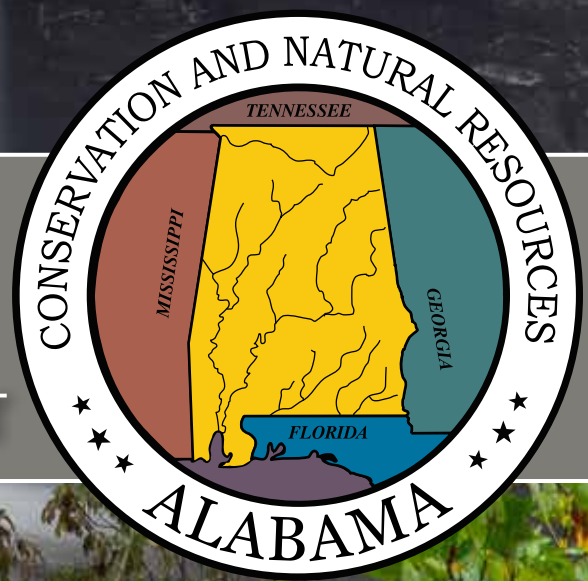




**ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF  
CONSERVATION AND  
NATURAL RESOURCES**  
2021-2022 ANNUAL REPORT





**The Honorable Kay Ivey  
Governor of Alabama  
State Capitol  
Montgomery, AL 36130**



Dear Governor Ivey:

I am pleased to submit the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources' (ADCNR) Annual Report for the fiscal year ending September 30, 2022.

Renovations and upgrades continued throughout Alabama's State Park System during the fiscal year. These improvements helped make our parks popular destinations for outdoor recreation for Alabamians and out-of-state visitors. In FY 2021-2022, guest occurrences grew to 5.6 million, an increase over pre-pandemic levels. The support Alabamians have shown for their State Parks in recent years has been overwhelming. We will continue working to provide the public with one of the best parks systems in the country.

Our Marine Resources Division (MRD) was very busy during FY 2021-2022 managing Alabama's red snapper season and the expansion of the state's artificial reef system along with providing support for several important boating access projects. Perhaps MRD's most significant accomplishment was overseeing the completion of the State Representative Steve McMillan Fort Morgan Fishing Pier and Boat Ramp on Mobile Bay. With this new facility, the public has more access to recreational opportunities off Fort Morgan.

ADCNR's Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries (WFF) Division continued to expand its public awareness and outreach efforts through popular programs such as Firearms 101, Adult Mentored Hunting, and Go Fish, Alabama! These innovative learning experiences are designed to introduce those who have little to no experience with shooting sports, hunting, or fishing to the variety of outdoor recreational opportunities provided through the Department. These programs also help increase awareness about ADCNR's conservation efforts.

The State Lands Division (SLD) oversaw the addition of seven tracts of land to the state's Forever Wild Land Trust, increasing by 3,660 acres the state's public land system in support of outdoor recreation. SLD staff also hosted various outreach events across the state including youth hunting opportunities, camping and fishing weekends, sporting dog field trials, and much more. Like WFF's outreach efforts, these events increase ADCNR's relevancy with the public.

These are just a few of the accomplishments you will find in this report. Thank you for your support and leadership to our agency and the State of Alabama.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Christopher M. Blankenship". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Christopher M. Blankenship  
Commissioner

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# DEPARTMENT OVERVIEW



**The Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources** is an executive and administrative department of the State of Alabama created by statute. The Commissioner, appointed by the Governor as a member of her cabinet, advises the Governor and Legislature on management of freshwater fish, wildlife, marine resources, state lands, state parks, and other natural resources.

## Scope of Operations

The Department's scope of operations includes the administration, management and maintenance of 21 state parks, 23 public fishing lakes, three freshwater fish hatcheries, one aquatic biodiversity center, 162 public boat ramps, 35 wildlife management areas, seven special opportunity areas, 10 shooting ranges, a saltwater mariculture center, and 645,000 acres of trust lands managed for the benefit of several state agencies, and the state's General Fund and the Alabama Trust Fund. Other departmental functions include maintenance of a State Land Resource Information Center and administration of the Forever Wild Land Trust program.

