

Peer and Partner Comments Received for SGCN: Birds

Compiled October 2014

MDIFW's responses (in blue) to peer and partner comments were provided by Brad Allen, Erynn Call, Danielle D'Auria, Tom Hodgman, Kelsey Sullivan, and Lindsay Tudor.

For questions related to the general process for designating Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN), please see the presentations 'SGCN Process' from the July 8, 2014 meeting and 'Revised SGCN Process' from the September 30, 2014 meeting on Maine's Wildlife Action Plan revision website (<http://www.maine.gov/ifw/wildlife/reports/MWAP2015.html>).

Please direct any questions to mainewildlifeactionplan@gmail.com.

1. Species-specific break out group comments from the July 8, 2014 conservation partners meeting.

- Did we look only at Partners in Flight Bird Conservation Regions 13 and 30?

The focus of our prioritization, at least from a spatial scale, was the state of Maine. However, the PIF database uses Bird Conservation Region (BCRs) for generating summary statistics by species. The two BCRs that overlap Maine are BCR 14 (Atlantic Northern Forest), which covers most of Maine, and BCR 30 (Southern New England), which includes a southern coastal strip of York and Cumberland Counties. For Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) data in particular, we were able to use both the state and BCR scales for trend estimates to assist with prioritization, but for the majority of information (i.e., the Partners in Flight [PIF] 2012 database), we used estimates based on BCRs. We felt that although the BCR scale is larger and in a few cases may give a false impression of species status (e.g., a species may be doing fine elsewhere in the BCR), the benefit of having such a rich source of information, applicable across a large geographic area for all species, outweighed those shortcomings.

- Several participants brought up **whip-poor-will** as a species that may meet P1 criteria.

MDIFW explained that long-term declines are not viewed with the same urgency as rapidly declining species, such as bank swallow. Triage drove some of the split between Priority 1 and 2 species. It is likely that the decline of whip-poor-will predates organized bird monitoring programs. Only recently have whip-poor-wills been the focus of population monitoring, although it is well known that this species is declining.

- There was a comment that E & T species have Section 6 monies available for projects

Relative to other states, Maine receives only a small percentage of Section 6 monies for E & T species management. For example, Section 6 funds support less than 25% of the annual budget for piping plover management alone.

- **Golden eagle**

- Why not a P1 as Barrow's and Harlequins? Edge of range, Regional responsibility, Breeding vs. Wintering...are we inconsistent?
- Disjunct populations of common western bird factor discussed.

The golden eagle is state endangered and is a High Regional Conservation Priority; however, RSGCN was the only source for the High Regional Conservation Priority criterion. In order to qualify as Priority 1 based on the High Regional Conservation Priority criterion, a species must be classified as High Responsibility AND Very High Concern by RSGCN. Golden eagle is High Responsibility AND High Concern; therefore it qualifies for Priority 2 using our criteria.

- **Chimney Swift and Barn Swallow**

Chimney swift and barn swallow are both priority species for the department in the SWAP revision. Chimney swift and barn swallow are equally ranked as Priority 2 in the current version of the SGCN list.

- **Broad winged hawk**

This species is classified as Priority 3 based upon the High Regional Conservation Priority status (source: PIF) and as a regional stewardship species.

- **Common Gallinule**

Common gallinule is a Priority 2 species due to its state status as a Threatened species. It is limited in its abundance and distribution in Maine, with approximately nine known breeding sites.

- **Great Cormorants**

This species is a Priority 1. 2013 survey results show the nesting population has been reduced to only 48 pairs nesting on 5 offshore islands in Maine, and thus this species is precariously close to again becoming extirpated as a breeding bird in Maine. The major threat appears to be excessive predation on fledgling cormorants by an expanding bald eagle population.

- **Atlantic Puffin:** Why is this species not a Priority 1?

This species is a Priority 2. The total estimated puffin nesting population in 2013 is estimated to exceed 1,200 pairs and growing, which exceeds the population objective for this species.

- **Nelson's sparrow:** Why is this species not a Priority 1?

