



# 2024 ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND 2025 INITIATIVES



OHIO DIVISION OF WILDLIFE





Chief Kendra Wecker and Ohio Wildlife Council member Solomon Curtis

## LETTER FROM THE CHIEF

Looking back on the Division of Wildlife's work in 2024, it's incredible how much was accomplished. We've honored species triumphs, increased recreation opportunities, restored habitats, and invested in improving experiences at our wildlife areas. We also celebrated the Ohio Department of Natural Resources' 75th anniversary, a milestone for outdoor recreation and conservation.

Wildlife is at the forefront of our mission, so removing trumpeter swans from our state's threatened and endangered species list was an exciting honor. This species' journey from extirpation to reintroduction to recovery highlights the importance of the work we do for wildlife, habitats, and people.

Beyond swans, our biologists worked to benefit many other species such as turkeys, Allegheny woodrats, lake sturgeon, and hellbenders. For the first time, we stocked steelhead trout in the Cuyahoga River, bringing Ohio's storied steelhead fishery to another Lake Erie tributary.

We increased hunting and angling opportunities by adding public land at Moxley, Brush Creek, Funk Bottoms, and Simco wildlife areas. Groundbreakings also took place for new visitor centers at Put-in-Bay and Appalachian Hills Wildlife Area, which will open this year.

We are proud to provide new and improved habitats for wildlife and more places to recreate for the many hunters, anglers, and wildlife watchers in Ohio. Our staff worked tirelessly toward those goals and are already hard at work to have an even bigger impact in 2025. This year, we aim to share our mission with broader audiences, upgrade facilities and infrastructure, and lead the way on projects that benefit lake sturgeon, diamond darters, and black bears.

Thank you to all who support Ohio's wildlife. It's a privilege to work with so many talented staff and passionate conservationists. We advance into this year prepared to meet whatever challenges arise, and confident that we can build on past success and lead the way in wildlife conservation.

Kendra Wecker, Chief, Ohio Division of Wildlife

The Ohio Division of Wildlife's mission is to conserve and improve fish and wildlife resources and their habitats for sustainable use and appreciation by all.



Mallards

# CONSERVATION COMMITMENT

## 2024 FEATURED ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- **Wild Ohio Harvest.** Expanded the Wild Ohio Harvest program and partnered with staff to offer new classes, including cooking classes and events during a themed Venison Week and Panfish Week. The Spring Valley Shooting Range and Education Center partnered with local Wild Ohio Harvest archery participants to build a range ambassador program. New resources were created to direct people to the Wild Ohio Harvest resources, including fishing essentials, places to fish, and additional recipes.
- **K-2 Field Guide.** Developed the kindergarten through second grade field guide booklet to highlight common Ohio wildlife species, as well as serve as a nonfiction text for these grade levels.
- **40th Anniversary of Project WILD.** Celebrated the 40th Anniversary of the Ohio Project WILD program. Since 1984, the Ohio Division of Wildlife has trained an average of 1,000 educators annually in this award-winning supplemental curriculum. Project WILD helps students and educators learn more about wildlife and their habitat through hands-on interactive activities appropriate for pre-K through 12th grade in science, English language arts, math, and across the curriculum.
- **New Staff.** Fish and wildlife positions were modified to add capacity for habitat, enhance aquatic and terrestrial wildlife diversity, remove invasive species, and improve partnerships. Positions included three aquatic habitat biologists and 16 wildlife area coordinators at the following locations: Mercer, Indian Creek, Salt Fork, Killdeer, Spring Valley, Mosquito Creek, Magee, Mosquito Creek, La Su An, Deer Creek, central district office, Appalachian Hills, Highlandtown, and Berlin Lake. A wildlife research technician was added in southwest Ohio, and a wildlife management consultant was added in southeast Ohio.
- **Statewide Wildlife Action Plan Public Meetings.** Held 21 public meetings and user group summits to share species specific management strategies, outline upcoming project initiatives, gather feedback from conservation partners to fold into the Ohio Division of Wildlife's 10-year revision of the SWAP.
- **Furthering Conservation with Partners.** Facilitated and shared resources to further conservation efforts with partners including Midwest Bat Working Group, Ohio Wetlands Association, Ohio Bluebird Society, Western Reserve Land Conservancy, and Ohio Biological Survey. The Ohio Division of Wildlife has hosted the annual Ohio Wildlife Diversity Conference for 40 years with a 2024 attendance of more than 800 wildlife enthusiasts.
- **Trout in the Classroom.** Partnered with Trout Unlimited volunteers to provide 34 classrooms with rainbow and brown trout to raise and release as part of the interactive educational program designed to connect students to their local watersheds.
- **New Wildlife Officers.** Twelve new wildlife officer cadets completed the basic peace officer training, a specialized wildlife officer school, and a six-month field training program. The cadets graduated on March 15, 2024.
- **Deer Processor Appreciation.** Initiated a deer processor appreciation program to identify and recognize outstanding deer processors across the state. Appreciation certificates will be distributed through 2025.
- **Law Enforcement Initiatives.** Law enforcement initiated and completed their first mentorship program to support cadets attending the basic peace officer's academy; established a Search, Rescue and Tracking Team; introduced an aerial drone program with the purchase of three drones; and the Women Officers of Wildlife Group incorporated noncommissioned staff into group meetings to share ideas related to equipment and safety.
- **Hunter Education.** Hunter education in Ohio has two new features that offer better customer service and convenience. The first is an online portal that allows students to select an interactive avatar as they move through the curriculum. The second is providing the online hunter education course in Spanish, with the goal to have better engagement with Spanish-speaking constituents.
- **Trapper Education.** A new and improved trappers education curriculum and test were developed in cooperation with the Ohio State Trappers Association. In 2025, the Ohio Division of Wildlife will launch an online version of the course that may be completed from a student's home.
- **Grant Platform.** Developed an online grant management system that is user friendly and allows grantees to easily manage their user profiles, grant applications, and final reports. This platform directly links proposed and completed activities to efficiently report how these grants are meeting project goals and track volunteer hours.
- **Art Show and Photo Contest.** Hosted first annual Artists for Wildlife art show for high school and college students, with featured artwork displayed at the Ohio State Fair; completed second annual wildlife photo contest, with winning photos displayed at the Ohio State Fair.





