset of threats to assist in addressing outlying associations between the threats and the 11 broad habitat types and 49 CFAs.

HERPTILES

Snake Fungal Disease – K. Schantz

No new report.

Snakes – K. Schantz

K. Schantz drafted a Request for Proposal (RFP) for northern copperhead research to assess survey method(s) to identify dens and rookeries. The draft RFP has been submitted to the Director's Office for Budget and Finance (under the Assistant Commissioner) for additional guidance.

SGCN Turtles – B. Zarate and B. Pitts

Field work was continued and finalized for completing standardized surveys for box, wood, and bog turtles. Surveys included those conducted by volunteers, conservation project partners, and staff. Staff also participated in monthly coordination calls for each of these species projects. The notice of award was received this reporting period for the regional wood turtle competitive SWG. NJ will receive \$122,500.00 in federal funds and provide \$40,833.00 in match for a total project value of \$163,333.00. Funding will be used to research and monitor priority populations, improve a road barrier fence to minimize turtle road mortality, and address some illegal turtle trade issues.

Eastern Tiger Salamander – B. Pitts

Nothing to report.

Diamondback Terrapins - J. Bowers-Altman and B. Zarate

No new report.

MAMMALS

Bobcat Project – G. Fowles

There were 2 roadkilled bobcats reported during the reporting period in northern NJ. The carcasses were collected, samples were taken and necropsies performed. Several tissue and scat samples were sent to the National Genomics Center for Fish and Wildlife Conservation for analysis, including from the southeast area of NY where we had few samples as a result of a collaboration with researchers at Black Rock Forest, NY.

Bat Conservation – M. Hall

No new report available.

Allegheny Woodrat – G. Fowles

With permissions obtained, staff are surveying all historic Allegheny woodrat sites in the Delaware Water Gap of New Jersey using a standardized baited trail camera survey. The distribution of anthelmintic baits in the vicinity of active woodrat sites in the Palisades continues every 6-8 weeks to treat local raccoons for roundworm, in an effort to prevent *B. procyonis* infection in the Allegheny woodrat population because it has been shown to be a serious mortality factor.

G. Fowles participated in a special regional woodrat working group call, in between our regular bi-monthly calls, which focused on initiating an Allegheny woodrat captive breeding program to support conservation efforts. The Toledo Zoo and the Maryland Zoo in Baltimore were on the call and expressed interest in initiating programs, particularly since there now is a multi-agency, communicative group of researchers across the region with whom to collaborate. The Philadelphia Zoo may have interest as well. We will discuss further on our regularly scheduled July call. The regional Allegheny woodrat working group was also recently highlighted in a [National Geographic article](#).

BIRDS

American Kestrel – B. Pitts

The 2021 Kestrel nest box season is shaping up to be a record year yet again! A total of 96 nesting attempts have been reported to ENSP with 30 attempts in Natural Lands (NL) boxes, 13 attempts in Friends of Hopewell Valley Open Space (FoHVOS) boxes, 4 attempts in Raritan Headwaters (RH) boxes, and 49 attempts in ENSP boxes. 46 adults have been captured by ENSP and partners with 23 newly banded birds and 23 recaptures; 235 new fledglings have been banded in 58 boxes, and to date only 14 boxes have been confirmed abandoned or predated.

Colonial Waterbirds – C. Davis

Davis and contractors completed aerial surveys of the marsh islands from Mantoloking from Cape May. Surveys focused on wading birds (Little Blue Heron, Tricolored Heron, Glossy Ibis, Yellow-crowned Night-heron, Black-crowned Night-heron, Great Egret, Snowy Egret, and White Ibis), terns (Common Terns, Foster's Terns, Gull-billed Terns, Caspian Terns), Black Skimmers and gulls (Herring Gulls, Great-black Backed Gulls, and Laughing Gulls). All known colonies were surveyed and efforts made to survey all new sites that were detected. White Ibis were detected nesting for the first time in the history of this survey (1976; they were confirmed nesting in NJ in 2020 but no aerial survey that year). Due to rising costs, a new helicopter company and type of helicopter was utilized this year. The Robinson 44 turned out to be a better option than the previously utilized Bell Jet

model. Flying without the doors while hot, offered a much better perspective on the colonies and allowed surveyors to be more efficient and accurate in their counts. Count data is not yet summarized so no information is available regarding the status of various species. Volunteers also helped with ground surveys of Yellow-crowned Night-Herons nesting in residential areas during this time period.

Beach-Nesting Birds - C. Davis & E. Heiser

The Memorial Day Nor'easter was particularly disruptive to beach-nesting birds. Approximately two-thirds of known nesting pairs lost nests or chicks to sustained high winds, flooding and below average temperatures. The majority of pairs have attempted a re-nest with a large percentage of nests hatching around or after the Fourth of July. Predator problems have been on the rise with this wave of re-nesting which is generally the case later in the season. Despite issues with the storm and predation, pair numbers for Piping Plover have increased in the state in 2021.

