

**Endangered and Nongame Species Program  
Monthly Report for 16 January - 15 February 2025**

*Staff:*

Kathy Clark, Chief  
Christina “Kashi” Davis, Principal Zoologist  
Gretchen Fowles, Research Scientist II  
MacKenzie Hall, Environmental Specialist II  
Emily Heiser, Senior Zoologist  
Alex Kisurin, Assistant Biologist/Aquatics  
Kim Korth, Assistant Biologist/Planner  
Sharon Petzinger, Senior Zoologist  
Bill Pitts, Senior Zoologist  
Melissa Roach, Assistant Biologist  
Kris Schantz, Principal Zoologist  
Robert Somes, Senior Zoologist  
Brian Zarate, Principal Zoologist  
Robert Criollo, CWF Biotics  
Daniel Turcios, CWF Biotics

**Administration – K. Clark**

K. Clark worked on planning and policy issues and regional actions as part of the Northeast Wildlife Diversity Managers Technical Committee’s monthly meetings.

**Landscape Project –**

No new report.

**Technical Guidance & Policy/Planning – all staff**

Staff reviewed and consulted on DEP land use permit applications, energy project reviews, and internal NHR land projects.

Staff continued to work with the Office of Environmental Review to address issues with DEP units conducting permit and plan reviews.

**Biotics Database – G. Fowles**

Biotics staff continued the ongoing work of processing rare species data from NJ Wildlife Tracker into Biotics. Biotics staff also have been working with biologists to finalize species-specific range maps for the State Wildlife Action Plan update.

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

G. Fowles participated in a call with the newly formed NJ Appalachians Coalition led by the Nature Conservancy to target land protection. She also participated in a Northeast Transportation and Wildlife Conference steering committee call to discuss a new structure moving forward for the group. G. Fowles also led the bi-monthly Roads and Wildlife Working Group meeting, made up of individuals from ENSP, DOT, USFWS, and DEP Watershed Protection and Restoration. Topics included updates on various road mitigation projects and upcoming revisions of the CHANJ Guidance Document and Flood Hazard Technical Manual.

### **Habitat Conservation Management on Public Lands – All staff**

S. Petzinger sent out the notification to over 28,000 people on the Sparta Mountain WMA Email Listserve announcing the public comment period for next winter's forestry activities on Sparta Mountain WMA. Information was also posted on the Sparta Mountain WMA website, including updated reports for each site managed on Sparta Mountain WMA. These reports can be found at <https://dep.nj.gov/njfw/sparta/stewardship-plan/>

S. Petzinger officially closed and posted the site on Sparta Mountain WMA where forestry activities will be conducted this winter.

S. Petzinger completed the 2024 interim grant report for the bird and vegetation monitoring in managed sites on Sparta Mountain WMA. Fifty-five bird species (25 of which are SGCN) were observed during breeding bird surveys in 2024 in at least one of the twelve sites treated to open the forest canopy through seed tree or shelterwood treatments. Non-native invasive plant cover on each site surveyed was below 2%. The amount of non-native invasive plant cover had little to no correlation with canopy cover (-0.16) or herbaceous cover (0.03) but had a moderate negative correlation with shrub cover (-0.41). Overall, opening the forest canopy to allow native shade-intolerant saplings, shrubs, and herbaceous vegetation to grow results in up to a 1200% increase in the bird conservation value of the site (mean 290% increase), through an average 150% increase in the number of bird species and 250% increase in bird SGCN using the site after treatment compared to before treatment. This is because the conservation value of the forest for birds was negatively correlated to the amount of canopy cover (-0.75) and positively correlated to the amount of herbaceous (0.75) and low woody vegetation cover (shrubs and saplings; 0.75) that grow after the canopy cover is reduced

### **Species Status Review – K. Clark**

As of February 14, the public comment period is closed for the Shore Protection rule, and staff will be assisting on writing responses to comments in preparation for rule adoptions in the coming months. The rule proposal to change the conservation status of NJ Chorus Frog is open for comments until March 7.

### **State Wildlife Action Plan – K. Korth**

K. Korth participated in the NE Regional Database Steering Committee meeting. The regional database is on track to be completed in late 2025.

Biologists with Freshwater Fisheries, Marine Fisheries, Wildlife Management, ENSP, and botanists from Natural Heritage Program are reviewing/finalizing their Species Profiles that will be part of the SWAP website.