## Organization

During Fiscal Year 2021-2022, the Department had four operational divisions and eight support sections. The operational divisions were Marine Resources, State Lands, State Parks, and Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries. Support sections were Accounting, Engineering, Communications and Marketing, Information Technology, Legal, Personnel and Payroll, Property Inventory, and Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill Restoration. The Commissioner was advised by a 13-member Conservation Advisory Board.

Division directors managed the Department's programs under their jurisdiction through authority delegated by the Legislature and the Commissioner. Throughout the fiscal year, the Department promoted wise stewardship, management, and enjoyment of Alabama's natural resources. Active public education and voluntary participation programs were expanded, and new plans were implemented to achieve maximum multiple-use benefits consistent with resource conservation.

## Department Goals

The Department's major goal is to promote the statewide stewardship and enjoyment of Alabama's natural resources and to ensure that future generations will be able to enjoy these resources.

## Funding

Funding for the Department is generated through special revenues, which include federal money, cigarette taxes, user and license fees, mandated interest from endowments and federal regulations. The Forever Wild Land Trust received interest income from the Alabama Trust Fund. Specific revenue sources for the four operational divisions are as follows:

**Marine Resources:** Saltwater fishing licenses, fines, marine gas tax, and federal grants. Marine Resources also has an endowment, but it has not grown enough to enhance operations.

**State Lands:** Management fees from the sale of timber, minerals and various leases on state lands administered under the Lands Asset Management Program. Further, the division receives additional federal grants that support specific programs.

**State Parks:** User-generated funds in the form of entrance, rental, lodging, golf, and other recreational fees. State Parks received a modest amount of funding from cigarette tax revenue.

**Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries:** Fishing and hunting licenses and permits; fines; waterfowl stamps; federal allocations from excise taxes on sporting arms, ammunition, archery gear and some fishing tackle; and federal grants. Interest income continues to be generated by the Game and Fish endowment fund for resident lifetime hunting and fishing licenses. Direct donations and voluntary state income tax refund check-offs for the Nongame Wildlife Program continue to decrease from previous fiscal years.

# CONSERVATION ADVISORY BOARD

The Conservation Advisory Board, created by statute, is composed of 10 members appointed by the Governor for alternating terms of six years and three ex-officio members in the persons of the Governor, the Commissioner of Agriculture and Industries, and the Director of the Alabama Cooperative Extension System. The Commissioner of Conservation and Natural Resources serves as the ex-officio secretary of the Board.

The Advisory Board assists in formulating policies for the Department of Conservation, examines all rules and regulations and makes recommendations for their change or amendment. By a two-thirds vote of the members present and with the

Governor's approval, the Board can amend, make any changes, repeal or create and promulgate additional rules and regulations. The Board also assists in publicizing the Department's programs and activities.

## Meetings

The Advisory Board met two times during FY 2021-2022:

- March 5, 2022, at the Alabama Department of Agriculture and Industries, 1445 Federal Dr. in Montgomery, Alabama
- May 21, 2022, at Lakepoint State Park, 104 Lakepoint Dr., in Eufaula, Alabama

## Conservation Advisory Board Members as of Sept. 30, 2022

Members	Hometown	Term Expires
Joseph Dobbs, Jr., Chairman	Birmingham	March 28, 2027
Greg Barksdale	Hanceville	September 30, 2023
Brock Jones	Tuscaloosa	March 28, 2027
Kevin Savory	Dothan	March 28, 2027
Grady Hartzog	Eufaula	March 28, 2027
Raymond Jones, Jr.	Huntsville	May 9, 2025
Jeff Martin	Pell City	May 9, 2025
Ben C. Stimpson, Jr.	Mobile	September 30, 2023
Gary Wolfe	Fairhope	March 28, 2027
Tim Wood	Selma	September 30, 2023

