

CONSERVING GEORGIA'S NONGAME WILDLIFE

2015 FISCAL YEAR REPORT



Loggerhead sea turtles. Bald eagles. Northern long-eared bats.

Monkeyface orchids, bluestripe shiners, Tennessee heelsplitters.

Sandhills and longleaf pine savannas. Black Belt prairies.

In Georgia, the rich names of these and other native animals, plants and habitats reflect a rich heritage: Our state is one of the most biologically diverse in the U.S.

But that heritage is threatened. More than 600 of our wildlife species are considered a high priority for conservation. And that's not counting the wild places they need to survive.

At Georgia DNR's Nongame Conservation Section, our mission is conserving the more than 95 percent of native species not legally fished for or hunted, plus rare plants and natural habitats.

From research to education, this work involves creatures and landscapes treasured by millions and critical to a wildlife-watching economic impact that exceeds \$1 billion a year in our state.

Yet conserving nongame isn't just about today. Restoring wildlife and habitats means our children and grandchildren will also enjoy soaring bald eagles and cathedral-like longleaf forests.

You can help ensure that heritage continues. When you buy or renew an eagle or hummingbird license plate, or contribute through the "Give Wildlife a Chance" tax checkoff, you provide vital funding for this work.

Thank you for your support. I hope this summary report updates you on our progress in 2015, and encourages an even deeper appreciation for Georgia's rich realm of nongame wildlife.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Jon Ambrose".

Jon Ambrose
Chief, Nongame Conservation Section

Also at www.georgiawildlife.com/conservation/AnnualReport. Comprehensive report | Interactive map

GEORGIA DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES | WILDLIFE RESOURCES DIVISION | NONGAME CONSERVATION SECTION



Bald eagle nest (Tim Keyes/DNR)



210

Bald eagle nest territories in 2015. Georgia had none in the 1970s.

More nest news:

- 2,300+ Loggerhead sea turtle nests in 2015, a record since surveys began and more evidence loggerheads are rebounding.
- 40+ American oystercatcher chicks surviving to fledging, the most documented in Georgia and a credit in part to DNR predator trapping.
- 1 Peregrine falcon nest at Tallulah Gorge State Park, the state's first in a natural setting since 1942.

Our role: We work with landowners to manage eagle nest areas, lead the Georgia Sea Turtle Cooperative and study and protect shorebirds through our Waterbird Conservation Initiative.

Juvenile gopher tortoise (Mate Thomas/DNR)



143

Young gopher tortoises released at Yuchi Wildlife Management Area.

The record release at the WMA near Waynesboro was part of larger effort to conserve tortoises and habitats they need, including ...

- \$500,000 State Wildlife Grant awarded in 2015 for phase 3 of work restoring sandhill and upland pine habitats across multiple states.
- 146,000+ Acres treated in phases 1-2, benefiting tortoises, northern bobwhites and other priority species.
- 500+ Acres that Forestry for Wildlife partners Plum Creek and Georgia Power converted to longleaf pine.

Our role: We guide gopher tortoise research, coordinate the sandhills grants and partner with private landowners to advance conservation.

Youth Birding Competition (Race4Birds Foundation)



93,700+

Visitors to DNR Wildlife Resources Division education centers.

The seven centers led an education and outreach mission highlighted also by:

- 19,000+ Youth in Charlie Elliott Wildlife Center programs this year.
- 3,320 Georgia records edited or added to NatureServe Biotics, the state's most in-depth database of rare species and communities, important for research and planning.
- 1,400+ Entries in the 25th Give Wildlife a Chance Poster Contest, which encourages K-5th-grade students to explore wildlife through art.

Our role: We provide educational programs, help conduct the poster contest with the State Botanical Garden of Georgia and manage Biotics.

Shorebirds eating horseshoe crab eggs (DNR)



Making a

GPCA at Center for Plant Conservation meeting in Athens (GPCA)



609+

Classes, trips and presentations led by Georgia Plant Conservation Alliance members from 2011-2015.

