

Congress identified [Eight Required Elements](#) in common for all State Wildlife Action Plans and these are attached to the USFWS original guidance (2007). The Elements require that

“the plan must identify and be focused on the *species in greatest need of conservation*, yet address the *full array of wildlife* and wildlife-related issues.”

The first Element requires

“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;”

Voluntary conservation

Including a species in the SWAP is not regulatory, and the SWAP does not automatically set in motion any regulation or evaluation process. The SWAP provides information, conservation options and guidance, resources, and opportunities to improve the pace and scale of biodiversity conservation in Washington.

Species types in the SWAP

The term “Species of Greatest Conservation Need” or “SGCN” is used widely in SWAPs. The Washington SWAP includes SGCN and other species categories: Species of Greatest Information Need (SGIN), native species that make up vulnerable concentrations such as forage fishes or migratory birds, and those that are closely connected to important habitats or features such as haul outs, colonies, or migration corridors. These are related to the conservation actions^A that are included in the SWAP.

Native species and subspecies that are considered taxonomically valid are eligible to be SGCN, SGIN, or in other SWAP species categories. Taxonomy can often be fluid especially in the era of genetic analyses; taxonomic validity is defined by the [International Code on Zoological Nomenclature](#) and is standardized across all zoological groups and internationally. Suspected new species, subspecies, and variants need to be confirmed using the formal scientific process prior to inclusion in the SGCN and SGIN tables.

Subpopulations that are geographically distinct or those defined in regulation such as [evolutionary significant unit \(ESU\) or distinct population segment \(DPS\)](#) refer to *functional or geographical divides in species or subspecies*. These divisions can be important conservation units – often threats and actions are similar at this scale or site(s) – but they are not *taxonomically* separate. If appropriate to focus a conservation action, subpopulations will be identified and considered in the conservation threats and actions part of the SWAP; they are not called out separately in the species/subspecies tables.

Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN)

SGCN are identified through vetted processes such as “listing” under the Endangered Species Act or state Periodic Status Reviews, or other expert assessments and information reviews with documentation. A species does not have to be listed or “at-risk” to be SGCN. These species have identifiable threats to their sustainability and need conservation

attention beyond only survey and monitoring. Two approaches identified species for the SGCN table: **defined status** and **expert proposals with citable conservation need**.

Defined Status

These species are identified through established vetting processes, most with a public review opportunity:

- Federally listed under the Endangered Species Act as endangered, threatened, or candidate;
- Washington state-listed endangered, threatened, sensitive, or candidate;
- Current NatureServe rounded rank G1, G2, S1, or S2^B (see the section “NatureServe Ranks in Washington” later in this document); or
- Native species identified by WDFW in the Priority Habitats and Species process^C

Expert Proposals

Nominations for SGCN that did not fit a *Defined Status* were reviewed for scientific support and compatibility with the SWAP purpose. In some cases, these species rely on habitats and conservation in Washington for a portion of their full life cycle although they breed or overwinter in other states or countries. These species populations in Washington could fail, decline, or become more vulnerable within the foreseeable future due to documented threats.

Foreseeable future is based on species ecology, life history, understanding of threats, and confidence in prediction of impact over time.

Documented threats are supported by evidence: citable research, monitoring, inventory, survey, modeling, assessment, synthesis, or expert observation [statement of a qualified scientific expert based on their best professional judgment, experience in the relevant scientific discipline, and a systematic vulnerability assessment] with documentation that WDFW can reference in the plan.

Some species may be secure within the state but are known to be globally or regionally insecure and/or identified in larger partnership conservation plans (i.e., Road to Recovery, Partnership for Amphibian and Reptile Conservation, Partners In Flight, Southern Wings, National Fish Habitat Partnership). These species could be considered in light of conservation partnership potential and definable actions for Washington state.

Species of Greatest Information Need (SGIN)

Species of Greatest Information Need (SGIN) highlight needs for basic status information in response to known current or emerging risks to habitats or environment. Resource managers may understand more about an emerging threat to habitat or environment but do not have enough information to understand the species’ status or its relationship to that context.

This is not a bucket for ‘nice to have’ or ‘cool to know’ information. In this category, new/urgent survey, inventory, research, and assessment are needed, and that information

will be applied to assess species status. Species that are not identified as SGCN can be considered for State Wildlife Grant funding to determine IF they should be an SGCN; if SWG is used for that purpose, WDFW should be able to identify how we intend to use that information and document status updates. In the SWAP, the only conservation action available for SGIN will be “Basic Research and Status Monitoring.”^D If there is enough information to define other conservation actions, the species is not SGIN.

Other SWAP Species – vulnerable groupings

Important or vulnerable aggregations (e.g., forage fishes, migratory birds, waterfowl concentrations, shorebirds, freshwater mussel beds, pollinators, seasonal raptor gatherings, nesting colonies, haul outs, ‘nurseries’) are important because their shared ecological contribution is greater than the individual parts; we may have gaps in single-species information but have strong information about the conservation value of and threats to the collective; and conservation actions for the broader group may be more efficient and beneficial than what we could do for the individual species in that assemblage.

These groupings do not have to include an SGCN. There will be opportunities to highlight conservation importance and actions for single-SGCN aggregations (e.g., western toad spawning/emergence, DPS-specific salmon staging/spawning, single-species bat hibernacula or maternity colonies, lamprey migration/spawning, swallow nesting colonies) in the species-specific threats and actions.

Other Considerations and Sensitivities

Climate influence on natural movement

Climate change will influence species to move into and out of Washington. Some species that can move will seek suitable habitats. This will influence SWAP species selection, need for assessment and monitoring, and conservation actions. Across the nation, this is also influencing what natural resources managers deem as “native” species, what responsibilities a state has in conservation of those species, and collaboration across state and national borders. This is an ongoing and complex consideration.