## Ex-officio Members

Kay Ivey, Governor, State of Alabama  
 Dr. J. Mike Phillips, Director, Alabama Cooperative Extension System  
 Rick Pate, Commissioner, Alabama Department of Agriculture and Industries

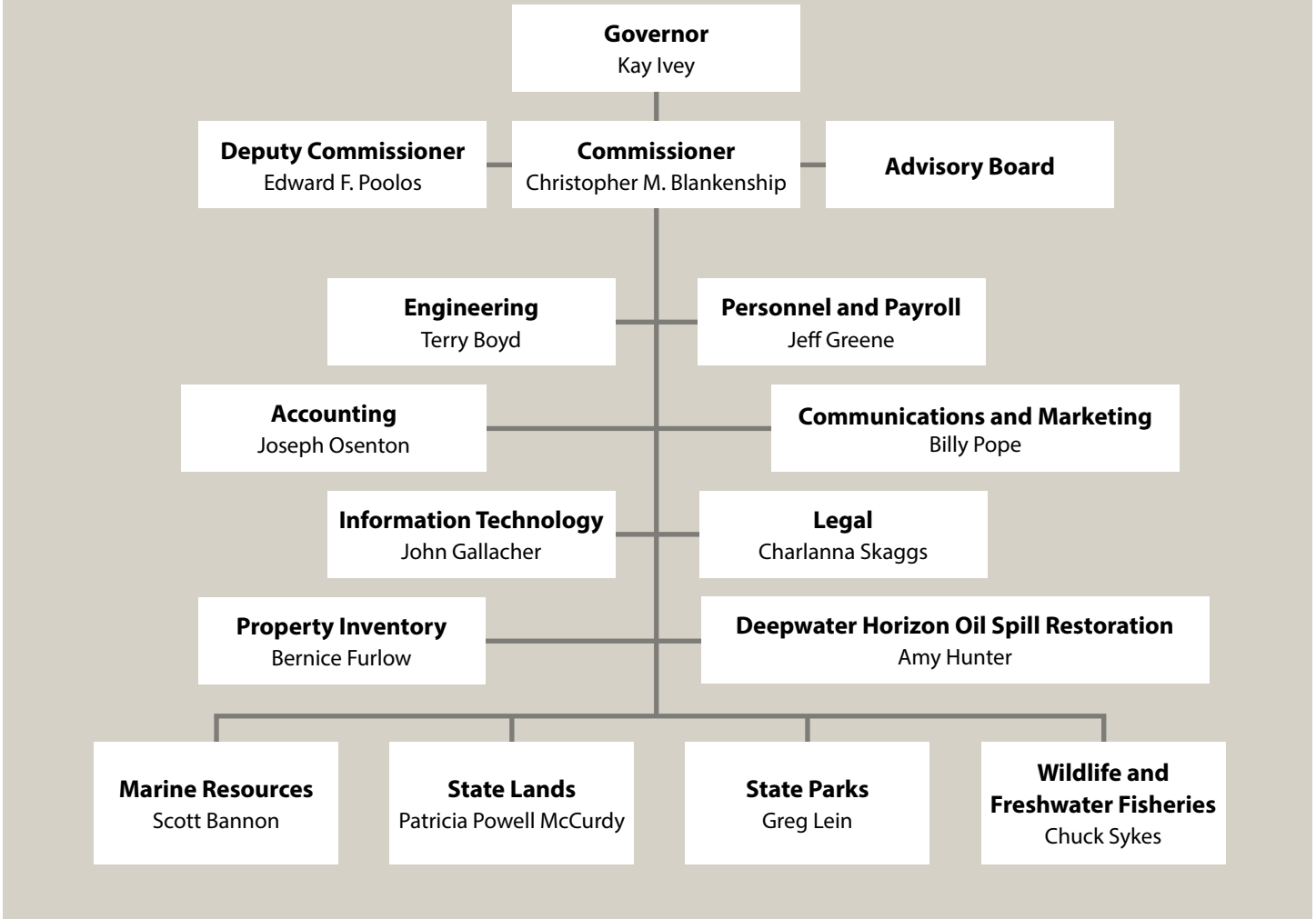
## Ex-officio Secretary of the Board

Christopher M. Blankenship, Commissioner, Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources

# BUDGETS

	ACTUAL	BUDGETED	REQUESTED
NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES	948	1,319	1,255
UNENCUMBERED CASH BALANCE FORWARD	105,284,275	99,410,123	73,234,933
<b>Federal Funds</b>			
0303 Marine Resources - Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission	1,044,540	1,040,614	1,865,000
0303 Marine Resources - Commerce	661,033	709,630	811,000
0303 Marine Resources - Interior	1,038,249	1,200,788	1,400,000
0304 Game & Fish - Interior	19,922,307	23,725,187	23,630,000
0304 Game & Fish - Misc	0	540,750	637,303
0305 Lands - Commerce	2,546,424	5,169,682	7,058,641
0305 Lands - Interior	599,705	715,112	525,000
1713 Restore Act	27,831,495	137,727,169	143,227,886
<b>Total Federal Funding</b>	<b>53,643,753</b>	<b>170,828,932</b>	<b>179,154,830</b>
National Fish and Wildlife Foundation	1,450,183	0	4,400,000
Licenses and Permits	29,682,899	26,066,653	28,450,000
Land Management Fees	3,257,947	3,689,038	3,625,059
User Fees	43,924,274	45,033,195	47,680,536
Timber Sales	1,488,803	600,000	500,000
Fines	471,972	516,620	550,000
Trust Fund Interest (MR and WFF)	710,743	650,000	700,000
Other	6,408,742	8,840,560	8,796,876
<b>Total Departmental Related Receipts</b>	<b>87,395,563</b>	<b>85,396,066</b>	<b>94,702,471</b>
Cigarette Tax	2,117,000	3,000,000	3,000,000
Gasoline Tax	2,793,752	2,630,000	2,700,000
Use Tax Discount Cap	1,260,374	1,170,000	1,361,000
Sales Tax Discount Cap	7,000,000	7,378,000	8,104,180
GOMESA	28,010,918	30,000,000	35,000,000
Forever Wild Land Management	900,000	900,000	900,000
BP Oil Spill/NRDA Reimbursements	11,754,815	24,000,000	25,000,000
State Reservoir Management Fund	762,620	1,652,380	1,380,000
<b>Total Other Receipts</b>	<b>54,599,479</b>	<b>70,730,380</b>	<b>77,445,180</b>
<b>Administrative Transfer</b>	<b>9,763,853</b>	<b>10,000,000</b>	<b>10,750,000</b>
<b>Actual All Receipts</b>	<b>205,402,648</b>	<b>336,955,378</b>	<b>362,052,481</b>
<b>BFY 2022-2024 Expenditures or Budgeted</b>	<b>211,276,800</b>	<b>363,130,568</b>	<b>407,572,419</b>
<b>Revenues verses Expenditures--Over (Under)</b>	<b>(5,874,152)</b>	<b>(26,175,190)</b>	<b>(45,519,938)</b>
<b>UNENCUMBERED CASH BALANCE</b>	<b>99,410,123</b>	<b>73,234,933</b>	<b>27,714,995</b>
	2022	2023	2024
<b>BFY 2022-2024 Expenditures/Budgeted</b>	<b>211,276,800</b>	<b>363,130,568</b>	<b>407,572,419</b>
<b>BFY 2022-2024 Federal Funding</b>	<b>53,643,753</b>	<b>170,828,932</b>	<b>179,154,830</b>
<b>BFY 2022-2024 State Funding</b>	<b>157,633,047</b>	<b>192,301,636</b>	<b>228,417,589</b>

