



Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program

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Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife

Northern Goshawk *Accipiter gentilis*

State Status: **None**

Federal Status: **None**

SPECIES DESCRIPTION: The Northern Goshawk is our largest accipiter species and breeds in boreal and temperate forests throughout the Holarctic region, including New England, New York, and Pennsylvania, the Great Lakes states, the mountain west, Canada, and Alaska. As with other raptors, goshawks show size dimorphism, with females being approximately 30% larger than males. The goshawk is a partial migrant where individuals may move south or to lower elevations during the winter months. Irruptive movements to the south occur in goshawk populations approximately every 10 years and when their primary prey populations (snowshoe hare, grouse) are very low. Goshawks are notorious for their aggressive behavior, and it is not uncommon for them to dive at people near their nest. This aggressive nature makes it a coveted species among falconers.

DISTRIBUTION AND ABUNDANCE: In Massachusetts, Northern Goshawks are an uncommon nester throughout much of the state, although it is generally absent in the northeast and most of the southeast, including Cape Cod and the Islands. Goshawks generally breed in large forest tracts away from human disturbance and, in Massachusetts, are most common in highly forested areas of the central and western regions of the state. Although goshawks are not well represented in the Breeding Bird Survey, the Massachusetts Breeding Bird Atlas suggests that this species has undergone a large-scale decline throughout Massachusetts over the last several decades (Sauer et al. 2014).

HABITAT DESCRIPTION: Northern Goshawks can be found nesting in a range of mature forest habitat including hardwood, mixed, or coniferous forests that occur at any elevation in the state. Territories are often established in large forest blocks, but goshawks are also known to nest within small forested patches in a

fragmented landscape. Forests with high canopy closure are preferred for nesting, and nests are typically placed just below the canopy in the largest tree in the forest stand.

THREATS: Threats to Northern Goshawks include disturbance around nests and illegal taking of chicks for the falconry trade. Timber harvesting can cause nest destruction by felling nesting trees and nest abandonment from nearby disturbance. Also, during the second Massachusetts Breeding Bird Atlas, there was at least one report of a nest tree being climbed and the nest and young taken.

REFERENCES:

- Squires, J.R. and R.T. Reynolds. 1997. Northern Goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*), The Birds of North America Online (A. Poole, Ed.). Ithaca: Cornell Lab of Ornithology.
- Sauer, J.R., J.E. Hines, J.E. Fallon, K.L. Pardieck, D.J. Ziolkowski, Jr., and W.A. Link. 2014. *The North American Breeding Bird Survey, Results and Analysis 1966 – 2013*. Laurel, MD.
- Veit, R., and W.R. Petersen. 1993. *Birds of Massachusetts*. Massachusetts Audubon Society, Lincoln, Massachusetts.
- Walsh, J. and W.R. Petersen. 2013. *Massachusetts Breeding Bird Atlas 2*. Massachusetts Audubon Society and Scott & Nix, Inc.

Updated 2015

A Species of Greatest Conservation Need in the Massachusetts State Wildlife Action Plan

Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife

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