K. Korth, Doug Rizio (I&E) and DJ Case (contractor) continue our regular weekly meetings to build out and test the Wordpress framework for new SWAP website. This group also meets every other week with OIT to share results and get feedback.

NJFW staff, SWAP's Technical Advisory Committee (TAG), members, and several technical stakeholders prioritized Actions addressing regional priority threats. DJ Case created a new "how-to" video. K. Korth sent the Action Prioritization assignment to Fish & Wildlife biologists, NHP botanists, SWAP Technical Advisory Group members, and a few DEP staff who were active in the

threat and action process. Each person was instructed to prioritize actions for 2 regions, provide feedback on the actions (e.g., duplicates, typos, suggested changes, etc). DJ Case merged the spreadsheets from all participants, concatenated the comments, summed the prioritization fields, and provided a master spreadsheet for reviewing and editing. The new spreadsheets allows for tracking of deleted actions and where the action prioritization score is moved. K. Korth is currently working on editing and revising the actions based on comments.

K. Korth and K. Clark drafted and submitted a C-SWG SWAP Enhancement grant for USFWS funding.

K. Korth worked on drafting a Shorebird & Horseshoe Crab presentation for the Jersey Coast Anglers Association.

## **HERPTILES**

### **Snake Fungal Disease – K. Schantz**

No new report.

### **Snakes – K. Schantz**

No new report.

### **SGCN Turtles – B. Zarate and B. Pitts**

There were coordination calls this period for the bog turtle and wood turtle Competitive-State Wildlife Grants (C-SWGs) and for regional bog turtle coordination.

- Bog Turtle CSWG: NJ still has some funds remaining to be spent down by summer, which has allowed us to develop a new request for bids for trapping up to three southern NJ core habitats where we have limited information on occupancy. These contracts should provide valuable information for these habitats and complete the grant objectives.
- Wood Turtle CSWG: We are also in the final calendar year of this CSWG and put together our spending plan to utilize remaining funds. The two main areas will be for purchase of wildlife fencing and staff time to continue to conduct standardized transect surveys this spring.
- Regional Bog Turtle Call: Bill Pitts presented on a southern NJ bog turtle project where the project improved hydrologic conditions.

NJ will be applying for Competitive-SWG funds as a partner state with Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Maryland. The grant host state is Maryland. We met weekly to develop the proposal and budget and we will be requesting the maximum award of \$1 million. Awarded NJ funds will allow us to continue and expand work on box turtles in the Pinelands region, in coordination with the Pinelands Commission. The submission deadline is 2/24/2025.

B. Zarate continued developing the “State of the Herps” presentation for Assistant Commissioner D. Golden to speak to various natural resource manager audiences this winter and spring about the need for increased attention to amphibian and reptile conservation, including funding and national coordination.

### **Eastern Tiger Salamander – B. Pitts**

B. Pitts and A. Kisurin are finalizing the NJ portion of the eDNA C-SWG grant proposal. The proposal is due to the Federal grant coordinator by 2/24/25.

Water levels are still low throughout the tiger salamander range in southern NJ. There is enough water at several sites, and precipitation is forecast for 2/15-16, so there is potential for breeding adults to move into the pools during the weekend. B. Pitts, A. Kisurin, and B. Henning plan to visit a site with the highest potential for occupancy to collect tissue samples for genetic analysis.

#### **Diamondback Terrapins - B. Zarate**

Coordination calls continued related to the active Northeast RCN terrapin project, specifically Job 1, which is standardized headcount surveys from land or water. NJ will identify land and water routes for these surveys that will be surveyed primarily by volunteers to generate match for the overall grant.

B. Zarate continued coordination with NJ Innovation Institute and Marine Fisheries Administration to design and print novel terrapin bycatch devices, so these new dimensions may be trialed in controlled and field settings in commercial-style crab pots. A first batch of twenty BRDs was printed and shipped and trials should begin the next reporting period.

### **MAMMALS**

#### **Bobcat Project – G. Fowles**

There were four reported roadkilled bobcats, and one incapacitated bobcat that was dispatched. The carcasses were collected, necropsies performed, and samples taken. There were also 12 bobcats reported trapped that NJFW responded to during the reporting period. Samples were taken from all individuals.

G. Fowles gave an update on the Bobcat Project to ENSAC and the Fish & Game Council in January and February, respectively.

#### **Bat Conservation – M. Hall**

Under the coordination of NJDEP's Division of Science and Research, M. Hall reviewed and scored three bat research proposals from a NJ Offshore Wind Research and Monitoring Initiative RFP that closed in late 2024. A total of 11 out of >60 proposals included studies of bat migration and/or vulnerability to offshore wind development. Winning projects will begin no sooner than December 2025 and run for up to 3 years.