Saugeye

# UPGRADED FACILITIES

## 2024 FEATURED ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- **Lake Improvements.** Highlandtown Lake Dam was repaired to ensure the stability and safety of the dam; boating access facilities were updated at Alum Creek's Cheshire Road and park campground to provide new concrete ramps, ADA floating docks, and additional parking; and ADA-certified fishing piers were installed at Knox Lake, Oxbow Lake, Mogadore Reservoir, Tycoon Lake, and Cowan Lake to increase public access. Several of these installations were facilitated by partners in the Division of Parks and Watercraft.
- **Shreve Lake.** The dam at Shreve Lake has been repaired and the lake will re-open for fishing in 2025. Shreve Lake is a 62-acre lake in Wayne County that is a popular destination for local anglers.
- **London State Fish Hatchery Improvements.** Water wells at London State Fish Hatchery were rehabilitated and pumps were replaced to ensure a consistent water supply to the hatchery. Additionally, a modernized fish display pool was constructed at the front of the hatchery.
- **Archery Range Expansion.** Provided support to the Division of Parks and Watercraft for construction of public archery ranges at West Branch, Findley, Buckeye Lake, Lake Loramie, Rocky Fork, Stonelick, Caesar Creek, and Burr Oak state parks.





Monarch Butterfly

# CONSERVING HABITAT

## 2024 FEATURED ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- **Additional Wildlife Area Acres.** Increased acres for the purpose of wildlife recreation access and opportunities and conservation with the acquisition of 1,568 acres at Funk Bottoms, Brush Creek, Moxley, and Simco wildlife areas; enrolled 11,080 new acres in the Ohio Landowner-Hunter Access Partnership (OLHAP), bringing accessibility to 31,100 acres in 49 counties.
- **Castalia Fish Hatchery Enhancements.** Repaired the purple martin array for the Castalia Fish Hatchery to provide viewing opportunities for visitors, as well as essential habitat for nesting and roosting.
- **Support for Pollinators.** Provided support to the Ohio Pollinator Habitat Initiative to coordinate 225 pounds of milkweed seed pod collection. The seeds are processed and distributed to enhance monarch butterfly habitat
- **Completed H2Ohio Projects.** Completed H2Ohio projects to improve water quality and wildlife habitat in cooperation with conservation partners, including reconnecting to Killbuck Creek with Holmes County Park District; Hocking River Riparian Restoration with Hocking River Commission; Dry Fork Streambank Stabilization with the Metroparks of Butler County; Chippewa Lake Wetland Restoration and Little Killbuck Creek Wetland Restoration with Medina County Park District; Mill Creek Wetland Restoration with Mill Creek Alliance; Moxley Reconnection Project with Erie Soil and Water Conservation District and Natural Resources Conservation Service; Navarre Marsh Reconnection Project with Ducks Unlimited and Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge; and Little Portage Renovation and O'Donnell Wetland Restoration with Ducks Unlimited.
- **Additional CREP Acres.** Enrolled and established 421 acres of wetlands in the Lake Erie watershed via the Lake Erie Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program and the H2Ohio initiative.