Nongame Conservation helped found the network in 1995. Also noteworthy in 2015:

- 300+** Rare plants outplanted at a Coastal Plain bog, a high-priority habitat.
- 20** Total weeks that Student Conservation Association and AmeriCorps crews worked with DNR and partners controlling invasives along the coast.
- 5** Approximate number of new Georgia aster populations found during surveys for a conservation agreement that helped keep this wildflower off the endangered species list.

Our role: We are an active GPCA member, the point agency for conserving Coastal Plain and mountain bogs, and a coordinator in the war on invasive species.

Interagency Burn Team prescribed fire (Shan Lamack/DNR)



52,338

DNR-managed acres burned by the Wildlife Resources Division.

Prescribed fire is vital to restoring fire-adapted habitats, helping many species of concern.

Other habitat highlights:

- 200,000+** Longleaf pines planted at Fall Line Sandhills WMA after removing 400 acres of sand pine and offsite loblolly.
- 26,655** Acres burned by Nongame Conservation on targeted conservation areas.
- 12** Years since reticulated flatwoods salamanders had been seen at Mayhaw WMA, where an effort restoring wetlands and savannas is credited for their rediscovery in 2015.

Our role: We help lead prescribed fire efforts statewide, work with the Interagency Burn Team and train volunteers to federal fire standards.

SWAP aquatics team discusses plan updates (Jon Ambrose/DNR)



640

High-priority animal and plant species in the revised State Wildlife Action Plan.

Drafted for review in 2015, this strategy – often called the SWAP – guides conservation in Georgia.

Related stats:

- \$1.21 million** State Wildlife Grants awarded Georgia, a 39% cut since fiscal 2010 in our share of the federal program that helps states conserve nongame.
- 395,000** Acres acquired by DNR or protected by partners under the first SWAP.
- 100+** Organizations and groups, from universities to land managers, that helped revise the plan.

Our role: We shepherded the SWAP revision, administer State Wildlife Grants and put wildlife tag revenue – our No. 1 fundraiser – to wise use.

difference



Biologist Katrina Morris with eastern hellbender (Thomas Floyd/DNR)



Amphibians & reptiles

In north Georgia, biologists caught and released 138 **eastern hellbenders**, including six tagged in the first round of the long-term surveys in 2012.

The development of solar farms in sandhill habitats led to 121 **gopher tortoises** being moved to WMAs, where Southern Company and its consultants had built acclimation pens.

Tennessee heelsplitters from Little Chickamauga Creek (Jason Wisniewski/DNR)



Freshwater aquatics

Sampling in South Chickamauga Creek near Ringgold yielded records for **snail darter**, **mountain madtom** and **Tennessee pigtoe**, the latter a species petitioned for federal listing.

A State Wildlife Action Plan technical team assessed the status and conservation needs of **251 species** and identified watersheds to protect the best-known populations.

MacGillivray's seaside sparrow (Todd Schneider/DNR)



Birds

Nesting **MacGillivray's seaside sparrows** were tracked for a third year, data that will help define where suitable saltmarsh will occur for this subspecies to nest as sea levels rise.

Boosted by translocating adult birds, prescribed fire and nest management, Silver Lake WMA's population of endangered **red-cockaded woodpeckers** fledged 40 young.

Big brown bats (Pete Pattinall/USFWS)



Mammals

In a multi-year project, three **North Atlantic right whales** were tagged with satellite tags, helping track one juvenile more than 1,000 miles from Florida to Massachusetts.

Surveys revealed a surprising number of **bats** using Georgia's bridges, information that will be used to protect bats during bridge repairs or replacement.

Monkeyface orchid (Rick Lavender/DNR)



Plants

Populations of rare **monkeyface** or **white fringeless orchid**, proposed for federal listing, were strengthened and monitored at Chattahoochee Bend State Park and on private lands.