Uncommon or Management - Peripheral species

Species that have extremely limited occurrence and do not carry out essential reproductive behaviors or have critical migratory stopover locations in Washington, and whose populations are therefore not able/expected to be impacted by management activities in the state are considered “uncommon or management - peripheral” for the SWAP. Many of these species have relatively stable populations, have few observations in Washington, and do not depend on Washington state conservation actions to support their population structure or persistence. To the extent there is information, subject matter experts reflect on the contributions of Washington occurrences of a peripheral species’ in overall population range, persistence, resilience, recovery, and other evolutionary and biodiversity considerations^E as well as whether there are effective conservation actions for that species that can be taken in Washington to determine whether a peripheral species is included in

the SWAP. Generally, infrequently occurring or peripheral species are not considered for SGCN or SGIN tags. This is not the same as “rare” in Washington referring to the declining condition of a species, or to those species suspected/determined to be experiencing range expansion that could be influenced through Washington management; those could be considered for SGCN.

Extirpated with Recovery Potential

Some species are considered extirpated in Washington, but still are conservation targets for U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), adjacent states, and/or other governments – Canada, Tribes – with active recovery efforts. These species could be considered on a case-by-case basis for SWAP depending on Washington’s potential role and effectiveness in recovery and whether the circumstances to re-engage can be described.

Hunted, Fished and Foraged SGCN

See WDFW Commission Wildlife Committee [briefing paper](#), December 14, 2023.

NatureServe Ranks in Washington

Many states have a “[natural heritage program](#),” are part of the North American [NatureServe network](#) that stewards biodiversity data, and use this network as a common language for collecting, managing, and sharing species, site, and ecological system information with rigorous methods. This shared language has been very helpful to inform conservation at the site to landscape scale, across political boundaries.

[Washington’s Natural Heritage Program](#) (WNHP) is managed and supported in the Department of Natural Resources and leads our state in plant, ecological system, and natural area conservation. WDFW leads data stewardship for fish and wildlife; when resources are available, WDFW contributes vertebrate and invertebrate status information to the WNHP database. However, WDFW’s species data stewardship and most current information is their own agency’s institutional systems. Because of this, NatureServe ranks in Washington state are best for plants and vegetation communities, but not the best indicator of status for fish and wildlife.

NatureServe ranks are an SGCN selection criterion because plants can be SGCN in this SWAP and, *in a few cases where fish and wildlife species ranks reflect the best information*, the NHP rigorous assessment can provide a clear status indicator. Vertebrate and invertebrate fish and wildlife species are primarily nominated for SGCN by “defined status” (federal listed, state listed, PHS native species) or another source that provides sufficient and citable information, not the NatureServe Rank. The NatureServe rank SGCN criterion may include species with low global rank (secure) and high state rank (imperiled) (e.g., G5S2). Updating NatureServe ranks for plants, fish, and wildlife could be a conservation action for some SGCN.

New Data

At this point in the SWAP revision process, there is no capacity in WDFW Science teams to set aside ongoing workload to prioritize ‘new’ data entry to support species evaluation that would influence which species are or are not included in the SWAP. WDFW has identified a

need to create capacity for more nimble SWAP species status updates more often than every ten years (required plan review period). As the agency is made aware of new available information and data, species leads flag these opportunities and work with agency science teams to determine priority, need, and capacity to ingest and steward that information.

Process Summary to Date (March 2025)

These criteria were developed by WDFW cross-Program technical and policy teams, influenced by external engagement in 2024, then applied by WDFW species leads, many of whom coordinated with their peers and communities of practice, to propose

- Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN),
- Species of Greatest Information Need (SGIN), and
- Other SWAP species.

The resulting tables are offered for review during April – May 2025 engagement meetings with Tribes, agencies, organizations, and the public. Comments will be considered in the SWAP development into early summer 2025. These criteria, the species selection process, and resulting final tables will be included in the SWAP and are a key piece in several sections of the plan.

EndNotes

^A Conservation threats and actions for the SWAP will be based on **Conservation Measures Partnership Threats and Actions Taxonomy V2, 2016**, adapted for Washington SWAP 2025. [Threats and Actions Classifications \(2016\) - The Open Standards for the Practice of Conservation](#). In January 2025, a new version of the Threats Classification was released, but not in time for consideration in this SWAP revision. WDFW will consider if a midstream SWAP revision sometime around or before 2030 could accommodate the new threat structure.

^B Definitions of **NatureServe Conservation Status Ranks**
https://help.natureserve.org/biotics/content/record_management/Element_Files/Element_Tracking/ETRAC_K_Definitions_of_Heritage_Conservation_Status_Ranks.htm

^C **WDFW Priority Habitats and Species** native fish and wildlife species require protective measures and/or management actions to ensure their survival. PHS animal aggregations and Priority Habitats are considered in the SWAP in other elements. [Priority Habitats and Species List | Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife](#)

^D From **Conservation Measures Partnership Actions Classification 2.0 (2016)**: Level I. 8. Research & Monitoring, Level II. 8.1 Basic Research & Status Monitoring. Research that contributes to basic understanding of the situations in which conservation takes place, independent of any specific conservation actions; research process (e.g., writing or reviewing proposals, developing protocols and methods, collecting data, analyzing data, creating or maintaining data storage and aggregation tools, peer reviewing results, and sharing and disseminating findings).

^E Fraser, D.F. 2000. Species at the Edge in L. M. Darling, editor. 2000. Proceedings of a Conference on the Biology and Management of Species and Habitats at Risk, Kamloops, B.C., 15 - 19 Feb., 1999. Volume One. B.C. Ministry of Environment, Lands and Parks, Victoria, B.C. and University College of the Cariboo, Kamloops, B.C. 490pp.