

Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN)

WDFW Briefing – Washington State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP) Series

An ‘Element’ of the SWAP

A **Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN) list** is one of the [Eight Required Plan Elements](#) of State Wildlife Action Plans (SWAP). Every U.S. state and territory has an [SGCN list](#) as part of their SWAP. The Plans provide current information and guidance to prioritize, scope, fund, and inspire species and habitat conservation actions in each state.

How SGCN are selected

Each state can define their own SGCN criteria. In the current Washington SWAP, WDFW and conservation partners used a set of criteria that includes state or federally ‘listed’¹ species protected by law with a legal designation as candidate, sensitive, threatened, or endangered, in addition to species that need conservation attention but do not have a formal ‘protected’ legal status.

Status and SGCN

‘SGCN’ is not a regulatory term and does not convey legal status or even ‘rarity.’ This term is an agency-applied label based on SWAP guidance and the list of species with that label influences how SWAP-related federal and state funding is directed. The SGCN list *can* include (but is not limited to) species that are regulated (i.e., Commission-approved state-listed species, and Endangered Species Act federally listed species) and those that influence regulation, such as Washington Priority Species (also called PHS species) that cities and counties use to implement and update land use plans and development regulations under the Growth Management Act and Shoreline Management Act. The SGCN agency-label carries no regulatory obligation by itself.

‘Needing conservation attention’ can mean a lot of things. Many SGCN are in the plan to bring attention to species before they are ‘listed’, before they are more rare or costly to conserve. Species are generally put on the SGCN list through our understanding of surveys, monitoring, research, and expert opinion on fish, wildlife, and plant populations, their habitats, threats to their sustainability or persistence, and/or the condition or context of the landscape in which they occur. Species may be:

- known to be rare, declining, or vulnerable in Washington;
- highly localized or restricted (endemic);
- dependent on special vulnerable resources (i.e. wetlands, shoreline, mature forest, deep soils);
- reliant on extensive landscape-scale connectivity (i.e. migratory birds or ungulates);
- subject to very impactful or emerging threats such as overexploitation, disease, developments of unforeseen scale, contaminants, or invasive species;
- associated with habitats, systems, or landscapes that are highly threatened, diminished, or vulnerable; or
- stable in Washington but declining substantially in other parts of their range outside of Washington, giving more significance to the Washington populations.

The SGCN label is a signal to people who work on conservation and land use questions that these species need more of our focus, collaboration, and resources: we need to know more about them or do

¹ ‘Listed’ refers to the protective status provided by the federal Endangered Species Act (endangered, threatened) or Washington Administrative Codes for endangered or protected wildlife (sensitive, threatened, or other protected).

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more for them so that they will be around for future generations to enjoy and to keep doing what they do in their systems.

WDFW and the Commission operate under laws and policies and they use information to review status and provide additional labels and layers of management, regulation, protection, or guidance for any species in Washington. So, species can have more than one label or layer of conservation attention in Washington state. For example, Pygmy Rabbit is federally listed as endangered, state classified as endangered, a WDFW-designated Priority Species,² and an SGCN. Pacific fisher has no federal status in Washington, but is state endangered, a Priority Species, and also an SGCN. Pygmy horned lizard has no state or federal status (“unclassified”) and it is an SGCN. Olympic mudminnow, pygmy whitefish, and margined sculpin are PHS Priority Species, state classified sensitive, and SGCN. Bighorn sheep are classified and managed as Game in Washington; do not have ‘protected’ status under federal or state law; are Priority Species of recreational, commercial, and/or Tribal importance; and SGCN.

Can hunted, fished, or foraged species also be SGCN? Yes

In Washington state, the Fish and Wildlife [Commission may classify wildlife](#) in many categories: game animals, fur-bearers, game birds, predatory birds, protected wildlife, endangered, deleterious exotics,.... Game animals and birds, game and food fish, shellfish, and seaweed are managed and conserved by WDFW, typically for recreation, commercial, or food opportunities. The Commission reviews staff recommendations then can adopt seasons for game animal and bird opportunities. Season-setting and rule-making authorities for game and food fish [varies](#). The Director can set seasons for shellfish and seaweed, with input from other agencies (Department of Natural Resources, Department of Health). The Department does not set a season on every game (animal, bird, fish), furbearer, or shellfish species every year. A license is required to take those species in the set seasons, and a person cannot take those species unless a season is set and open, and the person has a valid license. Some animals are ‘unclassified’ and may also be taken with a current appropriate license or permit; unclassified fish are closed to recreational or commercial harvest. Protected and endangered wildlife may also be taken if the person or entity has an appropriate Department-issued permit or authorization, such as for falconry, wildlife rehabilitation, or scientific research; federally protected species listed under the Endangered Species Act, Migratory Bird Treaty Act, or other federal regulation may also require a federal take permit.