Staff teamed with The Nature Conservancy to map high-quality **groundcover vegetation** in the Fort Stewart/Altamaha River area, data that will help guide conservation.

Nongame Assistant Chief Mary Pfaffko on WABE-FM Atlanta (WABE)



Conservation planning

Culminating work that began in 2013, a **revised State Wildlife Action Plan** was drafted and made available for public review.

The plan recommends strategies for **addressing and minimizing wildlife impacts** from challenges such as climate change and renewable energy development. It also advocates taking part in effective regional partnerships such as Landscape Conservation Cooperatives.

AmeriCorps NCC team (Eamonn Leonard/DNR)

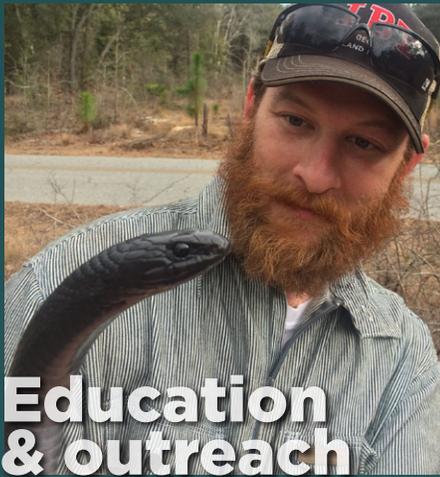


Invasive species

Partnerships forged with **Coastal Wildscapes** and **Jekyll Island Authority**, and coordination through the Coastal Georgia **Cooperative Invasive Species Management Area**, raised awareness and broadened efforts to control invasive species and promote native plants.

Sites infested with invasive salt cedar and water hyacinth were **mapped in 11 coastal counties**.

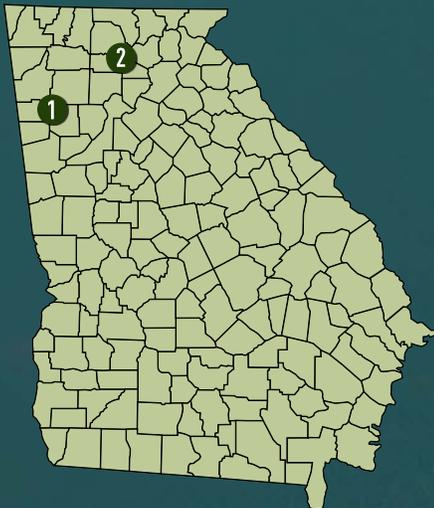
Fire crew member Bryn Pipes with eastern indigo (Shan Cammack/DNR)



Education & outreach

Video shot or shared by DNR reached millions: An **eastern indigo snake** topped 1.1 million views and **wildlife cams**, including Go Fish Education Center's, drew 922,000.

Arrowhead Environmental Education Center **taught 17,000-plus** people about wildlife; Sapelo Island National Estuarine Research Reserve Education Program helped **train 193 teachers**.



Land acquisition & easements

Targeting priority habitats in the State Wildlife Action Plan, 3,397 acres were acquired for conservation and recreation at **1** Paulding Forest, Sheffield Forest and **2** Dawson Forest WMAs.

The tax credit program, which Nongame Conservation administers with the State Properties Commission, **protected 7,184 acres** with conservation easements and fee-simple donations.

Snapshots from the field

Prescribed fire at night (Shan Cammack/DNR)



Natural habitats

Growing-season burns, crucial to maintaining fire-dependent habitats, totaled more than 3,500 acres, including prescribed fires at Reed Bingham State Park.

Restorative work such as **thinning pine plantations** and treating midstory to help native grasses was done in longleaf stands and Black Belt prairies, respectively, at Sprewell Bluff and Oaky Woods WMAs.

