

Endangered and Nongame Species Program
Monthly Report for 16 February – 15 March 2023

Staff:

John Heilferty, Chief
Kathy Clark, Supervising Zoologist
Christina “Kashi” Davis, 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, Principal Zoologist
Rhea Rajpal, Biotics (temp services)

Administration – J. Heilferty

J. Heilferty and K. Clark worked on agency planning, and regional actions as part of the Northeast Wildlife Diversity Managers committee. We congratulate Chief John Heilferty on his long career in NJDEP and his last nine years in the ENSP. John’s last day was 28 February, and he retired from NJ Fish and Wildlife on 1 March 2023.

Federal aid reports for five grants were completed and entered into the US Fish & Wildlife Service’s TRACS online grant system.

Landscape Project –

No new report.

Habitat Change Analysis Project (HCAP) –S. Petzinger

No new report.

Technical Guidance & Policy/Planning – all staff

Staff reviewed applications for Scientific Collecting permits, and issued permits and amendments for 2023

K. Schantz assisted researchers through the LMR process and to obtain permits from the Division of Parks, Forestry & Historic Sites.

S. Petzinger attended pre-app meetings for DEP land use permit applications.

C. Davis participated in the Atlantic Flyway Council Nongame Bird Technical Section meeting in Jekyll Island, GA during the last week of February.

Staff reviewed and commented on DEP land use permit applications, and internal NHR land projects.

Biotics Database – G. Fowles

The Biotics staff continued to work with BGIS to finalize the NJ Wildlife Tracker application components in preparation for public release. An issue related to automated confirmation emails was resolved with the help of OIT.

At the end of February, the NJFW ‘Reporting Wildlife Sightings’ webpage (<https://dep.nj.gov/njfw/conservation/reporting-rare-wildlife-sightings/>) was updated to include new information on how to report rare wildlife observations and now all on road wildlife sightings via the new NJ Wildlife Tracker application. A NJ Wildlife Tracker FAQ document and video tutorial were among the information added to the webpage. Information on NJ Wildlife Tracker was also added to DEP’s community science webpage: <https://dep.nj.gov/community-science/> as well as the ‘What’s New’ and ‘Tools of CHANJ’ sections of the CHANJ webpage: www.chanj.nj.gov

G. Fowles and R. Rajpal presented on the overhaul of ENSP’s data processing system in the last couple of years, culminating in the release of the NJ Wildlife Tracker application, to ENSAC in early March.

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

The CHANJ team scheduled and prepared for upcoming virtual trainings for NJDOT staff to learn about CHANJ, available tools, elements of successful road-wildlife crossing projects, and how NJ Flood Hazard regulations are advancing wildlife passage across roads at stream crossings.

G. Fowles gave a talk (virtually) about the CHANJ project to the Wildlands Network staff in early March. The organization works across Mexico, the United States and Mexico on building a connected network of habitat for wildlife and they have an Eastern Wildway initiative that extends from Nova Scotia to Florida.

An abstract to give a workshop on CHANJ at the upcoming TransAction conference in April. The conference is an annual New Jersey Transportation Conference and Expo.

G. Fowles and B. Zarate also gave an update to ENSAC in early March about new and upcoming CHANJ-related activities including the release of the NJ Wildlife Tracker application that can capture ‘on road’ wildlife observations of all kinds that can help inform road mitigation projects.

Habitat Conservation Management on Public Lands – All staff

S. Petzinger conducted a site tour of Sparta Mtn. WMA.

S. Petzinger presented information about the habitat work on Sparta Mtn. WMA to the Environmental Education Fund on March 14, 2023.

The public comment period for next winter’s habitat work on Stand 7/8 is due March 31, 2023.

Species Status Review – K. Clark

Hourly D. Jenkins continued working on drafting rule amendment language to revise the lists of endangered and nongame wildlife. Staff contributed with species-specific issues.

State Wildlife Action Plan – All staff

ENSP contracted with The Strategic Stewardship Initiative to supervise the review and revision of the NJ SGCN list, the first step in the Plan revision. Staff are meeting regularly with principal Elizabeth Crisfield and working on list criteria.

HERPTILES

Snake Fungal Disease – K. Schantz

No new report.

Snakes – K. Schantz

No new report.

SGCN Turtles – B. Zarate and B. Pitts

ENSP staff surveyed several sites in the Outer Coastal Plain recovery unit to assess for habitat suitability. Selected sites will be trapped for turtles in spring 2023 as part of an ongoing C-SWG grant.

Eastern Tiger Salamander – B. Pitts

Researchers from Cornell discussed their ongoing eDNA project in NY with the Northeastern tiger salamander working group. Results are very promising, and all of the states expressed interest in expanding the project.

Diamondback Terrapins - B. Zarate

B. Zarate provided an update on recent meetings with the Bureau of Marine Fisheries and a meeting of the Blue Crab Subcommittee of the Marine Fisheries Council regarding potential changes in crab traps designed to reduce terrapin bycatch.

MAMMALS

Bobcat Project – G. Fowles

There were 3 trapped bobcats and no roadkills reported during this period. Locations and samples were collected from all individuals.

