

# Florida's Wildlife Legacy Initiative and Wildlife Action Plan

## What is a wildlife action plan?

Congress asked each state to develop a wildlife action plan, known technically as a comprehensive wildlife conservation strategy. These proactive plans examine the health of wildlife and prescribe actions to conserve wildlife and vital habitat before they become more rare and more costly to protect.

## Florida snapshot

**Geography:** Florida's vast array of native wildlife depends upon highly productive and often delicate natural systems that range from the tropical coral reefs of the Keys and the Everglades' "river of grass" to the crystal blue waters of natural springs and the quiet beauty of the rolling sandhills.

**Landscape:** Florida's coral reefs, beautiful lakes, pristine beaches and unique recreational opportunities attract 80 million visitors each year.

**Wildlife:** With over 700 animals on land, more than 1,250 freshwater and marine fish, numerous other aquatic and marine vertebrates and many thousands of insects and other invertebrates, Florida is teeming with wildlife.

## Florida's planning approach

Florida's Wildlife Legacy Initiative is a comprehensive program developed by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission to address the conservation needs of all wildlife in Florida. The mission of the Initiative is to work together to sustain Florida's diverse array of native wildlife and their habitats for

future generations through implementing Florida's Wildlife Action Plan, developing partnerships, and using funding sources effectively.



Great Egret/Jason Hahn

Florida's Wildlife Action Plan provides a strategic framework to support the state's native wildlife and natural habitats. The action plan identifies 974 animals and the actions needed to conserve them. A habitat-based approach categorizes the state into freshwater, saltwater, and land systems consisting of forty-five habitat categories. The plan recognizes that Florida is an interwoven system of habitats, and that wildlife moves freely across the landscape with most species dependent on a mix of habitats. By sustaining the health and integrity of these habitats, the broad array of wildlife and natural places within them are preserved for the enjoyment of future generations.

## Primary challenges to conserving wildlife in Florida

Florida's action plan identifies many threats that cross multiple habitats. Five of these threats ranked as high statewide priorities.

*"The goal of Florida's Wildlife Action Plan is to sustain the incredibly rich and diverse fish and wildlife resources of the state for the enjoyment and use of our citizens and visitors. Florida is implementing a sound comprehensive strategy, developing and expanding cooperative partnerships and strategically using State Wildlife Grants to leverage greater resources."*  
– Ken Haddad, Executive Director of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

**Habitat loss:** This threat is directly related to human development and activities, for example roads and cars, shopping centers, and houses. Habitat loss and fragmentation isolate wildlife and can

habitats are fire-maintained systems, and many animals and plants depend on periodic fires to maintain healthy habitat conditions. Lack of fire is a threat in many upland habitats and can result in reduced availability of flowers, fruits, seeds and other foods for wildlife. Fire hazards increase when fire frequency and timing are altered, as well as when fire management does not keep pace with the accumulation of fuels. Consequently, when fire does occur it can be severe, resulting in loss of natural places for wildlife to live and threats to human health and safety.



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**Exotic plants and animals:** Florida's mild climate contributes to the

establishment of many species of exotic plants, mammals, fish, amphibians and reptiles. Exotic marine species also are introduced into Florida waters when large boats discharge bilge water and exchange ballast water in ports or in nearshore marine environments. While the distribution of exotic species differs regionally in Florida, the threat posed by these species occurs across all habitats. Exotic species pose direct threats to wildlife through competition, predation and transmission of disease.

**Artificial structures:** The overall effect of dams, seawalls and other sources of shoreline hardening, dredging, beach nourishment and impoundments also can be a threat to Florida's water resources.

prevent them from locating food, water, shelter and mates. As the human population increases, more land will be developed with the highest pressure occurring on coastal and upland habitats.

**Loss of water resources:** This threat stems from groundwater withdrawal, drainage of wetlands, and inadequate stormwater management. Many of Florida's springs have declining water quality and reduced water flow. Contamination by fertilizers and harmful chemicals can degrade water systems to the point that they no longer support wildlife and are harmful to humans. Increased salt levels are another source of decline in water quality.

