

# 1 | Introduction



*Arctic ground squirrel. T. Rains, NPS, used with permission.*

The Alaska State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP) is guided by the Alaska Constitution (Art. VIII, § 4) and the Alaska Department of Fish and Game's (ADF&G) mission to ensure the long-term viability of the state's fish and wildlife resources, managed to promote the well-being of Alaskans and the state's economy. Alaska is the only state with the sustained yield principle enshrined in its constitution, reflecting the state's commitment to the responsible use and conservation of its natural resources (Alaska Constitution, Art. VIII). The sustained yield principle emphasizes that renewable resources such as fish, wildlife, and their habitats must be maintained in a manner that does not restrict use, but rather ensures continued availability for future generations. The SWAP applies this definition to both harvested species (i.e., fish and game) as well as nongame species. The SWAP serves as a tool to help ADF&G and its partners proactively identify and address conservation needs, ensuring that healthy, viable populations of fish and wildlife persist, while allowing for the economic benefits provided by responsible resource use.

Alaska is required to have a SWAP to be eligible for funding through the State Wildlife Grants (SWG) program. The U.S. Congress created the SWG program in 2000 to provide critical funding to every state and territory to plan and implement proactive conservation actions to prevent the nation's fish and wildlife from becoming endangered. Funding is provided to the states through the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). SWG is the only federal program that explicitly aims to avoid the need to list species as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). This program continues the long history of cooperation between the federal government and the states to manage and conserve wildlife species, returning to landmark laws such as the 1937 Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Act and the 1950 Dingell-Johnson Sportfish Restoration Act.

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Gulkana River. ADF&G.



Golden Eagle nestlings. ADF&G.



Collared pika. ADF&G.

To help avoid ESA listings, SWG funding was used by each state and territory to develop a SWAP. Congress intended state action plans to be adaptive, requiring that they be revised periodically (at least once every 10 years) to incorporate new information and reflect up-to-date projected threats and priorities. These plans bring together the best science available to conserve and manage priority fish and wildlife species and their habitats. State action plans identify species with important conservation needs and offer a set of actions to address key threats, providing a voluntary, nonregulatory alternative to the federal ESA listing process. Grant funds must be used for activities that address conservation needs identified within a state’s plan, such as research, surveys, monitoring, and species and habitat management.

Before the establishment of the SWG program, conservation funding was typically only available once species were critically endangered or officially listed under the ESA. While the ESA has been instrumental in conserving species, it has faced criticism for being costly and inefficient (Bunnell et al. 2004a, 2004b; Evans et al. 2016). Some key critiques include 1) most funding has not been used on essential habitat for recovery, 2) monitoring and recovery efforts often fail to focus on the main threats to species, 3) conservation actions are most effective when initiated while populations and their ranges are relatively large, and 4) priority ranking systems have not always guided expenditure decisions.

### Application of the SWAP

Alaska’s SWAP is intended to serve as a framework for identifying priority species and habitats, addressing threats, and implementing effective conservation actions to manage species under the sustained yield principle as stipulated in the Alaska Constitution (Art.

VIII, § 4). Additionally, the SWAP is envisioned to inform decision-making, allocate resources, and coordinate across agencies and partners to ensure the long-term conservation and management of wildlife species. The target species within the SWAP, referred to as “species of greatest conservation need” (SGCN), are identified based on multiple scientific criteria (e.g., a declining trend or other concerns, as detailed in Chapter 4). SGCN are eligible for SWG funds, which aim to implement proactive measures that keep species of concern from being listed under the ESA. Continued use of the SWAP framework and the SGCN list helps to focus priorities, secure funding, and develop projects that conserve wildlife. The approach promotes collaboration with partners to achieve conservation and management goals, while also allowing flexibility to address emerging issues.

Eight appendices are included at the end of the 2025 SWAP and provide in-depth information that we think will be useful to our partners and members of the public. Comprehensive lists of terrestrial and aquatic SGCN, as well as their conservation status and justifications for their inclusion, appear in Appendices A through C. Geographic distribution of SGCN and population estimates (where known) are provided in Appendices D and E. Appendices F and G contain detailed habitat descriptions and plant taxonomy that can be used to gain a better understanding of the wealth of wildlife habitats in Alaska. Finally, Appendix H includes online resources relating to current and ongoing wildlife and habitat monitoring efforts.



