

FINAL MINUTES

Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Advisory Committee (NHESAC)

Friday, July 18, 2025

Meeting held virtually via Zoom webinar

MEMBERS:

Present: Bill Brumback, Wayne Peterson, Matt Sisk, Dave Small

Absent: Mark Mello, Kevin Powers

ASSOCIATE MEMBERS:

Present: Russ Hopping, Andy Finton

Absent: N/A

AGENCY STAFF:

Present: Jesse Leddick

OTHERS:

Present: Alexander Richards, Bill Napolitano, Jay Cordeiro, Nina McDonnell, Peter (?)

– The meeting was called to order at 1:30 P.M. –

1. Acceptance of the Minutes of the April Quarterly Meeting

Due to the lack of a quorum at the beginning of the meeting, the vote was postponed until the October meeting.

2. Chair's Comments – Mark Mello

Since the Chair was not available, Vice Chair Dave Small ran the meeting.

3. Board Member's Comments – Matthew Sisk

Board Member Transition

- Robert Durand, a long-time Board member, recently resigned to pursue personal projects and retirement.
- Commissioner O'Shea has identified a replacement who will attend the next Board meeting in August.
- The Board held a sendoff for Bob Durand. Members are encouraged to reach out to him.

Environmental Bond Bill Announcement

- A \$2.9 million Environmental Bond Bill (known as the "Mass. Ready Act") was announced in Braintree which focuses on building climate resilience and includes funding for various environmental programs. The bill will authorize the funding over five years and includes investments in areas like flood control, dam upgrades, land stewardship, and the Municipal

Vulnerability Preparedness program. Governor Healey was in attendance in addition to Lieutenant Governor Kim Driscoll, Energy and Environmental Affairs Secretary Rebecca Tepper, and Commissioners.

- Commissioner O'Shea mentioned several set-asides for DFW, land acquisition, and potential grants.
- DMF will receive funding for salt marsh restoration.
- Specifics of allocations are pending; once received, Jennifer may share with the Committee.

Bear Regulations Update

- Expanded bear regulations passed after extensive discussion.
- Consolidated the three-part bear season into one season; still one tag per hunter.
- Aim: address increased bear interactions in urban areas.
- Bear interaction calls are the top issue for EPOs in recent years.
- Boston Globe covered the regulation change.

4. NHESP & Assistant Director's Report – Jesse Leddick

Personnel and Operations Updates

- New Land and Habitat Conservation Section updates:
 - Emily Myron started as Assistant Director earlier this year.
 - Nicole Keleher hired as Habitat Restoration Program Manager before the hiring freeze went into effect (May 27).
 - Keleher was previously the Forest Health Director at DCR, with expertise in invasive invertebrates, aquatic restoration, and pine barrens.
 - Will focus on staff management.
 - Four Natural Heritage restoration ecologists (Chris Buelow, Dan Bove, Caren Caljouw, Alex Entrup) and several wildlife staff are transitioning to the new section.
 - Reporting lines are changing, but work and office locations remain the same.

Seasonal Staffing Expansion

- Brought on more seasonal staff than ever before, funded by the capital budget, Resilient Mass, Section 6, and state wildlife grants.
 - Two freshwater turtle biologists (1.5-year and 1-year contracts).
 - Four habitat restoration biologists (split into two crews, focus on invasive species).
 - One coastal shorebird biologist (contract through June 2026, supports tern and shorebird work).
 - One college intern (supports botanical surveys and invasive species work).
 - Expansion increases capacity and relieves pressure on permanent staff.

Federal and State Funding Updates

- Pittman-Robertson Act, Dingell-Johnson Act, and existing state wildlife grants continue without interruption.
- New Section 6 grant applications for next fiscal year are delayed; typically released in February, now July with no release.
 - Applications are ready pending release.
- The proposed House budget maintains and slightly increases state wildlife grant funding, contrary to the White House proposal to eliminate it.

- Optimism expressed by leadership that funding will continue.
- The Supreme Court decision allows the administration to proceed with federal staff reductions.
 - Concern that USGS co-op units (including UMass) may be affected next.
 - Hope that UMass will retain PIs or reassign students to continue research.

Heritage Projects and Activities Updates

- The State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP) has been the major focus for Heritage and DFW through the spring.
 - Heavy technical work completed by April/May; now in public rollout phase.
- Shorebird update: Preliminary roseate tern totals for Buzzards Bay (Bird, Ram, Penikese Islands) at 4,027 pairs, surpassing previous high of 3,600.
 - Buzzards Bay now hosts ~2/3 of the Northwest Atlantic roseate tern population.
 - Bird Island restoration credited for upward trend; Ram Island restoration in planning, funding being sought.
 - Restoration involved importing native soil to raise elevation, expand nesting habitat, and install hardened buffers to prevent erosion.

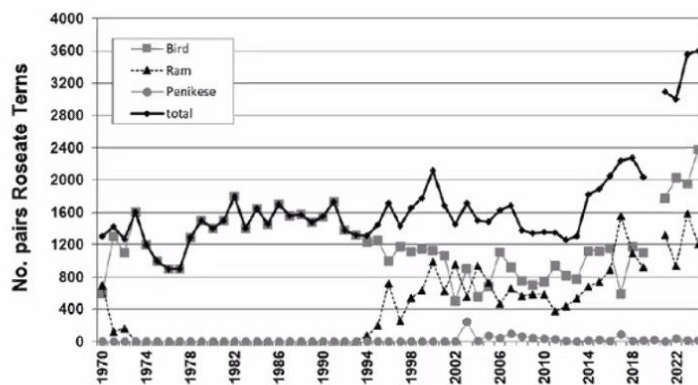


Figure 2. Number of peak-season nesting pairs of Roseate Terns on Bird, Ram, and Penikese Islands, 1970 – 2024. No censuses were conducted on Bird or Ram in 2020.

