www.fws.gov/southeast/candidateconservation/

# Conserving the Southeast's At-Risk Species

## *Listing not needed for over 40 species*

*"Private landowners are wonderful stewards of the Southeast's grand diversity of fish, wildlife and plants. Our goal is to work closely with them – and our public partners – to proactively conserve as many at-risk species as possible through voluntary and innovative measures. Together we can pass down our outdoor traditions to future generations of Americans, and help keep farms, forests and other lands working for both people and wildlife."*

Cindy Dohner, Southeast Regional Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

In 2011, the Southeast Region of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service began working with states, federal agencies and other partners to evaluate more than 450 fish, wildlife and plant species for potential listing under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). These evaluations are required due to litigation and petitions. The goal is to preclude the need to list as many at-risk species as possible through proactive conservation and the best available science.

### Our Goal

Work with private and public partners to protect working lands and our outdoor heritage by precluding the need to federally list as many at-risk species as possible through voluntary proactive conservation and the best available science.

### Definition of At-Risk Species

Biologists commonly refer to species as "at-risk" if they face grave threats to their survival. For the purposes of this conservation strategy, the Service's Southeast Region has defined "at-risk species" as those that are:

- Proposed for listing under the ESA by the Service;
- Candidates for listing under the ESA, which means they are in the queue to be listed; or
- Petitioned for listing under the ESA, which means a citizen or group has requested that the Service add them to the list of protected species. As the Service develops proactive conservation strategies with partners for at-risk species, the states' Species of Greatest Conservation Need (defined as species with low or declining populations) will also be considered.

*Bear cubs, credit Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC)*

### Southeast Regional Strategy for Conserving At-Risk Species

The Southeast Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (SEAFWA) and the Southeast Region is working in five action areas to accomplish the goal of conserving at-risk species:

- Prioritize species in need of conservation;
- Promote voluntary conservation actions;
- Work with partnerships;
- Improve data collection and sharing; and
- Outreach.

### Our Partners in Conserving At-Risk Species

In February 2014, the state directors agreed to fund a coordinator to implement the At-Risk Species Conservation Strategy. Fifteen southeastern states, working through the Southeastern Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (SEAFWA), are leading the effort to conserve at-risk species.

### SEAFWA Wildlife Diversity Committee

SEAFWA is addressing the information needs and conservation of at-risk species, achieving an unprecedented level of cooperation among the states. They completed a first cut at categorizing candidate and petitioned species for resource needs.

The Service and the states are identifying priorities for surveys and conservation agreements. In addition, states have begun sending data to the Service on the population status of at-risk species to assist with the annual Candidate Notice of Review to determine species status, including species that may not warrant listing.

### Projects with Federal Agencies

Partnerships such as the Southeast Natural Resources Leadership Group (SENRLG) and the Southeast Regional Partnership for Planning and Sustainability (SERPPAS) are helping us test more efficient documentation of federal investments that abate threats to at-risk species while offering greater "regulatory predictability."

- The Service is working with Camp Blanding in Florida to develop a Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurance (CCAA) to clarify policy related to providing regulatory assurances for state-owned lands that are managed using federal funds (National Guard Bureau).
- The Service is working through the SERPPAS At-Risk Species Issue Team to develop methods applicable nationwide:

  (1) a programmatic consultation on Integrated Natural Resource Management Plans (INRMPs) at Eglin Air Force Base for at-risk species would provide greater regulatory predictability;

  (2) a "candidate conservation credit" (or pre-listing mitigation) system for gopher tortoises to provide credits that may be used to offset impacts if the species later becomes listed; and

  (3) data systems for state and federal agencies to share information about species status and conservation efforts.

### Working with Private Landowners

The Service's Southeast Region recognizes the enormous contribution private landowners make to wildlife conservation. From the gopher tortoise in open pine forests, to the darter fish found in the riffles of mountain streams, the abundance and diversity of species found only in the Southeast are largely due to the conservation ethic of private landowners and the efforts of the states' fish and wildlife agencies.

*Longleaf pine ecosystem, credit USFWS/Randy Browning*

The Service also recognizes that the majority of lands in the Southeast are privately owned and include habitat for federally listed and at-risk species. To more fully engage private landowners in managing their lands and waters to benefit these species, the Service has developed several voluntary tools that both protect private land interests and provide incentives. These tools, which include conservation agreements and conservation banks or mitigation lands, can be used in combinations to cover both listed and at-risk species.

Early conservation — before a species requires listing under the ESA — maximizes management options for landowners, minimizes the costs, and reduces the potential for restrictive landuse policies by addressing the needs of the species before regulatory requirements for listed species come into play.

Reese Thompson is a Georgia landowner who's making a difference one tree at a time. A sixth generation Georgian, he's been planting trees for 42 years. "I'm the guy that rides the tree planter. I thoroughly enjoy planting trees, in my mind that's the closest to immortality I'm ever going to get. I have trees that my grandfather planted, and a son and a daughter that help me plant trees," said Thompson.

Thompson is quick to acknowledge that it takes teamwork to make this dream work:

"A wise man once said if you see a turtle sitting on fence post (in this instance a gopher tortoise) he didn't get there by himself. In a sense I'm that gopher tortoise. All of my good work is the result of help, assistance and knowledge that I've gained from other conservation minded people and organizations. I can't say enough good things about USFWS, Georgia DNR and NRCS. Any good work I do is a joint effort."

### Partners for Wildlife (PFW) Pilot – Longleaf Pine in Alabama and Georgia

A $200,000 Landscape Pilot for the Partners for Wildlife program is being implemented with private landowners. The programmatic Section 7 biological opinion/conference opinion in the historic range of longleaf pine in Alabama and Georgia will link 30-year PFW agreements to incidental take evaluation for at-risk species. We intend to work toward regulatory predictability for landowners.