*Nelson's sparrow (*A. n. subvirgatus*) populations are believed to be less sensitive to sea level rise and more stable than saltmarsh sparrow. Recent analyses support this. Nelson's deserve priority species status but not quite at the same level as saltmarsh sparrow.*

- **American Oystercatcher:** Why was this species on the SGCN list in 2005 but is not listed in the 2015 revision?

American oystercatcher is currently included as a Priority 3 SGCN due to recent changes to the Range Expansion criteria drafted on 9/19/14. This change is: "Priority 3 designation is not intended for: 1. Species who have expanded their range into Maine within the past 10 years." This change allows species who have expanded their range into Maine before the most recent 10 years to be considered Priority 3. American oystercatcher was first documented nesting in Maine in 1994.

- **Leach's Storm Petrel:** Why is this species not on the list?

This species is now ranked as a Priority 3 SGCN. The latest nesting population estimate for this species is approximately 10,300 pairs reported on a total of 34 islands, most (but not all) of which are in some form of conservation ownership.

- **Northern Harrier's:** This species did not show up on any list.

This species is now a Priority 3 based upon our revised criteria because it is listed as a state Species of Special Concern.

- Why aren't scrub-shrub birds represented in the P1 list, and how will we incorporate this habitat type?

There was no concerted effort to have "representative species" on the SGCN list. The rubric used to determine Priority 1 ranking focuses heavily on risk of extirpation. Although shrubland birds are facing numerous threats especially in BCR 30 and some populations are declining, it is by no means universal across BCR 14 which comprises most of Maine. Priority 2 and Priority 1 species will be a focus of attention and be eligible for funding. A species/habitat matrix will facilitate spatial analyses of priority birds and their habitats. Declining shrubland habitats will be incorporated into Elements 3 (stressors) and 4 (conservation actions).

- **Olive-sided flycatcher** was recommended to bump to P1 as was Nelson's sparrow (*see above*) based on threat from sea level rise.

The olive-sided flycatcher may be on the cusp of Priority 1, but without more information, this species was classified as Priority 2.

- Would the trends ever support **black duck** SGCN inclusion? Or is the concern by the joint venture just to maintain bag limits?

Black duck conservation is addressed via two sources: 1) black ducks are a game bird and are eligible for Pittman-Robertson funds; 2) the Black Duck Joint Venture uses population data to inform goals and objectives for conservation and protection of black duck habitat.

2. Email from Barbara Vickery (8/14/14)

I do have an over-arching concern about the growth of the SGCN list. The USFWS has made it clear they are looking for greater prioritization and greater specificity in the updated plan. I don't think it will be possible to be specific in a meaningful way about conservation actions needed for 298 species. Further, I am concerned that such a long list does not reflect a careful, genuine prioritization. So I hope the overall list could be reduced significantly and suggest below some ways to do that for the bird section.

The list is long; however, in August MDIFW staff split the overall list into 3 tiers (rather than 2) in order to address this concern, at least in part. The result is a larger overall list but much smaller Priority 1 and Priority 2 lists (as of July 2014: Priority 1= 45, Priority 2=253; as of September 2014: Priority 1=54, Priority 2=116).

If we think there is good reason to express some level of concern for and need to take some action on behalf of all these species, such that we cannot bring ourselves to leave 50 or more off the list, then I would suggest at least break priority 2 in to two levels.

We did both. We broke the list into 3 tiers resulting in a shorter list of Priority 1 and Priority 2 species combined, as described above.

Specifically, with respect to birds it does not seem credible or helpful in focusing conservation effort to have 55% of the species that breed in Maine listed as "Species of Greatest Conservation Need."

The metric stated above (55%) does not reflect the full SGCN bird list, as many SGCN birds are not breeders. Shorebirds in particular, as well as a few wintering waterfowl species, are represented on the list. However, using the same approach as in the comment above, the SGCN revision (as of late September 2014) now lists only 31% of species that breed in Maine as either Priority 1 or Priority 2.

With respect to the priority 1 list of birds, I see a very high degree of congruence between this list and the E and T list, which seems appropriate. This is overall a solid Priority I list.

It was our hope that the SGCN designation resulted in an easily defensible Priority 1 list.