5. *Proposed Revisions to the MA State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP)* – Jesse Leddick

Jesse walked the Committee through the public presentation of the proposed State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP). This was a broad-brush overview of the plan and the requirements from the USFWS.



8 SWAP Elements

1. Status of Species of Greatest Conservation Need
2. Assessment of habitats
3. Assessment of threats
4. Conservation actions
5. Monitoring plans
6. Plan revisions
7. Partnerships
8. Public participation




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Changes to SGCN list

Additions	Removals
• 1 bee • 2 birds • 2 butterflies/moths • 2 crustaceans • 11 dragonflies/damselflies • 3 mammals • 39 plants • 1 salamander • 4 stoneflies • 1 turtle	• 5 bees • 3 birds • 4 dragonflies/damselflies • 2 fish • 3 plants



Sandhill Crane



Atlantic salmon

New Total: 619 SGCN

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2025 SWAP Draft: Key Changes and Structure

- BioMap now foundational to SWAP, integrated into all eight elements.
- Element 1: SGCN List
 - Criteria standardized; all 453 MESA-listed species are SGCN.
 - Non-listed species must meet ≥ 2 of 4 criteria: low abundance/distribution, significant threats, significant declines, or data deficiency.
 - 619 SGCN in 2025 (net +49 from 2015): 66 additions, 17 removals.
 - Fact sheets created/updated for all SGCN.
- Element 2: SGCN Habitats
 - Expanded from 24 to 35 habitat types, especially aquatic habitats.
 - Habitat fact sheets summarize quality, threats, actions, and management recommendations.
 - Tied to Natural Heritage's natural communities classification.
- Element 3: Threats Assessment
 - Key threats: habitat loss/fragmentation, pollution, invasive species, destruction of natural processes.
 - Climate change research now incorporated, amplifying existing threats.

- Aligns with state climate adaptation/resilience priorities.
- Element 4: Conservation Actions
 - Land protection, habitat restoration/management, environmental review, species management, research/monitoring, education.
 - MassWildlife's Key Sites analysis identifies rare species aggregation areas for targeted action; update in progress.
- Elements 5–6: Monitoring and Review
 - Prioritize filling information gaps, evaluating conservation action success, and adaptive management.
 - Monitoring priorities: rare plants, high-priority natural communities (e.g., pine barrens), rare reptiles, climate change responses (especially aquatic).
 - SWAP reviewed/revised every 10 years.
- Element 7: Partnerships
 - Emphasizes continued and strengthened partnerships at all levels.
- Element 8: Public Participation
 - Enhanced outreach, especially for BioMap and Biodiversity Executive Order goals.
 - 2025 SWAP is web-based, interactive, available in multiple languages, and allows real-time updates.

2025 SWAP Web Platform Demonstration

- SWAP homepage features three main categories: SGCN, Habitats, Conservation Actions.
 - SGCN section: criteria, searchable/filterable tables, species fact sheets.
 - Habitats section: 35 habitat categories, tables for taxa/species per habitat, habitat fact sheets.
 - Conservation Actions: action-based navigation.
- Example: Searching for Hessel's hairstreak yields habitat associations and a detailed fact sheet.
- Habitat view allows filtering by habitat type and viewing associated species and management recommendations.

Case Study: BioMap and SWAP in Action

- Example: Quinebaug River and Hammett Brook in Sturbridge.
 - BioMap identified area as priority due to SGCN presence (rare mussels, fishes, wood turtle).
 - Three dams identified as key threat; dam removal completed in 2017 via multi-partner effort.
 - Resulted in restored connectivity, improved habitat, increased climate resilience, enhanced recreation, and public safety.
 - Ongoing monitoring shows SGCN use of restored areas.

Looking Ahead: SWAP Implementation and Public Outreach

- Maintain/increase pace of conservation with strategic, science-based actions.
- Expand/solidify partnerships and resource sharing.
- Strengthen protection of sensitive species/habitats via policy and review.
- Finalize biodiversity conservation goals under the Executive Order.
- Develop new funding mechanisms and prepare to scale up efforts as resources allow.

Public Comment and Next Steps

- Public presentations held at Fisheries and Wildlife Board meeting and public info session (recorded, translated, posted online).
 - 30-day public comment period open until August 18.
 - Comments reviewed; summary and revisions to be presented at September Board meeting.
 - Final plan to be submitted to USFWS by end of September.
 - Public encouraged to explore SWAP online and submit comments via web or mail.

Acknowledgments and Data Tables

- 2025 SWAP is a collective effort by MassWildlife staff, partners, and external experts.
 - Special recognition to Rebecca Quinones for coordinating updates and reviewing fact sheets.
- Data tables available showing species added/removed from SGCN list, with reasons and taxonomic breakdowns.

6. Discussion on SWAP Presentation

- Definition of "significant" varies: can refer to habitat quality for SGCN, number of SGCN present, or restoration potential.
- Of 17 SGCN removals, most due to extirpation or improved status; one plant removed due to taxonomic revision.
- Species/habitat conservation trends addressed fact sheets, with MESA listing providing trend insight for 453 SGCN.

7. Member's and Associate Member's Comments: None

– The meeting adjourned at 3:30 P.M. –
 Bill Brumback motioned, Wayne Peterson seconded, all in favor

Drafted & Submitted by: Dave Small