*Fishing for Arctic grayling in the Delta River. ADF&G.*

Throughout the 2025 SWAP, we include “vignettes” describing the life history, behavior, and habitats of SGCN and the conservation challenges they face. The purpose of the vignettes is to share additional information that we think provides interesting facts about Alaska’s fish and wildlife and increases a reader’s engagement with the SWAP. Vignettes feature SGCN and projects, providing examples of the kinds of work SWG funding allows ADF&G to do. Vignettes are not meant to imply the highest priority or top-ranked SGCN.

ADF&G authored this plan as the State of Alaska agency charged with the following mission: “*To protect, maintain, and improve fish, game and aquatic plant resources of the state, and manage their use and development in the best interest of the economy and the well-being of the people of the state, consistent with the sustained yield principle.*” SWG funds are used within ADF&G to help the state ensure that robust populations of fish and wildlife are maintained, while additional natural resources continue to be developed. Funds support research, conservation, and management efforts of the ADF&G Division of Wildlife Conservation’s Threatened, Endangered, and Diversity (TED) Program, Marine Mammals Program, and Lands and Refuges Program, as well as the Division of Sport Fish. SWG funds enable these ADF&G programs to conserve and manage many Alaska species that do not receive sufficient traditional funding (e.g., Pittman-Robertson, Dingell-Johnson). Examples include declining migratory songbirds and shorebirds, bats, marine mammals, and certain aquatic species that have data deficiencies or are impacted by invasive species (see Chapter 4).

### Species of Conservation Need: Lesser Yellowlegs (*Tringa flavipes*)

The Lesser Yellowlegs is a medium-sized shorebird that breeds in boreal wetlands throughout Alaska. These shorebirds are easily identifiable by their long, bright yellow legs and dark, slender bills. Lesser Yellowlegs are long-distance neotropical migrants. Transmitter data from GPS tags deployed on adults by ADF&G and others have revealed that these birds fly from Alaska, through the prairie pothole region, and continue as far south as Argentina. Wetlands and agricultural areas in Eastern Argentina appear to be important wintering areas. Unregulated subsistence hunting in South America on the fall and overwintering grounds is

considered a primary threat to the species. Lesser Yellowlegs populations have been declining at a rate of approximately 5–9% per year in Alaska according to survey data, and the species has lost 60–70% of its population rangewide since the 1970s. Additional threats, which occur primarily outside of Alaska, include agricultural expansion, wetland drying, shoreline hardening, and exposure to pesticides and contaminants. ADF&G’s Threatened, Endangered, and Diversity Program is conducting a mark-resight study to estimate the annual survival of migrating adults, assessing nest fate and breeding habitat characteristics, and assessing pesticide exposure to address various knowledge gaps for this rapidly declining species. ADF&G is working with partners across the species’ range to reverse population declines.



Lesser Yellowlegs. A. Underwood, ADF&G.

## How SWG Funds have Benefitted Alaska Wildlife

Since 2015, the State of Alaska has received \$27 million (about \$2.7 million annually) from Congress to implement the SWG program. The state and its partners have also provided more than \$14 million in matching funds. This funding was used in Alaska to accomplish the work needed on various taxa of concern, including marine mammals, small mammals, seabirds, shorebirds, landbirds, and fish. Activities funded have included invasive species removals as well as surveys, monitoring, and research on habitat use, vital rates (e.g., reproductive success and mortality), and long-distance migratory movements of various species where adult survival is at risk.

The State of Alaska has prioritized SWG funding to monitor, conserve, and manage a diverse suite of species, such as those provided in Table 1.1. These projects aimed to take a proactive approach to conservation and management by first quantifying the key parameters of target SGCN (e.g., reproductive success, migratory patterns, diet, and survival) to reveal potential threats or stressors that may be responsible for current or future declines. ADF&G then used this information to implement effective population management or mitigation strategies to reduce or

*Table 1.1. Example research projects conducted by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game’s Threatened, Endangered, and Diversity Program using State Wildlife Grant funding (2015–2025).*