A few are not proposed for E or T, but are at least on the Special Concern list. However, **purple sandpiper** and **bank swallow** do not appear on the E or T or SC lists, so they seem to merit additional scrutiny as to their qualifications to be on the Priority 1 list.

Bank Swallow seems to land there primarily because, in addition to regional significant decline which is also true of at least 5 species on the priority 2 list, it also qualified under Criterion 4 on the basis of Partners in Flight listing. Yet **Chimney Swift, along with cliff swallow and barn swallow**, seem to be in the same boat – what is the difference? I think it is probably appropriate for all of these species to be SGCN at some level, but I don't see any reason to call out bank swallow in particular for Priority 1 status.

Bank swallow is ranked higher than barn swallow, cliff swallow, and chimney swift because of steeper “Recent Significant Declines” not “Regional Significant Declines”.

Purple sandpiper likewise seems legitimately SGCN, but unless there is evidence of risk of extirpation from Maine or regional significant decline, which does not seem to be indicated on this table, I do not think it merits being Priority 1.

Christmas Bird Count (CBC) data suggest purple sandpiper numbers are in apparent regional decline. Recent MDIFW survey data suggest a steep regional population decline within the latest 10 years. In March 2014, MDIFW conducted the first year of a long term monitoring effort for purple sandpipers in the mid coast region (the core wintering area for purple sandpipers). The number of purple sandpipers recorded during the 2014 survey is down 49% from the number of purple sandpipers recorded in this same region during survey efforts conducted in 2004.

On the Priority 2 list, I am concerned about the fact that 25 bird species appear to qualify solely on the basis of their inclusion on the Partners in Flight list. PIF criteria and purposes were different. PIF put a great deal of emphasis on regional responsibility and even their list separates birds into Highest, High and Moderate priorities. I would think it appropriate perhaps for Maine to select those in the Highest and High PIF categories, both of great concern and for which our region bears a high responsibility, but NOT include all of the Moderates. I realize I am referencing the 2006 PIF Blueprint and the SGCN list refers to the 2012 PIF assessment Database with which I am less familiar. But I suspect the principles and the possibility of skimming more discriminately are the same. I note their attribute of Common Bird in Steep Decline and wonder if that has been parsed by geographic region at all? I would not say that **Belted Kingfisher** is in steep decline in Maine, for instance.

The PIF rankings were not used indiscriminately; rather, we took the approach suggested by the reviewer. In the 2012 PIF database, the species rankings result in a

series of priority lists (e.g. U.S./Canada Concern, Regional Stewardship, etc.) which can be further subset by BCR, which we did. We used a subset of those lists to further narrow the species list by considering only those in BCR 14 and 30 and whose rankings fell above certain criteria. Although the summary tables provided to reviewers appear to simply have a box checked for PIF, there was a great deal of effort (subcriteria) underlying that conclusion.

I worry that the definition of recent significant declines may overlook species that may have been on a longer term albeit slower downward trajectory, which thus do not show up in the BBS lists sorted by % decline in last 15-30 years, but which may nevertheless be arriving at the same place of vulnerability to extirpation. **Whip-poor-will** comes to mind as a possible example.

The Recent Significant Declines criterion is intended to capture those species that are falling fast but there has not been enough time for the conservation community to evaluate and focus on them. See whip-poor-will comments above.

With respect to the next step of grouping species by habitat association in order to then assign threats and develop conservation actions, I think it could be useful for birds to not only consider habitat but also feeding guild. By simply looking at breeding habitat we may miss threats that pertain across habitats such as decline in aerial insect prey for swallows, swifts and nightjars, for instance.

We expect that Elements 3 ('stressors') and 4 ('conservation actions') will capture the challenges faced by aerial insectivores.

The other qualifying criteria about which I feel concern is climate change vulnerability. 17 birds are included in the SGCN priority 2 list solely on the basis of predicted high Climate Change Vulnerability. I think this is an appropriate contributing criterion, but I do not think it is enough as a stand alone. It is true that for many of these species their range in Maine will likely contract in the coming century, but for many of them it is likely they will persist in good numbers in certain parts of the state. For instance, there is good evidence that the boreal spruce forest persisted through the post glacial super warm period in coastal areas down east. Very likely **spruce grouse** and the like will do so even in the face of climate warming in coming decades.

