

## **State Wildlife Action Plans assist mountain land conservation**

The sharp *zoo-zee, zoo-zoo-zee* call of the Black-throated Green Warbler can be heard from the Highlands of Roan to the lower elevation river valleys in summertime, the breeding season for the songbird. Like many species in the Eastern woodlands, the Warbler relies on several types of habitats, particularly as it migrates with a team of other bird species to the Caribbean and Central America.

Catching site of the yellow-faced, white-bellied, and olive-crowned bird is not unusual: it is quite abundant and classified as a “species of least concern.” But for birders, the site and sound is still a treat. Plus, its presence among other songbirds in the migration path is an important one, as is the ecological role of most common species.

Prior to 2005, federal wildlife funding was directed primarily to the endangered, so that biologists had little data about animals with abundant populations. Since then, the State Wildlife Action Plans have opened up new doors for both research and land conservation.

“The Wildlife Action Plans have set the table for the next generation of land protection work,” said Jay Leutze, Avery County, N.C. resident and Trustee of Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy. “We will look back a generation from now and see this as a critical moment when we became more strategic in connecting the landscape by recognizing the role of habitat in protecting species health.”

Each state’s wildlife resource agency completed an Action Plan (often referred to as “SWAP” or “WAP”) within the last four years. The plans broaden the aim of federal wildlife programs beyond simply protecting a small number of critically imperiled species to conserving a variety of plants and animals and their habitat. North Carolina’s plan identifies the natural communities that need to be protected so that wildlife has a diversity of habitat to thrive and enough room to roam. The plan states land conservation as one of the major objectives to achieve healthy wildlife populations.

SAHC is thoroughly familiar with the natural communities identified as important in the Action Plan, such as the rare spruce-fir forests, rock outcrops, and meadows ideal for Warblers in the high elevation ecosystems, all of which the organization has been protecting since its inception in 1974. “Spruce-fir communities provide critical breeding habitat for many landbirds of conservation concern that are likely endemic [found only here] to these high peaks,” according to the Action Plan. “Spruce-fir also provides critical habitat for a host of plant and animal species found nowhere else in North Carolina.” The spruce-fir forests are also some of the most vulnerable communities: their isolation from each other makes them particularly susceptible to pest damage and other threats.

Chris McGrath, Faunal Diversity Coordinator for the Wildlife Resource Commission, commented that “it’s not news” to local conservationists that these diverse river valleys and high elevation ecosystems are conservation priorities. “But the Action Plans apply a large context to some of these efforts,” he said. “Because they are identified in the state plan, it lays them out as priorities to be protected on a state scale.” Land trusts use the

Action Plan to rationalize the importance of these tracts and gain funds to complete their protection work.

SAHC has also incorporated the Action Plans in its conservation planning, using GIS (Geographic Information Systems) to identify properties that fall within North Carolina and Tennessee Action Plan priorities. See

[http://www.conservationregistry.org/assets/0000/1025/Final\\_Roan\\_050109.pdf](http://www.conservationregistry.org/assets/0000/1025/Final_Roan_050109.pdf).

This protection work of important natural communities, clean water and scenic views couldn't come at a more important time, as the mountain population continues to grow and prices for land skyrocket.

“As acres and acres are taken up by pavement, there is not enough space for wildlife anymore,” said McGrath of WRC. “If the trends continue, there will be less area for habitat. There's a minimum amount of acres needed for wildlife, and if we don't have a sufficient amount of land in conservation management, we will start to see species disappearing from that system. Once you start to lose a species here, a species there, you start to lose those that rely on those species for food.

“And habitat for animals is also habitat for us, whether that be natural landscapes for recreation, fishing, hunting, nature photography or the water and air we breath,” McGrath said.

Links to SWAP partners:

State Wildlife Action Plans: [www.wildlifeactionplans.org](http://www.wildlifeactionplans.org)

Open Space Institute:

[http://www.osiny.org/site/PageServer?pagename=Places\\_SouthernApps](http://www.osiny.org/site/PageServer?pagename=Places_SouthernApps)

Doris Duke Charitable Foundation: <http://www.ddcf.org/>

The Conservation Fund: <http://www.conservationfund.org/>

Blue Ridge Forever: [www.blueridgeforever.info](http://www.blueridgeforever.info)