

## Strategic Habitat Conservation Approach in Coastal Alabama



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In recent years, the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) Alabama Field Office (AFO) has taken an increasingly strategic approach to conservation in Alabama. This effort is due in large part to restricted budgets and an increased focus on accountability, but mainly it stems from a necessity to do conservation work effectively. We are becoming more explicit about what we need to conserve and where we need to work to achieve our goals. In short, our goal is to do “the right conservation in the right places.” So far, this thought process has resulted in aquatic work being concentrated in specific watersheds in the state and longleaf pine restoration that is prioritized based on geography and species locations. We are now able to defensibly put our resources in specific areas for the benefit of the species most in need.

A coastal working group is now using that same approach to guide our planning for conservation along Alabama’s coast. The diverse wildlife and habitat assemblages and myriad environmental organizations that operate in coastal Alabama make it imperative that we think strategically about conservation on the coast, including identification of priority species and habitats, and the resources we need to operate on the coast.

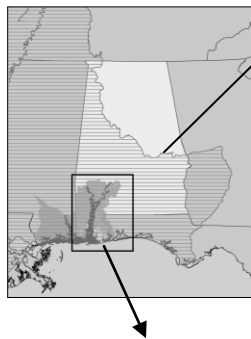
Following the Strategic Habitat Conservation (SHC) approach developed by USFWS, coastal discussions began with Biological Planning, during which priority – or focal – species were identified. Priority species were chosen before priority habitats because successful conservation of species ensures conservation of high quality habitats, and the reverse may not necessarily be true. This approach also promotes accountability. Considerations for choosing species included: federal trust species – listed species, migratory birds, anadromous fishes; species for which beneficial management will benefit a suite of priority species; species of sufficient importance that are unique to a particular habitat; and species that we have the ability to affect with management or other conservation mechanisms, alone or working with partners.

Included in the Biological Planning phase is a compilation of scientific knowledge of selected species, including population status, trends, models, and population limiting factors. Biological Planning also includes setting population objectives for each selected species, which may be the most difficult task of this phase. We have limited information about some species in coastal Alabama, and little work has been done to help determine what appropriate population and demographic metric. The coastal working group is now identifying those knowledge gaps.

As a first draft, the SHC coastal working group chose 3 strategic habitat units (SHUs), or areas of high priority, for restoration, upon which a number of priority species depend. These SHUs are: 1) longleaf, 2) estuarine marsh – open water, and 3) beach and dune. Each was preliminarily mapped using the Southeast Gap Analysis Program and National Land Cover Dataset (2001) shown below.

Future discussions will identify limiting factors for populations of focal species, how we need to target conservation for these species, and how conservation efforts can be monitored. Although the AFO works only in Alabama, consideration should be given to how coastal efforts fit in with larger Gulf Coast

restoration efforts. Additionally, a commonality found in all coastal habitats in Alabama is the human desire to recreate in these areas. We hope to use this potentially unifying mechanism to build partnerships in protecting these habitats for future generations.



Most of Alabama falls within the Gulf Coastal Plain and Ozarks Landscape Conservation Cooperative.



**Longleaf** habitat supports species such as red-cockaded woodpecker, gopher tortoise, pitcher plant bogs, Eastern indigo and black pine snakes.

**Estuarine marsh and tidal open water** habitats support species such as yellow and black rail, Louisiana seaside sparrow, saltmarsh topminnow, blackmouth shiner, Gulf sturgeon, West Indian manatee, Alabama red-bellied turtle and 5 species of foraging sea turtles.

**Coastal beach and dune** habitats support species such as Alabama and Perdido Key beach mouse, nesting loggerhead and Kemps ridley sea turtles, nesting and foraging shorebirds (snowy and piping plover, least tern).

- Current Projects:**
- 1) Participate in Gulfwide Marshbird Monitoring protocol development and surveys lead by Region 4 Migratory Bird Office.
  - 2) Monitoring/ mapping of AL red-belly turtle nesting and basking habitats in tributaries of Mobile Bay.
  - 3) Verification of suitable soils for gopher tortoise in Candidate listing range on public lands.
  - 4) Probability modeling/mapping of pitcher plant bogs using underlying features of known sites to identify potential new sites for restoration and protection.
  - 5) Document changes in dune development through fixed photopoints.