Spruce grouse has two other factors that contributed to its Priority 2 status: 1) this species is becoming a regional priority, with other northeastern states interested in reintroducing spruce grouse to their respective states (e.g., VT and NY have attempted reintroductions using Maine birds in the last 5 years); 2) we lack data for spruce grouse to inform any tangible population estimate or trend.

So, again following the principle of prioritization, remembering these are supposed to be species in GreatEST need, I would consider deleting many of these species from this list, unless there are other risk factors. Those with high vulnerability to CC which are

also dependent on very limited and vulnerable habitats such as salt marshes, on the other hand, should remain on the list.

Weighting of climate change vulnerability within the rubric was decreased such that species that only meet the Climate Change Vulnerability criterion are now Priority 3.

3. Email from Mac Hunter (7/7/14)

- **Barrow's Goldeneye** is not a regional priority? I tend to think of the Atlantic population as separate from Pacific.

Correct, there are two distinct (east and west) populations, and Maine winters a significant portion of the eastern population. If our winter surveys are accurately tracking the Barrow's goldeneye population trend, then this population is declining.

The Regional Priority criterion is not triggered for this species because it is really only a priority for Maine and the Maritimes.

- **Red Knot** and **Rusty blackbird** not in recent decline?

Red knot is indeed in recent decline and is ranked as a Priority 1 SGCN.

Rusty blackbird is believed to still be declining, although there is limited data to support this trend in Maine. The criterion mentioned is actually "Recent Significant Decline". The big crash of rusty blackbirds occurred in the mid-1970s and doesn't qualify under the "Recent" part of the criteria.

- Do **Chimney Swift** and **Golden Eagle** and Blueback Herring make Priority one on the basis of two criteria?

Chimney swift is a Priority 2 species on the basis of State Special Concern, Recent Significant Declines, and High Regional Conservation Priority.

The golden eagle is state Endangered and is a High Regional Conservation Priority; however, the only source that triggered it under High Regional Conservation Priority is RSGCN. The sub-criteria (i.e. metric) in the criteria table states that species triggered by RSGCN for the High Regional Conservation Priority criterion must be in the categories of High Responsibility AND Very High Concern to qualify for Priority 1 status. Golden eagle is High Responsibility AND High Concern, therefore it qualifies for Priority 2 using those criteria.

- I am surprised we know enough to decide that the **Red-necked Phalarope** is in jeopardy because of climate change...but not the **Red Phalarope**.

With the recent publication of “Predicting vulnerabilities of North American shorebirds to climate change” (Galbraith et al. 2014) that identifies Red Phalarope as a “high concern” risk category due to impacts from climate change, Red Phalarope is now a priority 3.

- The regional priority criterion seems odd when viewed from just a Maine perspective for a species like **Louisiana Waterthrush**

Edge of range often is a criterion for other listing programs (e.g., state threatened and endangered species lists) and is appropriate for SGCN designation, as well.

- The Priority 2 bird list is so long that it ceases to be much of a priority exercise. I wonder how much we should worry about mobile species like birds that are likely to readily shift their geographic range in response to climate change. I would tend to limit the CC perspective to sea level rise and tidal birds.

Climate change has been de-weighted. Saltmarsh sparrow is a Priority 1 and Nelson’s sparrow is a Priority 2. See related climate change comments above.

4. Email from Herb Wilson (6/29/14)

I am not aware of any recent records of **Sedge Wrens** in the state. Since we are on the margins of their distribution, I do not see the reason for inclusion of a species that is really not part of our avifauna.

Sedge wrens have been recorded in Maine since the 1860s and Palmer (1949) reports, “Since 1933, this species has been reported in sufficient numbers to indicate small to fairly large breeding colonies at about 21 localities in 10 counties.” The sedge wren is a challenging species to keep track of due to its specific requirements for plant height, cover, and water level changes such that they do not exhibit much site fidelity. We have documented this species at approximately 15 sites (source: MDIFW database) over time, and most of these sites are unoccupied today. Our ecoregional survey efforts (1998-2009) revealed 9 individuals at 8 wetlands. In 2006, we estimated the statewide population to be fewer than 50 pairs; today there may be even fewer.