Trumpeter Swan

# SPECIES SPOTLIGHT

## 2024 FEATURED ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- **Trumpeter Swan Delisting.** Trumpeter swans were removed from the state's threatened species list. The delisting culminates a 28-year effort by the Ohio Division of Wildlife to restore a population of trumpeter swans. Ohio's trumpeter swan population stands at nearly 900, with swans nesting in 26 different counties.
- **Statewide Fish Stocking.** Ohio's six state fish hatcheries produced and stocked more than 40 million sport fish of 11 different species in public waters, providing opportunities for anglers that would not otherwise exist in many waters throughout the state. Stocked steelhead trout for the first time in the Cuyahoga River during the spring of 2024. This addition increases the number of Lake Erie tributaries stocked each spring to seven and involved redistribution of the annual stocking allocation of 450,000 fish among tributaries.
- **Lake Sturgeon Restoration in Lake Erie.** Stocked young-of-year lake sturgeon into the Maumee River as part of the restoration program that began in 2018. Lake sturgeon recaptures by Ohio trap net fishers and agency surveys have become frequent from Toledo to Lorain, with the largest approaching 36 inches. A pilot stocking of three groups of 20 fish each in the fall of 2024 will inform stocking locations when the Cuyahoga River is added to the restoration program in 2025.
- **Dragonflies and Damselflies of Ohio.** The Division of Wildlife and the Ohio Biological Survey published *A Naturalist's Guide to the Odonata of Ohio*, by Dave McShaffrey, MaLisa Spring, and Jim McCormac, culminating a four-year statewide survey conducted through The Ohio State University.
- **Wild Turkey Research.** Collaborated with The Ohio State University Terrestrial Wildlife Ecology Laboratory on the second year of the multi-state mid-Atlantic wild turkey research project. OSU graduate students have been tracking hen turkey survival, nest fates, and wild turkey poult recruitment at Appalachian Hills, Waterloo, and Mosquito Creek wildlife areas. More than 50 hens per site have been fitted with radio telemetry gear to enable tracking.
- **Allegheny Woodrat Rearing.** Established Allegheny woodrat captive rearing in partnership with the Toledo Zoo. Offspring will be released into the wild in Adams County to bolster populations and the genetic diversity of this state-endangered species. Partnered with The Nature Conservancy to add 3 acres of high-quality habitat at the Edge of Appalachia Preserve, benefiting the state-endangered Allegheny woodrat.
- **Species Monitoring.** Continued repatriation of eastern hellbenders, with the number of human-raised three-year-old hellbenders reaching 2,000 through a partnership with the Columbus Zoo, Toledo Zoo, PENTA Career Center, and the Wilds, while Indian Creek High School in Jefferson County was added as a partner. Completed the brook trout restoration plan with the Geauga Park District.
- **Small Terrestrial Animal Monitoring.** AHDriFT arrays and Mostela boxes collected information which can be used to monitor a suite of small terrestrial animals including mice, voles, shrews, moles, weasels, reptiles, and amphibians. We have placed AHDriFT arrays at Appalachian Hills, Eagle Creek, and Paint Creek wildlife areas. Mostela boxes were installed at Big Island and Delaware wildlife areas.