M. Hall visited the NJDOH rabies lab to inspect rabies-negative bats of interest that the lab held for us throughout 2024. These included migratory tree bats (16 eastern red bats and 26 silver-haired bats) and a single northern long-eared bat (a state and federally endangered species); these bats were encountered either inside human dwellings or in outdoor settings where an "exposure" was said to have occurred (often by household pets). Date and location information for each encounter enables us to track these occurrences in our Biotics database.

M. Hall and Passaic County engineer consulted on a bridge deck replacement project happening soon at a known bat roost location, to come up with conservation measures to limit disturbance to the colony and a monitoring plan to follow the bats' response.

#### **Allegheny Woodrat – G. Fowles**

G. Fowles participated in a special Allegheny Woodrat working group call focused on coordination for a C-SWG application related to the captive breeding efforts that are just getting started regionally. NJ will not be directly participating in the grant.

G. Fowles led the bi-monthly Allegheny Woodrat Working Group meeting, which focused on updates of 2024 efforts and plans for 2025. Ten states presented, including NJ, and 4 zoos involved in the captive breeding program also provided updates.

## **BIRDS**

### **Colonial Waterbirds – C. Davis**

C. Davis worked with the Conservation Delivery Specialist for the Atlantic Flyway Council Nongame Bird Technical Section to address errors in the 2024 aerial and ground survey dataset that was previously submitted. The data is now finalized and NJ was one of the first to have all their data submitted. She started working with The Wetlands Institute to finalize plans for their third year of funding for work at Gull and Sturgeon Islands. She finalized paperwork for APHIS to continue their work managing Double-crested Cormorants at Gull Island. She completed the bid process for the wading bird aerial survey and submitted a PO request for this work. She reviewed a paper in which she will be listed as a co-author on the White Ibis expansion into NJ as a breeding bird.

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

No new report.

### **Bald Eagle Monitoring - M. Roach**

There are currently 120 Bald Eagle nests confirmed incubating, and one that has already hatched (on Feb. 13).

There have been 15 eagle mortalities the past month across 9 counties. Efforts have been made by staff, volunteers, and CPOs to retrieve the carcasses as well as pick up sick/injured birds for rehab facilities. The Office of Fish & Wildlife Health & Forensics is collecting and testing HPAI-suspect specimens. Of the 7 bald eagle carcasses tested to date, all 7 were positive for HPAI. We expect this number to rise.

### **Peregrine Falcon Monitoring – M. Roach**

The 2024 Peregrine Falcon report was finalized and sent to collaborators. The report will be posted on the NJFW website. A brief summary shows that the population dipped again this year with 37 pairs occupying sites and 32 known to lay eggs. Twenty of the 32 pairs (63%) were successful, producing 58 young, for a productivity rate of 1.81 (known) young per active nest. Adult turnover (the replacement of known individuals in nesting pairs) between 2023 and 2024 was high this year at 48% and especially so in the coastal region, where 24 of 42 individuals were missing (63%). Average turnover rate is between 15% and 20% in any year. There were three coastal nest sites that are normally active but went unoccupied.

K. Clark organized and held a virtual meeting for mid-Atlantic states to discuss status, monitoring, and concerns about Peregrine Falcon populations. Five states were in attendance. Virginia is documenting very similar experiences to ours: fewer Peregrines breeding (especially at coastal sites), high adult turnover, and immature birds taking up residence at nest sites (even though they are not old enough to breed yet). We also discussed Bald Eagles and monitoring for HPAI impacts to nesting populations.

### **American Kestrel – B. Pitts**

B. Pitts has planned for the installation of three new nest boxes on 3/7 with staff and volunteers from Readington Twp. B. Pitts has also planned to move a box on Burlington County property on 2/27.

As part of Raritan Headwater's Kestrel Kickoff, B. Pitts will present virtually to volunteers and landowners on Wednesday 2/26. The presentation is aimed at providing background information for people that are new to the project, as well as to give updates on the progress made to date.

#### **Osprey Monitoring – M. Roach**

No report.

#### **Other Raptors – M. Roach**

A dead Barn Owl was found in Cumberland Co and tested positive for HPAI. This is the first confirmed case of HPAI in a Barn Owl in NJ, and only the 4<sup>th</sup> case in the US.