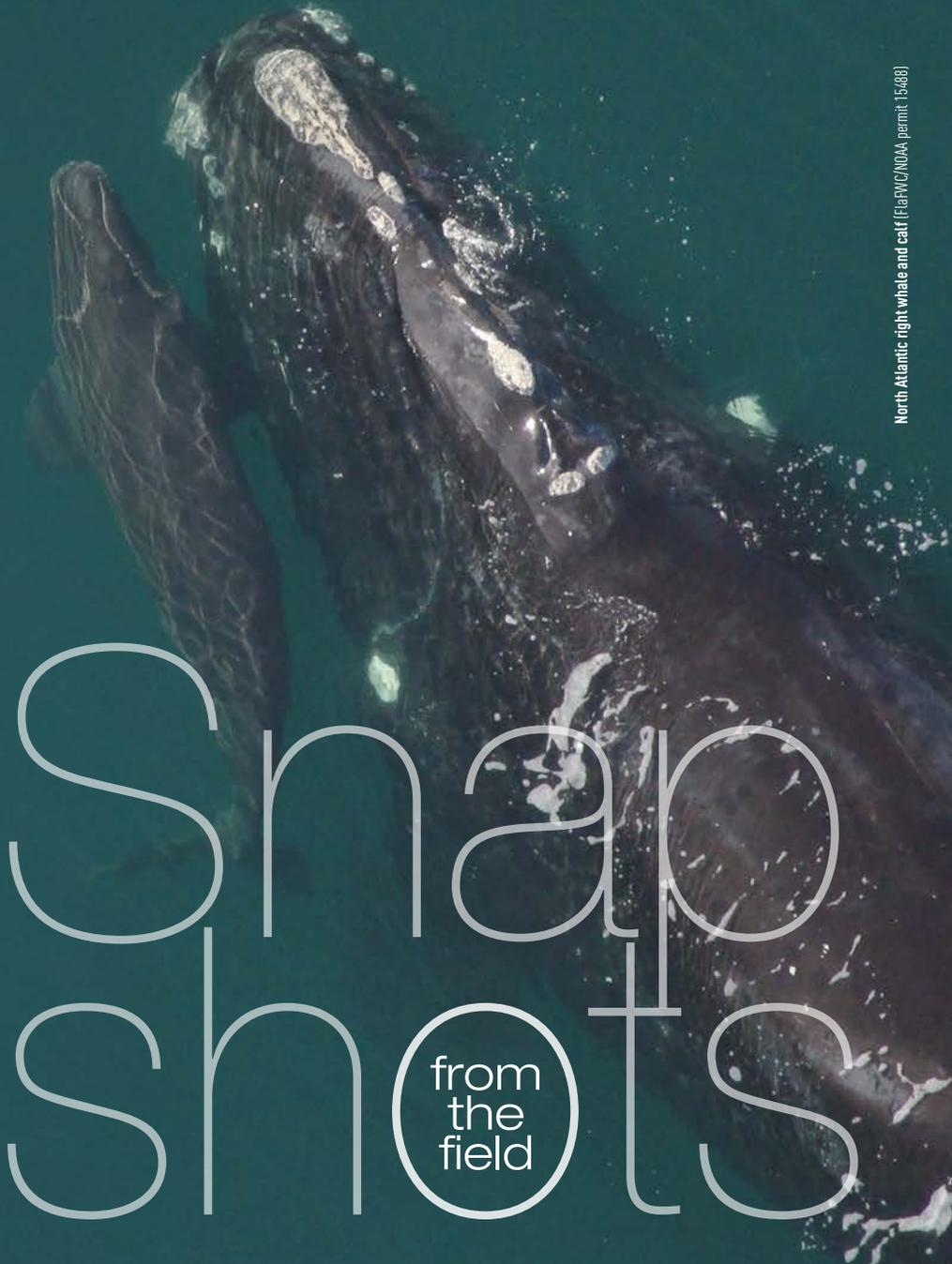
Private lands

Staff led **rare-species training** at Master Timber Harvester events and worked with 2014 **Forestry for Wildlife partners** Plum Creek, Georgia Power and CatchMark Timber Trust to enhance conservation on 1 million acres.