White-tailed Deer

# PUBLIC OUTREACH & STAFF COMMITMENT

## 2025 FOCUSED INITIATIVES

- **New Media Efforts.** Launch a monthly podcast featuring conservation news, notes, and timely topics. Hosts will interview special guests about their areas of expertise. A YouTube page will accompany the podcast to stay relevant in multiple media formats.
- **New Fishing Trailer.** Purchase and outfit a fishing trailer using a Recreational Boating and Fishing Foundation grant to promote fishing awareness, outreach, and first cast programming. The trailer will house rods and reels for the public to borrow. The debut of the trailer will coincide with planned trout stockings.
- **Wildlife Officer Cadets.** Initiate the hiring process to add wildlife officer cadets in 2025. This will maintain the Ohio Division of Wildlife's goal to keep one wildlife officer in all 88 Ohio counties.
- **Joint Law Enforcement Training.** Continue joint training efforts of the Ohio Division of Wildlife's Search, Rescue, and Tracking Team with officers from each district, drone team operators, and all K-9 handler teams. This team serves to maintain standards of excellence in the Division of Wildlife's training.
- **Aquatic Invasives.** Establish an outreach and education project to work with the pet trade community on injurious aquatic invasive species.
- **Hunting Guide License.** Create a hunting guide license along with an outfitter accreditation program where outfitters can voluntarily sign up with the Division of Wildlife. A list of accredited outfitters will be posted on our website for customer consideration.
- **New Audience Outreach.** Market to new audiences, specifically the Hispanic community. Staff will work with La Mega Media to promote Spanish hunter education courses in Columbus, Cleveland, and Cincinnati in coordination with Spanish hunting regulations.
- **Small Trees and Shrubs of Ohio.** Working with the Division of Forestry, we will design and produce a new field guide on the native small trees and shrubs of Ohio and their benefits to wildlife.





Wild Turkey

# UPGRADED FACILITIES

## 2025 FOCUSED INITIATIVES

- **Appalachian Hills Visitor Center.** Open the new Appalachian Hills Visitor Center featuring a state-of-the-art building, scenic views, interactive displays, and modern restroom facilities. Visitors can plan their time in the region and learn about the outdoor recreational opportunities available on the nearly 60,000-acre property.
- **Put-in-Bay Visitor Center.** Complete renovations to the historical building and property surrounding the Put-in-Bay Aquatic Visitor Center. This project will enhance future outreach and education initiatives on South Bass Island.
- **Youth Fishing Pond Renovations.** Complete renovations at the northeast Ohio district office's youth fishing ponds to improve overall safety and management efficiency at the facility, along with enhanced accessibility and equipment upgrades.
- **Lake Erie Research Vessel.** The R/V Walleye, a new fisheries research vessel that will replace the R/V Explorer at the Sandusky Fisheries Research Station, is scheduled to be completed and delivered prior to the end of the 2025 navigation season. The 55-foot boat will be used to conduct fisheries surveys in Lake Erie's western basin.
- **Lake Access and Facility Improvements.** Partner with the City of Columbus to improve the boat access facility at Hoover Reservoir's Walnut Street ramp by installing a new concrete boat ramp; complete repairs to the Division of Parks and Watercraft's boat launch near Deer Creek Marina; and rehabilitate and stabilize the earthen fishing pier at Ross Lake.
- **Mobile Kitchen Trailers.** Use three Wild Ohio Harvest mobile kitchen trailers at events to showcase fish and game as a sustainable source of food. A pop-up version of the mobile kitchens will also be used at smaller venues such as farmers markets and more.
- **Replace Aircraft.** Replace the Division of Wildlife's two aircraft with one new model. The aircraft is vital for wildlife management projects and a new aircraft will be equipped with the latest technology and safety features.
- **London State Fish Hatchery Improvements.** Replace water supply piping throughout the hatchery. Currently there are several water supply lines that are 36 to 57 years old. This project will consolidate and modernize water supply lines throughout the hatchery to secure and improve fish production.
- **Hebron Capital Project.** The project will replace the water supply and filtration infrastructure at the Hebron State Fish Hatchery and make several improvements to the ponds, including additions of electricity, new supply and drain lines, and new fish catch boxes.
- **H2Ohio Projects.** Initiate H2Ohio projects in cooperation with conservation partners, including Croatian Lodge Dam Removal with Munson Township, Hocking River Shelly Lakes Wetland Project and Scioto River Genevieve Jones Floodplain Restoration with Appalachia Ohio Alliance, Lower Killbuck Creek Crane Swamp Preserve and Lower Killbuck Creek Bowfin Bottoms with Killbuck Watershed Land Trust, and Aukerman Creek Stream Restoration with Preble County Historical Society.
- **Shooting Range Improvements.** Open the Grand River Wildlife Area Shooting Range in fall 2025. A new range master building and a new outdoor education center will increase safety and provide a location for classes. Improvements include new shooting benches and a covered shooting line, ADA-compliant sidewalks, new berms, and a new backstop. Work will also be initiated to renovate shooting ranges at Deer Creek and Woodbury wildlife areas and address limited storage issues at Delaware Wildlife Area Shooting Range.