### Focal Areas Map

The states of Alabama, Florida and Georgia are collaborating with the Service to identify focal areas of high endemism for at-risk species and include other wide-ranging species that may occur there. Field offices are working to identify focal areas in other states. These maps will help the Service and partners identify places where conservation efforts can be focused for at-risk species.

*Elfin-woods warbler, credit USFWS*

### Outreach to Private Landowners and Organizations

In the last two years, the Service has met with thousands of individuals representing utilities such as the Southern Company (Alabama Power, Georgia Power, Mississippi Power and Gulf Power), forest landowners and managers (Forest Landowners Association, Georgia Forestry Association, Plum Creek, Rayonier, Southern Group of State Foresters), and coal mining interests in Kentucky. Together we are working on opportunities for proactive conservation, as well as innovative new methods to document effective conservation on private lands that may preclude the need to list species.

### Examples of Accomplishments to Date

- Two Candidate Conservation Agreements signed: the Yadkin River goldenrod in North Carolina and the Georgia aster. As a result both have been removed from candidate status.
- SEAFWA and the Service have prioritized wide-ranging at-risk species for collaborative conservation efforts. An example is the gopher tortoise, which is a candidate for listing across its eastern range in parts of Alabama, Georgia, Florida and South Carolina. The Service is coordinating with the states to provide Section 6 funding for surveys and to develop proactive conservation agreements.
- Seven species that were petitioned for listing have been withdrawn and do not require federal protection.
- More than 40 conservation agreements are under discussion or under development in the Southeast Region, including a comprehensive agreement for cave species in Arkansas.
- A searchable database, called the **At-Risk Species Finder**, is available on the Southeast Region's website. Partners and the public can readily sort lists of candidate and petitioned species, their status, location, range, and field office contacts. **http://www.fws.gov/southeast/candidateconservation/finder.html**

### Gopher Tortoise

The Service, in collaboration with Alabama, Georgia, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi and South Carolina, completed the Range-Wide Conservation Strategy for the Gopher Tortoise in May 2013. With six objectives to minimize threats and hopefully preclude the need to list the species in its eastern range, the strategy includes teams co-led by the Service and states. The strategy is posted on the candidate conservation website.

- The Natural Resources Conservation Service's Working Lands for Wildlife partnership provides cost-share funds for managing lands in the Gopher tortoise range (AL, FL, GA, LA, MS, SC) has been very successful. In fiscal year 2012, $10.9 million was allocated to 122,389 acres. In fiscal year 2013, $9.9 million was allocated.

*Chowanoke crayfish, credit NCWRC*

- The Service is working with Plum Creek to develop a tortoise Management Plan that can be used in association with the company's Forest Certification (Sustainable Forestry Initiative), which can also provide third party verification of tortoise populations to aid information for species status.
- Tall Timbers Research Station is working with the Service, Florida and Georgia on a programmatic CCAA for the gopher tortoise and commensals for landowners already enrolled in the red-cockaded woodpecker Safe Harbor Agreement (SHA).
- Line Transect Distance Sampling (LTDS) was adopted by all public agencies as the standard protocol for surveying tortoise populations. States, especially Georgia, are working with private landowners to use LTDS to determine populations for a better assessment of the population rangewide.
- The Gopher Tortoise Council, a 501©3 organization, released a report in July 2013 that recommends a recommended minimum viable population size. The report is available at www.gophertortoisecouncil.org.
- Florida has proposed management plans for state-listed species that intersect candidate and petitioned species and commensal species with gopher tortoises. The state is also

working on Desired Future Conditions and Best Management Practices for a suite of state-listed species, and developing conservation measures that can be inserted into any conservation agreement. In addition, a major MOU was signed with phosphate mining company for easements to protect gopher tortoise habitat.

*Georgia aster, credit TNC-GA/Michele Elmore*

## A History of Success

Over the years, the Service and its partners have been able to conserve dozens of at-risk species and preclude the need to list them under the ESA. In the Southeast, by working closely with states, other federal agencies, private landowners, non-governmental organizations and many other partners, the Service has been able to remove the label "candidate for federal listing" from the Florida black bear, Adams cave beetles in Kentucky, the Camp Shelby burrowing crayfish, the Yadkin River goldenrod and the Georgia aster.

*Jon Ambrose, chief of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources' Nongame Conservation Section, said removing the Georgia aster as a candidate for federal listing is heartening to see, noting that while not every species will fit the same approach, "Georgia aster can serve as a good example of what can be done both on the research front — identifying populations, finding out the habitat requirements, determining management needs — and with partnerships to get an agreement in place that will conserve the species."*

Another success story is the robust redhorse, a large sucker fish once thought to be extinct before it was rediscovered in 1991 in a Georgia river. Thanks to the pre-listing recovery work by the Robust Redhorse Conservation Committee detailed in a Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances signed in 2002 by Georgia Power, which is part of the Southern Company, and the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, the fish has not been listed.

*Robust redhorse, credit Georgia Department of Natural Resources*

*Gopher tortoise, credit FWC/Renee Rau*

A video describing the work on the robust redhorse can be viewed at www.fws.gov/southeast/candidateconservation/.

## Next Steps

In order to do enough proactive conservation to the point that ESA protection is not needed for as many at risk species as possible, the Service and its partners must:

- Target resources (partners, staff time, and funding) to proactive conservation actions in the Southeast, such as purchasing conservation easements in habitat essential to at-risk species.
- Conduct essential research and surveys to determine the habitat and life history requirements of priority at-risk species. Better information will enable the Service and its partners to maximize conservation impact.
- Better use existing tools and programs, and explore new ways to provide regulatory flexibility to landowners for proactive conservation actions.

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