The popular **Landowner's Guide to Conservation Incentives in Georgia**, a comprehensive review of programs, was revised and published.

Full report, interactive map at www.georgiawildlife.com/conservation/AnnualReport

North Atlantic right whale and calf (ElaFWC/NOAA permit 15488)





NONGAME CONSERVATION FUND

Listed in millions per year*
*not counting federal grants



About wildlife plates

The eagle and hummingbird license plates play a key role in all Nongame Conservation projects.

Sales and renewals are our leading fundraiser. They accounted for 55% of Nongame Wildlife Conservation Fund revenue in 2015.

Thanks to legislation in 2014, the cost of buying and renewing any DNR wildlife tag is **only \$25** more than a standard peach plate. Also, **\$19 for every eagle and hummer tag purchased and \$20 for each one renewed** goes, by law, to the Nongame Wildlife Conservation Fund!

Those changes boosted tag revenue by 81% from fiscal 2014 to 2015. But, the number of eagle and hummingbird plates in circulation shrank further.

There were 347,000 tags on the road in 2010. Today, that number is down to 82,000.

Here's how you can help:

- If you don't have a wildlife tag, buy one!
- If you have one, please renew it each year.

Show your support with an eagle or hummingbird tag.

We'll use that support to conserve Georgia's wildlife and wild places!

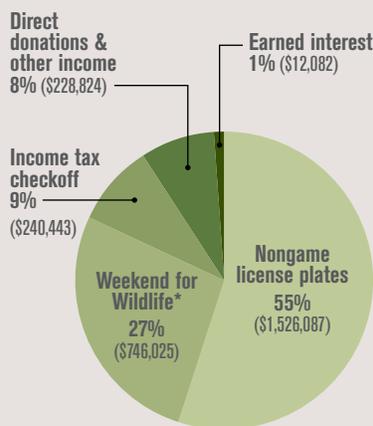
Details at www.georgiawildlife.com/conservation/support.

Other ways to help

- Join **The Environmental Resources Network**, our friends group. TERN funded \$51,500 in projects in 2015 and provided other support, such as for the annual Weekend for Wildlife fundraiser.
- Contribute through the "Give Wildlife a Chance" **state income tax checkoff**.
- Donate **directly** to the Nongame Fund or online through the **Georgia Natural Resources Foundation**.

REVENUE

TOTAL: \$2,753,461

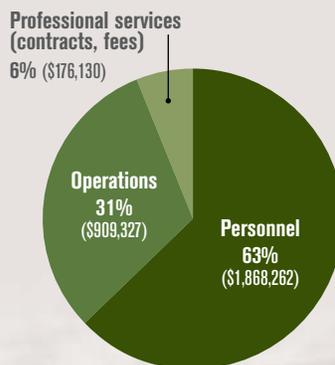


Not including federal and other grants.

* Includes \$264,000 that will be disbursed through the Georgia Natural Resources Foundation.

EXPENDITURES

TOTAL: \$2,953,719



Through Nongame Fund.



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GEORGIA DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

WILDLIFE RESOURCES DIVISION
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Also sign up for Nongame Conservation's free e-newsletter, Georgia Wild. Click the red envelope icon at www.georgiawildlife.com

ON THE FRONT:

- Red-cockaded woodpecker work at Silver Lake WMA (Linda Gonynor)
- Juvenile gopher tortoise (Nate Thomas/DNR)
- Bald eagle nest (Curtis Compton/Atlanta Journal-Constitution)
- Monkeyface orchid (Rick Lavender/DNR)
- Youth Birding Competition team member (Race4Birds)
- Eagle license plate (Omar Murcia)

Full report, interactive map at www.georgiawildlife.com/conservation/AnnualReport