Copper-bellied Water Snake

# CONSERVING HABITAT

## 2025 FOCUSED INITIATIVES

- **Miami Rivers CREP.** Create the Miami Rivers Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program in southwest Ohio to open 60,000 acres of environmentally sensitive cropland for farmers and landowners to install wetlands, floodplain forest, and stream buffer conservation practices.
- **Conservation Planning.** Implement new technology for use in operational planning for both habitat and recreation projects. COMPAS is designed to increase transparency in planning and reporting accomplishments and provide data on how much work should be planned and accomplished to maintain habitat on wildlife areas. The dashboard provides public land management direction, goals and objectives, and track accomplishments.
- **Increasing Ohio Landowner-Hunter Access Partnership Acres.** Increase access and opportunities to enjoy wildlife recreation with the acquisition of 4,000 acres and enroll an additional 15,000 acres into the OLHAP program. During this upcoming year, we will work with landowners to add deer gun hunting as an option for the 2025-26 hunting season.
- **Protecting Listed Reptiles.** Restore 16 acres of wetland forest at Lake La Su An Wildlife Area to increase habitat connectivity for the state- and federally protected copper-bellied water snake; create a formal regional partnership with the state of Michigan to further Blanding's turtle habitat conservation, genetic research, and head-starting efforts.





# SPECIES SPOTLIGHT

## 2025 FOCUSED INITIATIVES

- **Bass Research.** Work with social scientists to survey and better understand the motivations, preferences, trip-related expenditures, and demographics of bass anglers to improve insights of participants in one of Ohio's most popular fisheries. Additionally, a population genetics approach will be used to survey Ohio largemouth bass, smallmouth bass, and spotted bass for the presence of invasive Alabama bass or Florida bass genes. This study will help protect native Ohio bass population and may expand options for future black bass management.
- **A Guide to Ohio Streams.** Update and redistribute A Guide to Ohio Streams (2001) through a partnership with Midwest Biodiversity Institute. Revision of this popular book will be led by the original author (Randy Sanders) and illustrator (Ronald Zimmerman). Funding for this publication was made possible through Monsanto Settlement Funds.
- **Lake Sturgeon Restoration.** Add the Cuyahoga and Sandusky rivers to the Ohio lake sturgeon restoration program in partnership with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Geological Survey, and University of Toledo. This will result in stocking three of the four Ohio Lake Erie tributaries where these lake sturgeon were historically sustained through natural reproduction. The restoration goal is to re-establish a self-sustaining population through a long-term stocking commitment.
- **Diamond Darter Repatriation.** The draft recovery plan for the Ohio-extirpated diamond darter was completed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The plan identifies establishing new populations in currently unoccupied historical habitats as a critical component of the future survival of this species.
- **Tracking Wildlife.** Develop a comprehensive system to show locations of critical species and their habitats. This system will manage permit user data, fulfill data requests, and provide public viewing to minimize impact to important habitats.
- **Statewide Fish Stocking.** Produce and stock more than 40 million sport fish of 11 different species in public waters. Fish are stocked for better catch rates and an improved fishing experience.
- **Saugeye Stocking at Grand Lake St. Marys.** Beginning in spring 2025, the Ohio Division of Wildlife will begin an experimental saugeye stocking program at Grand Lake St. Marys. Saugeye survive well, grow fast, and create excellent fisheries in canal reservoirs such as Grand Lake. Because Grand Lake lies in the Lake Erie watershed, sterile saugeye will be stocked to protect Lake Erie walleye genetics.
- **Guide to the Freshwater Mussels of Ohio.** Initiate publication of *A Naturalist's Guide to the Freshwater Mussels of Ohio*, by Michael Hoggarth, Otterbein University, in partnership with the Ohio Biological Survey. This follows completion of a statewide survey of Ohio mussel populations in 2024 supported by ODNR through H2Ohio Large Rivers funding.
- **Ohio River Sauger Spawning Characteristics.** Begin two new research projects to better understand variation in spawning success of Ohio River sauger. One project will focus on changes in reproductive physiology during the spawn, and the other project will identify local-scale movement and habitat use of adult sauger during the main fishing season and spawning period. Results will inform sauger management in the Ohio River and future hatchery production of sauger for Lake Erie reintroduction.
- **Black Bear Research.** Continue working with the University of Dayton to determine survival and reproductive rates of female black bears colonizing Ohio.
- **Finalize SWAP.** Finalize Ohio's 10-year revision to Ohio's State Wildlife Action Plan. The update will incorporate more outreach opportunities and provide easier access to partnerships and activities that will help Ohio meet short- and long-term conservation goals for species in greatest need of conservation.