

**T**his is your window into the work of the Georgia DNR's Nongame Conservation Section.

Our mission at Nongame Conservation is straightforward and critical: Conserve the more than 95 percent of native Georgia wildlife species that are not legally fished for or hunted – called nongame – as well as rare plants and the habitats these plants and animals need.

That work affects us all, whether it's acquiring lands along the Altamaha River for conservation and recreation, sizing up the alligator snapping turtle population in Spring Creek or teaming with partners to keep Georgia aster off the Endangered Species list.

One continuing challenge is funding. We do not receive state appropriations for conserving nongame. Instead, we depend on grants, contributions and fundraisers, such as the eagle and hummingbird license plates.

2014 featured some good news regarding license plates. A law change made this year holds great promise for turning around a three-year decline in wildlife tag sales and renewals, our primary fundraiser.

You'll find details here on that issue, plus intriguing snapshots from the field. For a more in-depth look and video highlights, I encourage you to visit [www.georgiawildlife.com/conservation/AnnualReport](http://www.georgiawildlife.com/conservation/AnnualReport).

## Conserving Georgia's Nongame Wildlife **2014**



### FISCAL YEAR REPORT

Conserving nongame species and restoring and preserving wildlife habitats are central to making sure this natural heritage is available for our children and their children to enjoy.

Besides helping maintain our quality of life, these programs support our economy. In 2011, some 2.4 million people spent more than \$1.8 billion watching wildlife in Georgia!

This report offers a glimpse of nongame research, surveys, conservation programs, education, land acquisition and habitat management during the fiscal year from July 1, 2013, to June 30, 2014.

Included are our successes and our challenges.

Thank you for your interest in conserving Georgia's nongame wildlife and natural habitats.

If you have questions or comments, please email me at [jon.ambrose@dnr.state.ga.us](mailto:jon.ambrose@dnr.state.ga.us).

**Jon Ambrose**  
Chief, Nongame Conservation Section



## BRIGHT WILDFLOWER, BRIGHT FUTURE

Georgia aster is on the minds of many conservation organizations in the Southeast. And with good reason.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said in September 2014 the purple-flowering plant will not be added to the Endangered Species list, although it had been a candidate for 15 years.

Helping trigger that decision, DNR and eight partners signed a Candidate Conservation Agreement in May to protect and enhance Georgia aster. Partners are searching for new populations, changing land management practices such as when rights of way are mowed to protect known ones, and monitoring plots.

Georgia aster is a wide-ranging but rare wildflower found in the upper Piedmont and lower mountain regions from Alabama to North Carolina. The number of known populations in Georgia increased from 55 to nearly 80 this year.

At Nongame Conservation, we've documented Georgia aster sites since the mid-2000s. But we're ramping up restoration and working with the Georgia Plant Conservation Alliance to add and nurture populations.

The Candidate Conservation Agreement is part of an at-risk species strategy that

protects wildlife, saves money, reduces landowner regulatory burdens and benefits many species. For example, declining birds such as grasshopper sparrows and eastern meadowlarks require the same open grasslands as Georgia aster.

Signers include the Fish and Wildlife Service, Clemson University, Georgia Department of Transportation, Georgia Power, Mecklenburg County (N.C.) Park and Recreation, National Park Service, North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, and the U.S. Forest Service. Many cooperators help with research and monitoring.



## THUMBS UP FOR DOWN-LISTING STORKS

June 26, 2014, proved a banner day for the bald wading birds with the big beaks.

Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell traveled to Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge to announce that wood storks would be down-listed from endangered to threatened under the Endangered Species Act.

Soon after, DNR released the results of the year's wood stork nest surveys. They documented the most nests in Georgia since surveys began by air in the 1990s – 2,932 nests in 22 colonies, from Camden to Brooks County. The previous high was 2,696 nests in 2010.

Wood storks nest in colonies over water and depend on wetlands for food. The species was listed as endangered in 1984 as the loss and alteration of wetland habitats in Florida undercut populations. Then, the birds were considered at risk of extinction by 2000.

Survey leader Tim Keyes of the Nongame Conservation Section said down-listing is a tribute to conservation efforts and the resilience of wood storks, which "moved into new habitat types and adapted to different hydrologies than their historic south Florida range." Georgia now has about 20 percent of the U.S. nesting population.

At Nongame Conservation, we conduct aerial surveys to identify and monitor nesting colonies, and work with landowners to protect these areas. With more than 75 percent of Georgia rookeries on private land, the species' comeback is tied to landowners' willingness to preserve these freshwater wetlands.