#### **Migratory Shorebirds – B. Pitts**

ENSP met with BLE and Land Management staff to discuss logistics ahead of the 2025 field season for migratory shorebirds and beach nesters. B. Pitts is working on acquiring quotes and processing purchase orders for the Shorebird Steward coordination and the Horseshoe Crab Egg Density surveys. B. Pitts has identified two resightings candidates for the upcoming season.

#### **Secretive Marsh Birds – C. Davis and E. Heiser**

C. Davis and E. Heiser continued making plans for their joint Black Rail/Saltmarsh Sparrow seasonal position this spring, which will combine acoustic recording surveys for Black Rail and Rapid Demographic Assessments and other surveys for Saltmarsh Sparrow (with a special focus on state lands that have or will have restoration activities). C. Davis worked with a Rutgers student to start coordination for eDNA sampling that is scheduled to occur this field season.

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

S. Petzinger virtually attended the monthly GWWWG (Golden-winged Warbler Working Group) meeting.

S. Petzinger conducted a site visit with NRCS for the WLFW-GWWA program.

S. Petzinger completed the 2024 interim federal aid report for golden-winged warbler research and monitoring. In 2024 we observed a net loss of three potential breeding golden-winged warbler (GWWA) pairs, or a 43% decrease in the observed population from 2023. The number of blue-winged warblers (BWWAs) and *Vermivora* hybrids (hybrids) increased slightly in 2024. Overall, breeding GWWAs are nearing extirpation in NJ because of the loss of suitable nesting and post-fledging habitat, not from competition with Blue-winged Warblers or climate change. Efforts to increase productivity and juvenile survival will help slow, if not reverse, these declines and prevent extirpation. Conservation measures for this would involve increasing the amount of GWWA nesting habitat created in ideal locations and creating post-fledging habitat near existing and newly created nesting habitat. Ideal locations for nesting habitat would be off the ROW, near existing breeding pairs, within or adjacent to herbaceous wetlands with >75% forest cover, and >1/2 mile from residential development. If habitat creation efforts cannot be conducted quickly and efficiently, then the NJ breeding GWWA population will soon be extirpated and other species dependent on similar habitats, such as Canada warblers, Kentucky warblers, and prairie warblers, will also continue to decline.

S. Petzinger completed the 2024 interim grant report for the wood thrush nanotag project. While it is still too soon to determine mortality during migration, 16 out of 19 tagged individuals began migration in late September/early October, and at least half of those crossed the Gulf of Mexico into Central America. Six tagged Wood Thrush were last detected in Belize in October 2024 and two were last detected in Costa Rica the end of December 2024/early January 2025.

#### **Regional & National Bird Coordination – S. Petzinger**

S. Petzinger virtually attended the monthly Appalachian Mountains Joint Venture Monitoring Team meeting and the quarterly Cerulean Warbler Technical Group meeting.

#### **INVERTEBRATES & AQUATICS**

##### **Butterflies, Dragonflies and other Insect Species – R. Somes**

R. Somes conducted habitat surveys and scouting for the upcoming field season for planning spring management projects at several Ocean County Frosted and Hoary Elfin sites.

R. Somes participated in a Southern Region Bureau of Lands Management meeting to plan and discuss several Monarch, Frosted Elfin, and pollinator habitat management projects in Cape May and Cumberland County.

##### **Pollinators – R. Somes**

R. Somes met with Middlesex County Parks staff to plan several pollinator and butterfly conservation and habitat management projects for the upcoming spring field season.

R. Somes met with South Jersey Quail Project staff to discuss pollinator conservation and habitat management projects in Southern New Jersey.

R. Somes participated in a NJ Native Plant Society Native Plant Propagation workshop.

##### **Freshwater Mussels – A. Kisurin**

A. Kisurin prepared a Request for Bid for an intensive survey effort on Brook Floater in New Jersey waterways this field season to improve understanding of its population and distribution under the Brook Floater C-SWG grant.

R. Somes gave a presentation at the New Jersey Freshwater Mussel Conservation working group meeting on the listed Freshwater Mussels of New Jersey and the regulatory protections and requirements related to projects that might impact them.

R. Somes participated in the New Jersey Dam Removal Working Group meeting where a variety of topics related to freshwater mussel and invertebrate conservation were discussed in relation to dam removals. An important topic that was discussed was survey design and data collection pre and post dam removal to monitor the effects of the dam removal on SGCN species.

#### **eDNA TECHNOLOGY – A. Kisurin**

No new report.