Nationally, many SWAPs include game-classified birds, mammals, and fishes in their SGCN list. For example, six western states – Colorado, Idaho, Nevada, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming – include bighorn sheep in their SGCN list, consider them “big game”, and provide limited hunting opportunity. The SGCN label for this species helps draw conservation awareness to a species that is experiencing pressures from disease, climate change, poor grazing or livestock management practices, and habitat encroachment. Providing hunting opportunities in areas where the bighorn is not in decline or for surplus rams does not threaten the overall population or the species’ persistence in those states, and it provides ongoing support and funding from the hunting community for this species’ management and conservation across its range.

Washington’s 2015 SGCN list of 268 species included a small group of game birds, game/fur-bearer mammals, and game fishes because their populations were known to be small, isolated, experiencing declines, strongly associated with declining habitats (like shrubsteppe), or play a key role alongside other SGCN. Also, in cases where species declines were known to be strongly associated with certain distinct

² The Washington state Priority Habitats and Species (PHS) List includes species and habitats for which special conservation measures should be taken. The PHS List explains why each priority habitat and species is on the list, shows which counties have that species or habitat, and provides links to PHS management recommendations. Cities and counties use the PHS List when designating and protecting Fish and Wildlife Habitat Conservation Areas under the Growth Management Act and Shoreline Management Act.

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population segments (DPS), evolutionarily significant units (ESU), or geographic areas of the state, species were identified as SGCN for those populations or regions only.

Some examples:

Mountain Quail is a regional SGCN in eastern Washington only; they also occur in western Washington but are stable and hunted west of the Cascades.

Greater sage-grouse and Columbian sharp-tailed grouse are good examples of Washington SGCN game birds which are experiencing significant declines unrelated to hunting, no longer have a hunting season, and are benefitting from the extra focus and attention of the SWAP conservation actions and funding to improve their status.

American Badger is a more complex example as a Washington SGCN with a fur-bearer classification. Badgers are found widely in the Great Plains of North America. In Washington, this species can be trapped by a licensed trapper by legal means and methods for lethal harvest during an annual period set by WDFW, based on information about the population status, harvest potential, and hunting opportunity interest. Hunting pressure is low on badgers based on seasonal trapper reporting, so hunting is not a significant conservation concern for this species. In Washington, they inhabit the eastern Cascade foothills, Columbia Basin shrubsteppe, and 'scablands' to the Idaho border. They are not an SGCN because they are inherently rare or due to hunting pressure, but rather because they are keenly connected to a rare and diminishing *habitat* – deep soiled shrubsteppe – and *prey base* – ground squirrels. They also serve an important function in other shrubsteppe SGCN and burrowing species' ecology in that landscape, with burrowing owls, ground squirrels, rattlesnakes, and other small mammals and reptiles.

Bull trout are SGCN in Washington, listed under the Endangered Species Act as threatened, Candidates in state classification, and Priority Species. Fishing seasons are set for this species in limited areas (Skagit, Skykomish and Snohomish river systems) and with selective gear rules that enable opportunity without further risk to the population.

SGCN and the State Wildlife Action Plan

State Wildlife Action Plans are proactive plans that assess the health of each state's wildlife and habitats, identify key threats, and outline actions that can conserve and manage species before they become even more rare and costly to restore. Each plan identifies SGCN and – more importantly – makes a connection among SGCN, habitats and systems, and threats to shape conservation actions. The first SWAPs were drafted in 2005 and review is mandated every ten years. Conservation actions in the plan can extend beyond that horizon to be relevant to species, habitat, and system needs, and the ability to detect progress.

The Washington State Wildlife Action Plan revision is due by October 1, 2025 to a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Regional Review Team. This plan will be a collaborative document that Tribes, government agencies, partners, community members, and non-governmental organizations can use to inform their conservation efforts.

The SWAP helps WDFW maintain eligibility for federally provided State Wildlife Grants, guide new biodiversity funding from the Washington State Legislature (~\$30 million every two years), and be ready for Recovering America's Wildlife Act (RAWA) funding (annually, nearly \$23 million to Washington) if it passes Congress.

New elements in this plan's third version will include rare plants, at-risk plant communities, and sensitive groups of species like pollinators, bat colonies, and forage fish. The plan will emphasize habitat and ecosystem conservation actions at all scales – sites to landscapes; be more specific about climate change actions for fish, wildlife, and their habitats; and include more education and outreach actions.