Making  
a difference in  
2014

## AND THAT'S NOT ALL

- On DNR lands, 57,555 acres were treated with prescribed fire, nearly triple the total in 2005. Nongame Conservation led or took part on about half of the burns – needed for restoring fire-adapted habitats – and added a second seasonal fire crew, more than doubling the acreage burned by the crews.
- The Youth Birding Competition started by biologist Tim Keyes served as the model for Race 4 Birds. Spearheaded by renowned birder Richard Crossley, the foundation promotes youth birding nationwide.
- At Nongame Conservation, we coordinated revision of Georgia's State Wildlife Action Plan, a strategy guiding wildlife conservation statewide. The plan will be ready for review by June 2015.
- Loggerhead sea turtles had 2,291 nests in 2013, the fourth straight state record since comprehensive surveys began. While that total dropped to 1,201 this year, the trend points to a population in recovery.

## 2014 LAW CHANGE BOOSTS WILD TAGS

As noted, Nongame Conservation receives no state appropriations for conserving nongame wildlife.

We raise support in different ways, but our leading fundraiser is sales and renewals of the eagle and hummingbird license plates. For more than 15 years, wildlife tags provided at least half of the revenue for Georgia's Nongame Wildlife Conservation Fund, which is dedicated to conserving nongame and natural habitats. In 2014, however, the portion of revenue from plates slipped to 41 percent.

Why? A 2010 law change that raised the price of specialty plates, added a renewal fee and reduced the share for programs led to steep declines in revenue and the number of tags in service. By the end of fiscal 2014, there were 70 percent fewer eagle and hummer tags on the road. Revenue followed suit. Most recently, it fell from \$1.2 million in 2013 to \$841,000 this year.

But, to stop that downward spiral, the 2014 General Assembly passed and Gov. Nathan Deal signed legislation sponsored by state Rep. Bubber Epps (R-Dry Branch) and Sen. Jeff Mullis (R-Chickamauga) and supported by numerous stakeholder groups. Those revisions:

Gov. Deal signs tags bill / Barking treefrog (DNR)



Left to right: Jackie Jeffrey swabs bat (Pete Pattavina/USFWS)

- Lowered the cost of buying or renewing DNR wildlife tags – the eagle, hummingbird, quail and trout designs – to only \$25 more than a standard tag.
- Directed up to 80 percent of fees to the wildlife programs the plates benefit.

As of July 1, 2014, \$19 of every wildlife tag bought and \$20 of each one renewed goes to conserve and manage native wildlife and habitats, from bald eagles and brook trout to longleaf pine forests and mountain bogs.

At Nongame Conservation, we are working with others in and outside of DNR – including our friends group, The Environmental Resources Network – to raise awareness of these important changes. Conservationists appreciate the changes, and early results show a bounce in tag sales.

## FEDERAL FUNDING OUTLOOK UNCERTAIN

We are weathering another funding blow, as well:

Budget cuts have sliced the State and Tribal Wildlife Grants Program by more than a third.

This program is the main source of federal funds for our nongame work. A suite of federal conservation programs including State Wildlife Grants also has been trimmed 25 percent. All have faced repeated House subcommittee proposals to eliminate funding.

Georgia's \$1.26 million share of State Wildlife Grants in 2014 is about \$250,000 less than four years ago.

Since 2000, this federal program has been vital to helping states keep common species common and protecting others before they become critically imperiled and more costly to recover.

That work contributes to local and state economies. The more than 90 million wildlife watchers 16 years old and older spend about \$55 billion a year nationwide on wildlife-related recreation.

The Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies recently named a panel to provide recommendations and policy options on the most sustainable and equitable model for funding conservation of America's wildlife species.

## WHAT CAN YOU DO?

These challenges and efforts all point to a central fact: We need you to conserve nongame wildlife in Georgia. Here's how you can help.

- 1** Buy an eagle or hummer plate. If you have one, keep it. Wildlife tags cost only \$25 more a year than a standard peach plate, and most of that fee – \$19 to \$20 – goes to conserve wildlife.
- 2** Tell others about the lower pricing and increased support provided through DNR wildlife tags. Many people haven't heard about the changes!
- 3** Donate through the Georgia Wildlife Conservation Fund checkoff on your state income tax return. Giving is easy, and any amount helps.
- 4** Contribute directly to the Nongame Conservation Section. For details, including about estate, memorial and other gifts, call us at (770) 761-3035.
- 5** Join TERN, friends group of Nongame Conservation and a key supporter of wildlife conservation in Georgia. Contact (478) 994-1438 or visit <http://tern.homestead.com>.
- 6** Follow nongame through our Georgia Wild newsletter and social media. Also, learn more about supporting wildlife at [georgiawildlife.com/conservation/support](http://georgiawildlife.com/conservation/support).