**Fire management:** Many of Florida's

*“The Florida Wildlife Action Plan is an essential piece of the combined effort of all 56 states and territories to proactively conserve declining wildlife before they become rare and more costly to protect. Florida is important to a rich variety of wildlife and habitats not found anywhere else. Investing in Florida’s wildlife action plan now will help conserve fish, wildlife and natural areas for future generations to enjoy.”*

*– John Baughman,  
Executive Vice President,  
Association of Fish and  
Wildlife Agencies*

Wildlife	Total number of species	Species of conservation need*	Threatened/endangered listed species
Invertebrates	50,000 <sup>1</sup>	369	10
Fish	1,250	378	3
Amphibians	57	19	1
Reptiles	114	48	12
Birds	485	104	10
Mammals	99	56	15
<b>Totals</b>		<b>974</b>	<b>51</b>

<sup>1</sup>Estimate

\* Each state is using its own criteria for this category. Florida focuses on the full array of native wildlife, including fish and invertebrates, state and federally threatened/endangered species, and game animals.

### Wildlife highlights

Highlight habitats	Wildlife (examples)	Issue (examples)	Action (examples)
<b>Scrub</b> <i>Ownership:</i> Approx. 80% public 20% private	Spotted skunk Florida scrub-jay Striped newt Gopher tortoise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conversion to agriculture and development</li> <li>• Altered natural fire cycles</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify scrub that is to be converted to other uses and work with landowners on a voluntary basis to preserve the habitat via acquisition, easement agreements or other incentives programs.</li> <li>• Target preservation of large contiguous areas rather than small piecemeal efforts.</li> </ul>
<b>Freshwater Marsh and Wet Prairie</b> <i>Ownership:</i> Approx. 72% public 28% private	River otter Little blue heron Carpenter frog Spotted turtle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conversion to agriculture and development</li> <li>• Surface water withdrawal</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage funding projects that restore and conserve habitats.</li> <li>• Form an interagency task force to streamline the permitting process for wetland restoration projects that restore natural water movement.</li> </ul>
<b>Coral Reef</b> <i>Ownership:</i> 100% Public	Atlantic bottlenose dolphin Green sea turtle Spotted eagle ray Blue parrotfish	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vessel impacts</li> <li>• Coastal development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support a marine/estuary trust fund.</li> <li>• Create state and federal collaborative incentive-based programs to more effectively preserve coastal resources across jurisdictions.</li> </ul>

**Recommended actions to conserve Florida's wildlife**



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Shallow-water reef, Florida Keys Marine Sanctuary/NOAA

*“Fish and wildlife resources in Florida will benefit greatly from the strategic thinking and science-based approach that went into this wildlife action plan. We are proud to work in partnership with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission as it implements its plan. The result will be sustainable ecosystems and healthier wildlife populations.”*

*– Sam D. Hamilton,  
Southeast Regional Director  
for the U.S. Fish and  
Wildlife Service*

Such management actions can be incompatible with wildlife, due to reduced land and water quality or destruction of habitats.

## Working together for Florida’s wildlife

Numerous state, federal and local agencies, universities and education centers, conservation and environmental organizations, recreation groups, as well as businesses and the general public participated in questionnaires, 16 workshops, two conferences, an open house and an on-line virtual workshop. A Web site and e-mail contact list of approximately 1,200 individuals’ raised awareness and participation in action plan development. A broad cross-section of stakeholders with interest or expertise in Florida’s natural resources contributed over 5,000 comments on two draft plans.

The Wildlife Action Plan is one major component of Florida’s Wildlife Legacy Initiative. The Initiative seeks to conserve



Florida scrub/James Valentine

our native wildlife and habitats through measures emphasizing non-regulatory, voluntary, and incentive-based actions designed to create partnerships. Reaching the goals of the Initiative is an ambitious undertaking that will involve the efforts and energies of numerous individuals, groups, and agencies. Commission staff is dedicated to playing a leading role in these efforts and is committed to making the Initiative a success.

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