Birds	Research Focus
Lesser Yellowlegs	Migratory patterns, genetics, demography, threats assessment
Golden Eagle	Reproduction, survival, movement ecology
Aleutian Tern	Population monitoring, movement ecology
Kittlitz’s Murrelet	Population monitoring, reproduction, abundance, nest success
Red Knot	Abundance, habitat hotspots, diet, migration patterns
Bank Swallow	Population monitoring, migratory patterns
Olive-sided Flycatcher	Migratory patterns, important stopover areas, survival, reproduction
Gray-headed Chickadee	Range estimation, abundance
Mammals	
Collared pika	Distribution, abundance, survival, genetics, diet
Little brown bat	Habitat, hibernation ecology, distribution, threat of white-nose syndrome
Arctic ground squirrel	Diet composition
Northern bog lemming	Diet composition, habitat use, resilience to environmental change
Alaska hare	Population monitoring, genetics, diet, management
Other (e.g., multiple species)	
Managing for timber and SGCN wildlife	Best management practices that benefit forest regeneration and provide habitat for SGCN birds and mammals
Reducing losses of Alaska’s migratory SGCN	Migratory patterns, identification of actions to reduce mortality during the nonbreeding season
Monitoring SGCN songbirds	Long-term population monitoring and changes in migration timing
Pollinators	Diversity, abundance, distribution

reverse decline and avoid the need for species to be listed as endangered or threatened under the ESA. Successful projects benefit Alaskans because species are conserved, and expensive or prescriptive regulatory burdens of the ESA are more likely to be avoided. For more detailed information on ESA successes over the past 10 years, please see the “Defining Success” section of Chapter 9 and Table 9.1.

## Creating the 2025 SWAP

ADF&G has reviewed the 2015 SWAP, new status assessments, and pertinent scientific literature from the last decade. In consultation with our partners, the SWAP was revised to identify threats to priority species in addition to conservation and management actions envisioned for the next 10 years. A detailed list of major changes in this revision is provided in Chapter 2.

Briefly, the 2025 revision offers updated information on the distribution, abundance, habitat use, threats, conservation actions, and status of SGCN. As in the 2015 SWAP, we have maintained a streamlined approach to the plan rather than providing an encyclopedic treatise about every



*Gathering of Bald Eagles. ADF&G.*

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*Little brown bat. D. Owens, ADF&G.*



*Emperor Geese with goslings. ADF&G.*

species, threat, or possible conservation action in Alaska. We found the encyclopedic approach used in the original 2005 SWAP to be less practical and effective for users of the plan.

We consulted with partners and the public during the development and review of the 2025 SWAP with the intent that this plan will provide useful guidance for a wide array of partners, agencies, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), Alaska Native groups, and others interested in conservation and management of Alaska’s wildlife. Consultation will continue as ADF&G implements this revised plan and seeks to ensure that Alaska’s wildlife and fish remain healthy and abundant into the future—a goal all Alaskans share.

## **Eight Required Elements**

The 2025 SWAP must adequately address all eight elements below to ensure its approval and continued eligibility for SWG funding.

Congress directed that states include the following eight elements in their revision:

1. Information on the distribution and abundance of species, including low and declining populations that are indicative of the diversity and health of the state’s wildlife.
2. Descriptions of locations and relative condition of key habitats and community types essential to conservation of species identified in element 1.
3. Descriptions of problems that may adversely affect species identified in element 1 or their habitats, and priority research and survey efforts needed to identify factors that may assist in restoration and improved conservation of these species and habit.
4. Descriptions of actions proposed to conserve the identified species and habitats and priorities for implementing such actions.
5. Proposed strategies for monitoring species identified in element 1 and their habitats, for monitoring the effectiveness of the conservation actions proposed in element 4, and for adapting these conservation actions to respond appropriately to new information or changing conditions.

6. Descriptions of procedures to review the SWAP at intervals not to exceed 10 years.
7. Strategies for coordinating the development, implementation, review, and revision of the SWAP with federal, state, and local agencies and Alaska Native organizations that manage significant land and water areas within the state or administer programs that significantly affect the conservation of identified species and habitats.
8. Provisions to ensure broad public participation in the development, implementation, and revision of the SWAP, along with associated projects and programs.

## Literature Cited

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View from a survey route on the Kenai Peninsula. ADF&G.

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