Meeting  
the challenge

Bald eagle (Clay George/DNR)



## Birds

Our twice-a-year aerial surveys documented the most **bald eagle** nests and young in Georgia in decades – 188 occupied nesting territories, 150 successful nests and 238 young fledged.

Restoring native grasslands on DNR properties continued to attract rare birds, including a nesting population of **Bachman's sparrows** last summer at Joe Kurz Wildlife Management Area in Meriwether County.

Dwarf sumac survey (Mincy Moflett/DNR)



## Plants

Snail darter (Conservation Fisheries)



## Freshwater aquatics

From snail darters to Tennessee pigtoe mussels, we are developing **conservation status assessment maps** for 193 rare aquatic species to provide consistent information on species petitioned for federal listing and others.

A project with Young Harris College recorded large numbers of **sicklefin redhorse** migrating up Brasstown Creek into Georgia, plus the most upstream record in Brasstown for this fish, another candidate for federal listing.

Brazilian pepper (Lamonn Leonard/DNR)



## Invasive species

The discovery of **Brazilian pepper** on Jekyll Island causeway – the first time this aggressive exotic has been confirmed in the wild in our state – spurred a fast response from our staff, the Georgia Forestry Commission, Jekyll Island Authority and the First Coast Invasive Working Group to treat and monitor the site.

We joined with Kingsland and Pooler residents to **remove apple snails**, taught Brunswick citizens how to report invasive species online and provided interviews for a Georgia Outdoors episode titled "Invaders."

Dot Kay leads workshop (Watson Brown)

Alligator snapping turtle study (Brian Folt)



## Amphibians & reptiles

In a long-term study of **alligator snapping turtles** in southwest Georgia's Spring Creek, Nongame Conservation and Auburn University researchers caught and released 71 turtles, gathering data that not only suggests males can reach 104 years old, but which will be used to assess impacts of now-outlawed harvest on the species.

We discovered two unknown north Georgia populations of **bog turtles**, federally listed as threatened, through extensive review of possible sites and wide-spread trapping in tandem with Clemson University.

Green salamander (DNR)



## Private lands

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# Snapshots from

Georgia Plant Conservation Alliance management of our most important population of endangered **dwarf sumac** brought at least eight genotypes out of dormancy and increased stem counts from two to about 750.

A study involving nearly 40 vegetation plots in **wet oak flats**, first documented in Georgia through the Coastal Habitat Assessment, is geared to helping us conserve and protect these threatened natural communities.

Ren Determann, Tom Patrick at bog (Gary Peeples/USFWS)



## Natural habitats

As part of a State Wildlife Grants project restoring **sandhill and longleaf pine habitats** in five states, Georgia completed 22,000-plus acres of prescribed burns, improving groundcover for priority species such as gopher tortoises and northern bobwhites.

We helped form the **Bog Learning Network**, a regional group advancing stewardship of Southern Appalachian bogs, and organized a 2014 network meeting with field trips to these endangered habitats in Georgia.

# n the field

Manatees in Cumberland Sound (DWR)



## Mammals

Georgia's Marine Mammal Stranding Network, which we coordinate, helped track a regional dolphin morbillivirus outbreak, recording 38 dead **bottlenose dolphins** in November and December alone.

The abundance of endangered **Florida manatees** in Cumberland Sound is better understood after years of surveys that revealed counts as high as 50 in June and July, and spurred similar work in the Savannah area.



## Education & outreach

The department's education centers reached about **119,000 students and adults**, an effort underscored by the Environmental Education Alliance of Georgia choosing McDuffie's Dot Kay as PreK-16 Formal Educator of the Year.

We **raised awareness** through varied channels: blogging about white-nose syndrome, promoting Berry College's eagle nest camera and providing data for legislation banning the gassing of gopher tortoise burrows. Biologists discussed hellbenders on the Discovery Channel, helped produce an aerial imagery dataset of the coast and shot video of a right whale disentanglement broadcast worldwide.

**2013 Forestry for Wildlife Partners** Plum Georgia Power and CatchMark Timber Trust positive impact for wildlife on 974,000 acres, work varying from documenting rare green herons in northwest Georgia to protecting endangered fringed campion in Talbot County.

off helped landowners learn and navigate **conservation easements and federal programs** such as the Natural Resources Conservation Service's Environmental Quality Incentives and Working Lands for Wildlife.

