

UNVEILED

THROUGH A NEW INTERACTIVE WEBSITE

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Many people associate a state wildlife agency with a single species.

Did I get my deer tag? What is the walleye limit? Does the pheasant brood count mean the upcoming season will be a good one?

Tied to these recommendations and surveys are biologists and other resource managers who collect and analyze data to develop recommendations that balance fair opportunities with management needs of individual species.

What about species that don't have this combination of intensive surveys and management planning?

South Dakota has more than 400 bird species, nearly 100 native bird species, 100 native mammal species and about 50 species of amphibians and reptiles combined. Many wildlife groups, particularly invertebrates, lack species experts in our area or funds have not been available to even begin to estimate how many species there are, let alone to determine where they live and what they need to thrive. Wildlife action plans are an attempt to address this challenge, which is faced by all state wildlife agencies in the country, U.S. territories and the District of Columbia. Although called by various names, the plans collectively represent an ambitious effort to consider and plan for the needs of all species and the essential habitats within a state or territory.

Wildlife action plans were developed to allow states to remain eligible for a federal funding source called state wildlife grants. This annual Congressional allocation helps meet a small part of the tremendous funding needed to provide the full complement of species a wildlife agency is responsible for managing. During the 14 years state wildlife grant funds have been provided, South Dakota has received \$7.6 million to help fund monitoring, research and restoration projects not eligible for other sources or that weren't identified as priorities for limited funds.

Specific plan requirements are evaluated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, but individual states have latitude with how they satisfy those requirements. South Dakota's first wildlife action plan was approved in 2006, and a revised plan was approved in May of 2015. Like many states, South Dakota's plan uses a habitat approach, with different methods used for terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems.

A habitat-based approach provides for the needs of species known to rely on a particular habitat or landscape type but more importantly, this method will accommodate other species, both plant and animal, that may not be on the radar. This is a preventive, rather than a reactive, approach. Although we will always need to consider specific needs of rare species, continuing to focus on single species uses limited resources at the expense of the vast majority of plants and animals.

Nature does not operate in a simple, linear fashion – all components, whether soils, climate, predator and prey influences, migratory or wintering ground challenges and habitat changes, work together in a complex relationship we will never fully understand. Even when using a habitat framework, wildlife action plans must include a list of species to help evaluate the plan's effectiveness: these are called "species of greatest conservation need."

South Dakota's wildlife action plan uses coarse filter and fine filter approaches. The coarse filter is a description of habitats that provide for the needs of plant and animal species under prevailing climatic and disturbance patterns. The terrestrial framework is the system of major land resource areas developed by the Natural Resources Conservation Service. For aquatic habitats, a framework previously developed for the Missouri River drainage was used to classify riverine ecosystems. If we can provide a representation of habitats found in the state under a variety of disturbance types, like controlled fire and managed grazing, we hope to provide for the needs of the majority of native species. The species of greatest conservation need are the fine filter, where additional species-specific actions may be needed for those that are very rare or have more precise habitat needs.

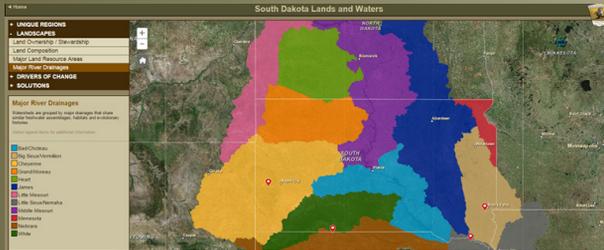
To more easily explain and invite participation in South Dakota's plan, GFP recently premiered a new website called the Wildlife Action Plan Explorer. Use the GFP website's search tool to find it or go directly to this link arcgis.sd.gov/server/gfp/wap/Default.aspx.



The “Explore the Maps” section of the site provides information about the wildlife and aquatic landscapes where users can investigate conservation challenges faced by species and habitats and see examples of possible solutions to these challenges.

In this example, Major River Drainages are selected and the corresponding color key identifies them.

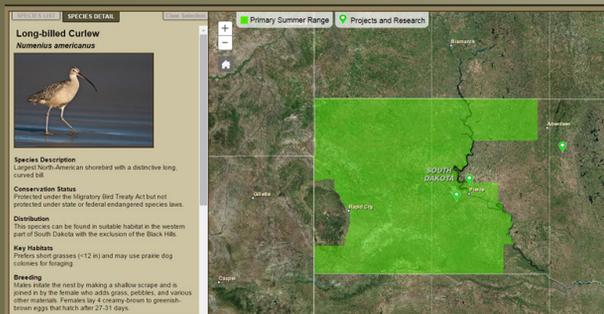
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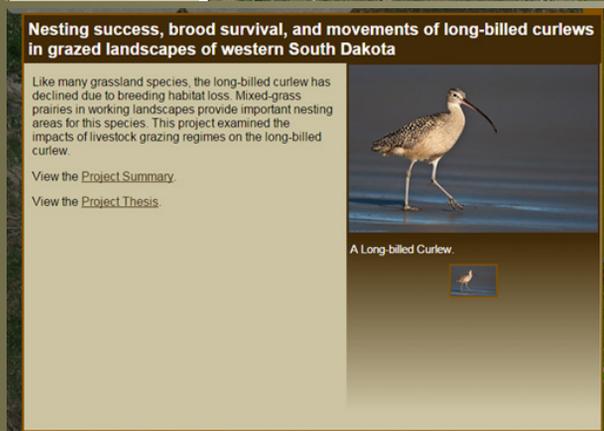


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Select any of the pins to learn more about a project, such as this research project, to access project summary information.

Users will also find descriptions and depictions of known habitat challenges including land conversion, habitat fragmentation, extreme weather changes and invasive species.



The “Launch SD Wildlife” section of the site is a work in progress. Users can select a species of greatest conservation need and see where it occurs in the state, learn about its life history and see examples of recent projects related to the species. The project icons link to more information, like images, reports and publications related to the project. Featured projects were funded with state wildlife grant dollars. Eventually all species will be incorporated.

The long-billed curlew is selected in this example, which displays life history information, the state range map and pins of interest for several projects related to this species of greatest conservation need.

Users familiar with the ecosite classification system of the Natural Resources Conservation Service may find “My Conservation Tool” of interest. For those not familiar with this land classification and evaluation system, the site includes an instructional video. By selecting a specific region, users will see a listing of the predominant ecological site and plant community type, various disturbance states, a selection of growth forms and plant communities expected under restored conditions. These lists can help assess habitat restoration success.

A major section of the site is a catch-all that includes links to related GFP websites, a list of contacts for Wildlife Diversity and Natural Heritage Program Staff and links to species checklists. As more surveys are conducted on wildlife groups, checklists will be updated and added.

The South Dakota Wildlife Action Plan is less a paper document than a philosophical approach to planning for the state’s landscapes and species in a broader way. Success will definitely “take a village.”