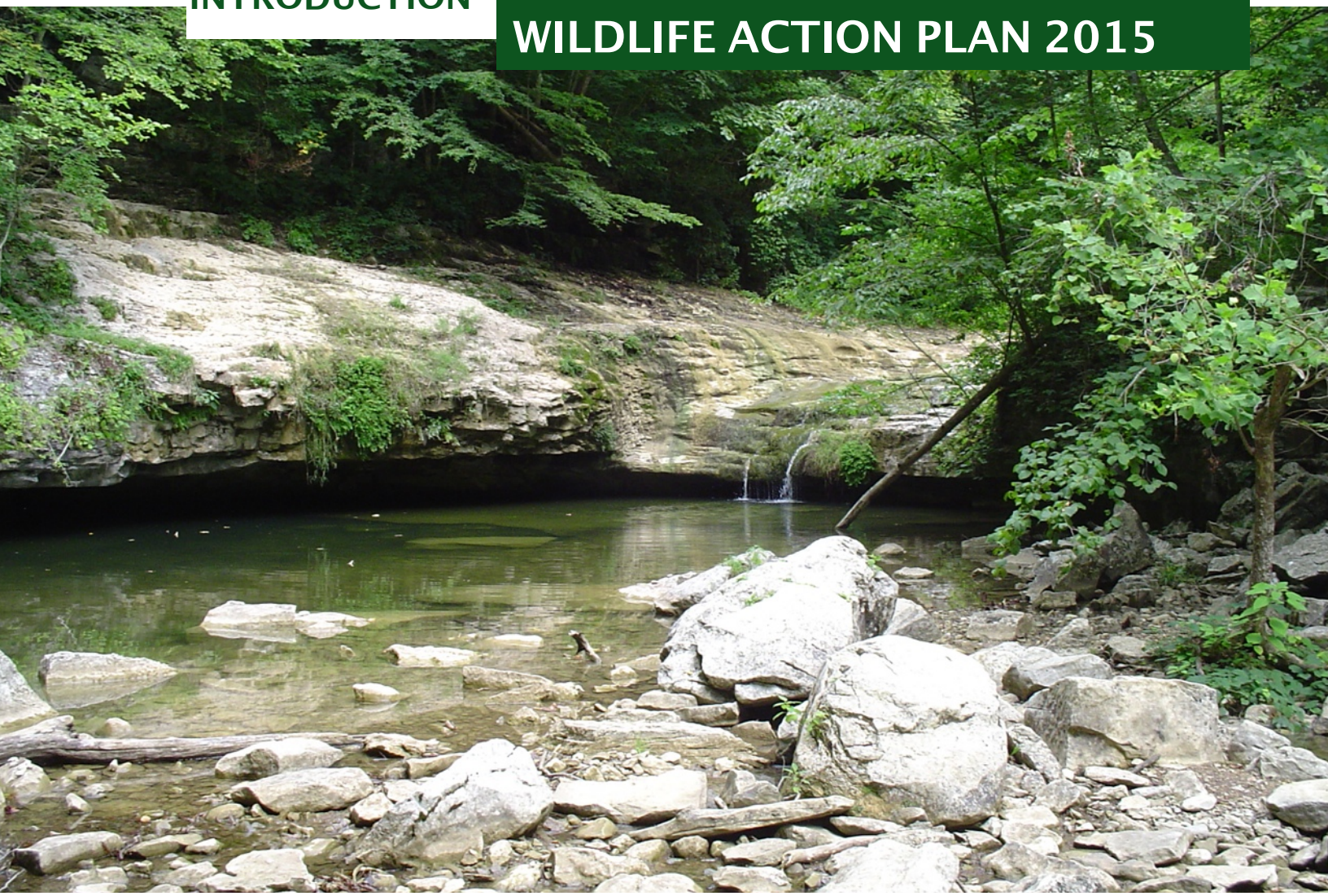
INTRODUCTION

TENNESSEE STATE WILDLIFE ACTION PLAN 2015



I-1. From 2005 to 2015: Overview of the First SWAP Revision

TENNESSEE'S FIRST COMPREHENSIVE WILDLIFE CONSERVATION STRATEGY (now known as the State Wildlife Action Plan or SWAP) was completed in 2005. In developing the 2005 SWAP, the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency, in collaboration with The Nature Conservancy, invested in the development of an integrated relational database and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) tool to serve three main purposes: (1) consolidate numerous datasets on species occurrences and habitats managed by different agencies and organizations in the state; (2) link the species and habitat data to a GIS platform to facilitate conservation priority mapping statewide; and (3) promote common understanding of problems facing species and habitats across the state to encourage and prioritize collective action (TWRA 2005, pp. 28-29).

This 2015 update of the State Wildlife Action Plan is a comprehensive revision intended to build upon the original 2005 assessment methods, tools, and planning process addressing the Eight Required Elements (see I-2.2.). In the creation of this revision document, the emphasis is placed on highlighting where data and methods have been added, revised, and updated; how decisions on addressing priority problems and strategies have been made; and the rationale for decision-making throughout the process.

Key attributes of this 2015 comprehensive revision include the expansion of statewide mapping efforts to include priority problems affecting habitats, the identification of Conservation Opportunity Areas, integration of climate change vulnerability assessments, and the targeting of priority conservation actions with both government agency and non-governmental organization (NGO) partners.