Staff continues to monitor nests and manage high disturbance nesting sites. The beach-nesting bird volunteer program has grown extensively this year – particularly in Strathmere where Plovers nested again for the first time since 2015. The Strathmere Piping Plover Project has been instrumental in helping to manage human disturbance at the site.

An offshore island that has formed off of Little Beach is hosting a large colony of terns and skimmers. Piping Plovers have been noted foraging there as well. ENSP staff was able to visit the island with the help of EBF NWR staff and their boat. Managing this island may prove challenging if nesting continues considering it will likely become a haven for recreational boaters. Additionally, ENSP staff does not currently have the resources to access the island.

Bald Eagle Monitoring - K. Clark

To date, 214 nests have been identified as active, 8 as territorial, and 40 as unknown status. Twenty-six new nests were documented so far. Nest monitors continued to watch nests to report number of nestlings and fledging.

The nest camera at the Three Bridges nest, installed by PSE&G and streamed by Conserve Wildlife Foundation of NJ, has grown in popularity. The two nestlings there are approaching fledging, expected by end of June. <http://www.conservewildlifenj.org/education/threebridges/>.

Peregrine Falcon Monitoring – K. Clark

K. Clark and volunteers are conducting regular nest monitoring. Specialized cameras are working at four nests to help staff identify prey that are delivered. Nestlings are being banded at all accessible nest sites, and nesting adult birds that are banded have been identified at most sites.

Osprey Monitoring – K. Clark

K. Clark and B. Wurst (of Conserve Wildlife Foundation) have been recording new nests as they are reported to us. Banding will be done in late June-early July by licensed bird banders who are volunteers on the project. We encourage citizens to monitor nests in their area and report their observations and key dates on the website www.osprey-watch.org.

Other Raptors – K. Clark

K. Clark continued to coordinate with non-profit partners on a coastal barn owl nest box program to support nesting in coastal areas.

Migratory Shorebirds – A. Dey

No new report.

Scrub-shrub/Open Field birds (GWWA) – S. Petzinger

Bird migration was delayed this year so bird surveys began on May 20 instead of May 15, 2021. NJ Audubon assisted with conducting surveys again this year. Two golden-winged warblers were captured and banded. Another four or five were detected during surveys but not all the data have been submitted.

Secretive Marsh Birds– C. Davis & E. Heiser

Black Rail surveys continued in earnest during this time period. Rails were surveyed via traditional call-playback surveys, from automated acoustic recording units (ARU), and by volunteers going out and passively listening in suitable habitat. Weather and minor logistical issues have, as always, delayed or cancelled some surveys, but significant progress was made towards the goal of surveying each of the 50 call-playback points 3x this season. This is our second year using ARUs and they have once again provided a valuable additional tool in our survey toolbox. A small number of Black Rails were detected, which was welcome news after very few in the last few years but still points to the remarkably small number of birds that are presumably present in the state. There were also multiple regional marsh-and Black Rail related virtual meetings, but those were difficult to attend due to the constraints of field season.

Monitoring Avian Productivity & Survivorship (MAPS) – S. Petzinger

Nothing to report.

Regional & National Bird Coordination – S. Petzinger

Nothing to report.

INVERTEBRATES & AQUATICS

Freshwater Mussels/Shortnose Sturgeon/Aquatics – J. Bowers-Altman

J. Bowers-Altman provided comments to LRP on several proposed instream projects relating to impacts on listed freshwater mussels. Reviewed a mussel relocation plan for a project involving instream work along the Delaware River. A conference call was held with K. Symanski (LRP) and J. Snavely (Normandeau Assoc.) re: freshwater mussel survey methods to be applied at a bridge repair site in Camden.

J. Bowers-Altman continued work on the NJ section of a Comp-SWG proposal focusing on Brook Floater conservation. The multi-state effort is being led by the State of Massachusetts and the Brook Floater Working Group. The proposal was submitted by MA prior to the due date.

Pollinator Conservation – R. Somes

R. Somes and seasonal staff distributed and assisted with the planting of several hundred pollinator plants that were held over from last fall. These plantings were conducted at several wildlife management areas and parks throughout the State.

R. Somes gave a presentation on Pollinator Conservation in NJ via livestream with the assistance of the Bureau of Information and Education.

Lepidoptera, Odonata, Coleoptera- R. Somes

R. Somes and seasonal staff conducted surveys for the Common Roadside Skipper in Yard's Creek and along the Appalachian Trail and observed 5 individuals in various patches of suitable habitat.

R. Somes and seasonal staff conducted surveys for Hessel's Hairstreak in several areas of Atlantic White Cedar in the Pinelands Region and documented two new occurrences for this species.

Surveys of the New Jersey Pine Barrens Tiger Beetle documented one new occurrence in Ocean County.