Least Bittern is another similar example. Breeding densities of this species are low in the state but not unexpected for a species at the limits of its breeding range. I would divert resources and attention from those species to those in the state that are in more need of protection (terns, Piping Plover).

While the least bittern does reach the northern edge of its breeding range in Maine, it has been historically documented in Maine as early as 1863. It has been found at 32 sites distributed across York, Cumberland, Oxford, Androscoggin, Sagadahoc, Kennebec, Lincoln, southern Somerset, southern Penobscot, Waldo, Hancock, and Washington counties. Surveys by Gibbs and Melvin (1989, 1990) documented 18

occupied sites, of which only 4 were still occupied in 2005-2006. Our ecoregional survey efforts (1998-2009) revealed 9 individuals at 8 wetlands.

5. Email from Kate O'Brien (7/29/14)

I did want to voice my support for elevating the **blue winged warbler** to a #1 priority species (as opposed to #2) in the SWAP/CWCS plan for Maine.

This is due to a few factors,

- 1) It was in the first SWAP/CWCS for Maine as #1
- 2) I don't think it has increased markedly given its habitat requirements and it appears to still be relatively uncommon.
- 3) There are no other shrubland dependent birds on the list as a priority 1
- 4) In southern Maine, where it occurs, a designation of 1 would support our work for NEC as well as Blue-winged Warbler, and, depending on the listing decision may make it more likely for FWS to be able to continue to work on restoring this important habitat in southern Maine.

We evaluated each potential SGCN species separately based on the designation rubric. We did not seek to have a representative species for each habitat type in Maine. The rubric changed significantly from 2005, so some species were elevated to higher priority rankings while a few species were downgraded to a lower priority. Please note that Priority 2 is still an SGCN ranking, and species in this category would be eligible for funding.

6. Email from Amy Johnson (9/29/14)

I wonder if the sanderling population has declined [near Morse Mountain]? We used to reliably get large flocks through each fall, and the number we have seen on field trips (once per fall, mind you) have seemed much less. The fall amphipod counts have also been much less in recent years, but this summer there were incredibly dense swarms of beach amphipods, so we may just have hit temporal windows in our once yearly samples. We've stopped doing the amphipod beach lab in favor of a tidepool lab the last few years, so I haven't kept track these creatures for the last few years.

We are currently conducting shorebird surveys at Seawall Beach, Popham Beach, and Reid State Park as part of the Atlantic Coast Enhanced Shorebird Monitoring program established in 2009. Beginning in 2009, volunteers have surveyed all three beaches concurrently every two weeks, starting mid-July through mid-October. Due to the new expansive sand bar located between Seawall and Popham beaches created by the recent shift in the Morse River outlet, this area has become extremely productive for shorebirds.

Sanderling numbers in 2009 totaled 577 and increased to 1,038 in 2013. The average numbers of sanderlings recorded during 2009-2013 are comparable to numbers recorded during intensive survey efforts in 1994. We are very interested in the amphipod data collected at Seawall to make comparisons with fluctuating sanderling numbers and comparisons with invertebrate samples collected this year on mudflats located downeast. Sanderlings are a Priority 2 SGCN.

7. Email from Susan Gallo (7/22/2014)

.....happy with SGCN for the most part, good balance, good drops from the 2005 list...two questions though:

yellow-bellied sapsucker and **ovenbird**...what is rationale for not having those as Priority 2??? Seems to me they both make it, they made it onto the Forestry for Maine Birds list...

Neither yellow-bellied sapsucker nor ovenbird met the PIF sub-criteria (Regional Concern, Regional Stewardship, U.S./Canada Concern) used in the designation rubric. Neither species is declining according to BBS.

One other species, **yellow throated vireo** we had on our forest stewardship list (longer than the FFMB list)...another one that could be Priority 2???

In the revised SGCN list, yellow throated vireo qualifies as a Priority 3 species based on PIF Regional Concern driven by trend. We used professional discretion to downgrade this species to Priority 4 (not SGCN) because the trend for this species from the BBS for BCR 30 suggests that it is stable in both the long and short term.