A paper titled “Habitat suitability and landscape connectivity for an expanding population of bobcats” was accepted for publication in the journal Landscape Ecology. The paper was co-authored by G. Fowles along with a professor and a former Master’s Degree student at the University of Delaware and relates to one chapter of the student’s thesis that was part of a collaborative study from 2018-2020 with ENSP on the NJ bobcat population.

Bat Conservation – M. Hall

M. Hall and partners completed winter bat surveys at three more hibernacula. In one former mine tunnel in Sussex County, 3 Tricolored Bats were observed (an increase from 0 bats in January 2020). In another in Sussex Co., 13 Eastern Small-footed Bats (up from 6 in 2020) and 52 Big Brown Bats (down slightly from 59 in 2020) were counted. The third site, in Warren Co., where no bats have been observed since the last pre-white-nose syndrome survey in 2004 (when just 7 bats were present), again had no bats observed.

M. Hall presented the ecology and research section of a bat workshop at the Allegheny Society of American Foresters conference in Somerset NJ on Feb 16, with co-presenters from USFWS addressing Northern Long-eared Bat habitat management considerations and regulatory updates related to the species’ uplisting to federally endangered (effective March 31, 2023).

M. Hall continued working with NJDEP Division of Watershed Protection and Restoration to finalize a protocol and justification for designating freshwater wetlands as exceptional resource value when documented for the (soon-to-be) federally endangered Northern Long-eared Bat.

M. Hall finished preparing a task order package, now in review, to support a Rutgers University collaboration to investigate environmental DNA (eDNA) detection at bat-bridge roosts.

Review of our 2022 NABat acoustic files continues – incrementally – and we submitted reports and permit renewals for our 3 county park survey locations. M. Hall worked with L. Wells of Conserve Wildlife Foundation on the 2022 mobile acoustic bat survey report.

M. Hall had a radio interview with Dino Flammia for a NJ 101.5 segment about bats in buildings, which aired around March 7.

Allegheny Woodrat – G. Fowles
No new report.

BIRDS

Colonial Waterbirds – C. Davis

C. Davis worked with BLM to improve nesting conditions for wading birds at a coastal marsh site. She continued to participate in regional efforts to coordinate colonial waterbird surveys in 2023 and 2024.

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

Staff are preparing for the nesting season that will start in April. Training and field work is scheduled for early April.

Bald Eagle Monitoring - K. Clark

ENSP and Conserve Wildlife Foundation, plus the volunteer corps, are monitoring eagle nesting statewide.

Bald eagle nesting is underway with over 210 nests documented active and 31 nests hatched as of mid-March. L. Smith is providing weekly email updates to all volunteers and cooperators.

Peregrine Falcon Monitoring – K. Clark

Planning for the 2023 season is underway.

American Kestrel – B. Pitts

B. Pitts replaced four kestrel nest boxes, removed two, and did maintenance on several other boxes. He is also preparing a presentation for the Raritan Headwaters Partnership Kickoff meeting. During this virtual meeting, landowners and volunteers will receive an overview of the project and information for the upcoming field season.

Osprey Monitoring – K. Clark

The first returning Ospreys were observed in NJ in the second week of March.

Other Raptors – K. Clark

Migratory Shorebirds –

Staff are planning for the 2023 season. K. Clark and B. Pitts participated in an agency planning meeting with Delaware Fish & Wildlife and the US Fish & Wildlife Service.

Secretive Marsh Birds – C. Davis and E. Heiser

C. Davis unsuccessfully searched for a Black Rail technician for the upcoming field season. No applicants applied for the position, but she was able to recruit two different people. Unfortunately, both had to back out due to unforeseeable circumstances. She may try to salvage some monitoring for the season but a full monitoring effort is no longer possible.

E. Heiser worked with ACJV and other stakeholders to revise the 2021-22 Saltmarsh Sparrow Habitat Prioritization document. Additional information will be included on characterizing the marsh habitats and potential for restoration work.

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

Nothing to report

Regional & National Bird Coordination – S. Petzinger

S. Petzinger submitted information for the Appalachian Mountains Joint Venture Technical Digest and Year in Review.

S. Petzinger attended a virtual AMJV meeting on March 15, 2023 to discuss bird population recovery goals within the region.

INVERTEBRATES & AQUATICS

Butterflies and Dragonflies – R. Somes

No new report.

Pollinators – R. Somes

R. Somes gave a Pollinator Conservation presentation at the Pequest Nature Center.

R. Somes and NJ State Forest Service staff planted 6000 tubes of 32 species of native plants and wildflowers for spring pollinator and butterfly conservation projects.

Freshwater Mussels – R. Somes

R. Somes attended a virtual Brook Floater Conservation Working Group meeting where the upcoming field season was discussed along with the collection of genetic specimens from NJ's populations.

R. Somes participated in the NJ Aquatic Invasive Species Working Group kick-off meeting. This working group is focusing on developing an Aquatic Invasive Species plan for the State of New Jersey.

R. Somes met with NJDEP staff to discuss Freshwater Mussel surveying in the Raritan River Basin.

R. Somes participated in a Chinese Pondmussel Biosecurity meeting with USFWS and USDA staff.