Loggerhead Shrike - Derek Bakken

I-2. Precedents and Requirements for State Wildlife Action Plans and Revisions

The development of State Wildlife Action Plans or SWAPs in every state and territory in 2005 was a historic milestone. All states completed plans following a similar, recommended format for the first time, which set the stage for better collaboration and decision-making on conservation priorities.

I-2.1. Mandating Legislation and Relationship to State Wildlife Grants

Congress funded the State & Tribal Wildlife Grants Program (commonly known as the State Wildlife Grant program or SWG) beginning in 2001. The focus of this program is to address important wildlife issues that have traditionally been underfunded and to "keep common species common." The SWG program is now the nation's core program for preventing endangered species listings. To receive funds, each state and

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Prescribed fire on Bark Camp Barrens WMA, Johnny Martin, Wildlife Technician - Josh Campbell, TWRA

territory is required to develop a "Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy," popularly known as a State Wildlife Action Plan or SWAP.

These first-of-their-kind plans are helping state fish and wildlife agencies and their partners target and improve management for the full array of fish and wildlife under their jurisdiction.

Although the focus of the SWG program and SWAPs is conservation of nongame wildlife species, many nongame conservation strategies and actions are habitat based and therefore benefit a wide range of species, including those that are common or hunted recreationally. SWAPs are intended to serve as adaptive management plans to be updated at regular intervals, the maximum interval being a 10–year cycle. The Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency published a 2009 SWAP update on potential climate change impacts on the state's

I-2.2. SWAPs Must Address 8 Key Elements

In its directive to states on the development of State Wildlife Action Plans, Congress identified eight required elements and directed that the strategies must identify and be focused on the "species in greatest need of conservation" as well as address the "full array of wildlife" and wildlife-related issues (TWRA 2005). The following summarizes the Eight Elements and the chapters of this revision document which address each element:

(1) Information on the distribution and abundance of species of wildlife, including low and declining populations as the state fish and wildlife agency deems appropriate, that are indicative of the diversity and health of the state's wildlife; [Ch 3]

(2) Descriptions of extent and condition of habitats and community types essential to conservation of species identified in (1); [Ch 3]

(3) Descriptions of problems which may adversely affect species identified in (1) or their habitats, and priority research and survey efforts needed to identify factors which may assist in restoration and improved conservation of these species and habitats; [Ch 4]

(4) Descriptions of conservation actions proposed to conserve the identified species and habitats and priorities for implementing such actions; [Ch 5]

(5) Proposed plans for monitoring species identified in (1) and their habitats, for monitoring the effectiveness of the conservation actions proposed in (4), and for adapting these conservation actions to respond appropriately to new information or changing conditions; [Ch 6]

(6) Descriptions of procedures to review the plan at intervals not to exceed ten years; [Ch 7]

(7) Plans for coordinating the development, implementation, review, and revision of the plan with federal, state, and local agencies and Indian tribes that manage significant land and water areas within the state or administer programs that significantly affect the conservation of identified species and habitats; [Ch 1,7]

(8) Processes for broad public participation in developing, revising, and implementing these plans, the projects that are carried out in accordance with these plans, and the designation of species in greatest need of conservation. [Ch 1, 7]

wildlife and habitats. This 2015 update plan constitutes Tennessee's first comprehensive revision of all Eight Elements from its 2005 SWAP.

I-2.3. Agency Guidance for Plan Revision and Implementation

Since the first round of State Wildlife Action Plans completed in 2005, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, and conservation partners have developed voluntary guidance to help states revise and improve their plans. These flexible guidance documents focus on identifying best practices for meeting each of the Eight Elements and also assist states in determining their approach to addressing climate change vulnerabilities for species and their habitats:

- 2007 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service-issued **Guidance on SWAP revisions**;
- 2009 AFWA **Voluntary Guidance for States to Incorporate Climate Change into State Wildlife Action Plans** and Other Management Plans;
- 2011 AFWA **Measuring the Effectiveness of State Wildlife Grants** report;
- 2012 Association of Fish & Wildlife Agencies (AFWA) **Best Practices for State Wildlife Action Plans**;
- 2012 National Fish, Wildlife and Plants Climate Adaptation Partnership's **national strategy**.

The 2015 revision team has utilized these guidance materials throughout the update development process. Tennessee does not contain land and water areas under Indian tribal management nor have tribal programs affecting species and habitats covered by the plan. Therefore, TWRA did not engage tribal interests in the planning effort.

I-2.4. Plan Revision Features and the 2012 Best Practice Guidance

The 2005 Tennessee State Wildlife Action Plan illustrates many of the features highlighted in AFWA's 2012 Best Practices Guidance document including the use of the NatureServe ranking methodology for assessing species conservation status; standardized habitat classifications, problem and strategy hierarchies; mapping of habitat priorities statewide; and using the input of many public and private partners in the plan's development. The 2015 update effort expands on those original approaches using the Best Practice Guidance, with a particular emphasis on the addition of plants as GCN species; updating habitat mapping to standardized units from nationwide datasets; selecting "Conservation Opportunity Areas" as strategic places to focus actions and partner engagement; alignment of program effectiveness measures to facilitate project reporting in the new U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service TRACs system; and the design of new stakeholder outreach tools including updating the Teaming With Wildlife coalition contact list, a new e-newsletter, and redesigning the Tennessee State Wildlife Action Plan website. For a list of specific Best Practices used by the 2015 revision team, please refer to Appendix A.