Morgan Lake (MVC)

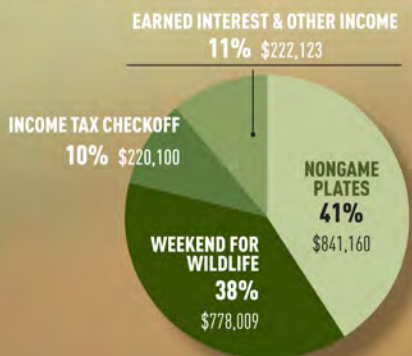


## Land acquisition & easements

DNR acquired **priority conservation sites**, including the 1,117-acre Morgan Lake Tract in Long County (1) and 9,515 acres used to help create Chattahoochee Fall Line Wildlife Management Area near Columbus (2). Partners included The Nature Conservancy, U.S. Marine Corps, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Knobloch Family Foundation.

As administrators of the Georgia Conservation Tax Credit Program, Nongame Conservation and the State Properties Commission saw **10,649 acres protected** through conservation easements awarded in fiscal 2014.

## FINANCIAL



Three fundraisers provide crucial support for conserving nongame wildlife:

- Nongame license plates (sales and renewals of the new bald eagle plate and the ruby-throated hummingbird, plus renewals of the older eagle plate).



- The Give Wildlife a Chance state income tax checkoff.
- Weekend for Wildlife, held at Sea Island each February.

The charts show how those fundraisers performed in 2014 and the 10-year status of the Wildlife Conservation Fund (officially called the Nongame Wildlife Conservation and Wildlife Habitat Acquisition Fund).

The Environmental Resources Network also provides important support. TERN funded \$60,650 in nongame projects in 2014. That pushed the nonprofit's contributions over the years to more than \$1 million!

Federal and other grants received during fiscal 2014 included a \$500,000 grant from the Fish and Wildlife Service Cooperative Endangered Species Fund. Through this grant, we're working with Florida to determine the status of 23 at-risk species petitioned for federal listing.

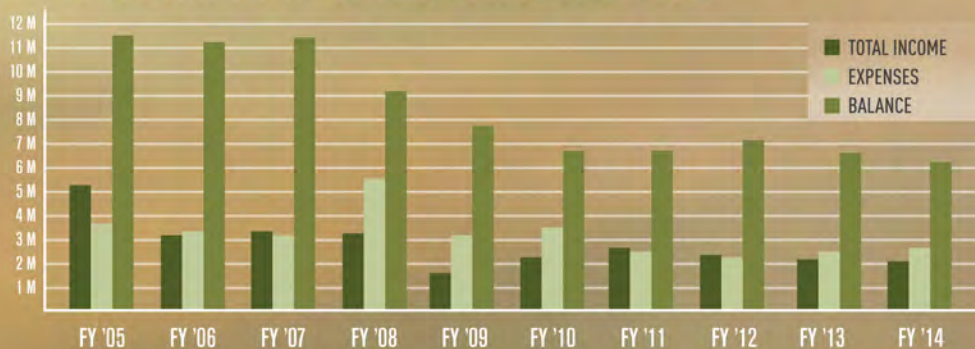
Matching dollars from the Wildlife Conservation Fund make these grants possible.

### ON THE FRONT:

Bog turtle (Todd Pierson) / Georgia aster (Michele Elmore/TNC) / Sickleafin redbone (Brett Albanese/DNR)  
Yellow-rumped warbler by Angus Pritchard (Linda May/DNR) / Wood storks (Mary Ellen Urbanski/USFWS) / Disentangling a right whale (FWC/NDA permit 15488)

Comprehensive 2014 report at [www.georgiawildlife.com/conservation/AnnualReport](http://www.georgiawildlife.com/conservation/AnnualReport)

## NONGAME CONSERVATION FUND Listed in millions per year



## MOVING FORWARD

2015 will include:

- Continued research of species petitioned for listing, including aerial surveys of Florida sandhill cranes at Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge and boat surveys for Barbour's map turtles in the Flint River.
- Monitoring plots to gauge management treatments in sandhill and longleaf habitats, part of the regional State Wildlife Grants work that may help keep gopher tortoises off the Endangered Species list.
- Completing revision of the State Wildlife Action Plan, a requirement for receiving State Wildlife Grants.
- Stronger emphasis on prescribed fire during the growing season, burns that have profound ecological benefits for fire-adapted habitats.

While 2014 had plenty of rare-species success stories, Nongame Conservation Section Chief Jon Ambrose stressed that such successes seldom happen quickly. Nongame Conservation, Ambrose said, "is in it for the long haul."

We hope you are, too.

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