## Department Organizational Chart as of September 30, 2022



### Administrative Section Budget and Expenditures FY 2022

Section	Budgeted Amount	Actual Expenditures	Over/(Under)
Accounting	2,437,456	2,033,122	(404,334)
Commissioner	754,918	598,441	(156,477)
Engineering	473,644	373,236	(100,408)
Communications and Marketing	975,313	834,071	(141,242)
Information Technology	2,522,112	2,545,026	22,914
Legal	1,138,511	1,032,031	(106,480)
License	345,392	250,543	(94,849)
Payroll and Personnel	1,258,841	1,301,663	42,822
Property Inventory	240,043	222,937	(17,106)
<b>Contingency</b>	<b>563,020</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>(563,020)</b>
<b>Totals</b>	<b>10,709,250</b>	<b>9,191,070</b>	<b>(1,518,180)</b>

# ADMINISTRATIVE DIVISION

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## ACCOUNTING

The Accounting Section is the central clearinghouse for all departmental financial data. Accounting maintains and records all receipts and disbursements for the Commissioner's office, the administration sections, and the four divisions. Accounting is responsible for six internal functions: accounts payable, accounts receivable, budgeting, procurement, hunting and fishing license sales, and financial reporting.

**Accounts Payable** reviews and approves all payment transactions and transfer journal entries for the Department. Section staff process more than 20,000 transactions annually.

**Accounts Receivable** reviews and approves all cash receipts and investment transactions for the Department. Section staff process more than 12,000 transactions annually.

The **Budgeting Office** prepares and submits the annual budget. It also processes budget modifications as required during the year. The Department expenses for FY 2021-2022 were approximately \$211 million.

**Procurement** provides purchasing assistance to each administrative section and to all divisions. This office is the liaison between ADCNR and State Purchasing.

The **Hunting and Fishing License Office** is responsible for receiving revenues from license sales and certifying them into the Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries and Marine Resources funds.

**Financial Reporting** processes Comprehensive Annual Financial Report entries, closing entries, and reports on grants; calculates federal draws; and maintains grant budgets for the Department.

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## COMMUNICATIONS AND MARKETING

The Communications and Marketing Section provided a variety of services for the Department including writing news releases; publication and graphic design; editing, proofreading, and copywriting services; website development; video production; photography; email marketing; marketing analysis; and a weekly outdoors column sent to the media and published on the Department's website. Staff also coordinated special projects and events such as Outdoor Alabama hunting and fishing nights with two minor league baseball teams. Personnel included six full-time positions.

### Accomplishments

- Managed the Department's email marketing and communication platform (GovDelivery) that is used to communicate with 1,048,576 subscribers distributed among 203 interest topics. Distributed communications included press releases, annual hunting and fishing license expiration reminders,

weekly outdoors articles, lapsed hunting and fishing license marketing incentives, and more. In FY 2021-2022, section email marketing and communications efforts generated \$669,371 in revenue from 14,288 license buyers.

- Developed landing pages on OutdoorAlabama.com for various marketing campaigns, outreach programs, and licenses. Those landing pages generated \$440,132 in revenue from 13,058 license buyers.
- Partnered with minor league baseball and collegiate sports marketing groups to advertise to a broader and more diverse market segment. Working with Auburn University Football and Playfly Sports, ADCNR garnered over 600,000 impressions per football game with a total of 13,000,000 for the season. Game day activations with the Rocket City Trash Pandas and the Montgomery Biscuits allowed the Department to meet potential and current customers in person. The events provided more than 20,000 impressions onsite and digitally through partner social postings and email marketing. These partnerships are critical in ADCNR's efforts to become more relevant to all Alabamians.
- Partnered with ADCNR's State Parks Division, Alabama Tourism Department, and the Alabama Conservation Enforcement Officers Association (ACEOA) on the Outdoor Alabama Photo Contest. Coordinated a traveling exhibit of the winning photos in locations across the state, such as state parks, museums, and libraries.
- Developed and edited 127 press releases (including weekly outdoors articles) focused on departmental programs, public events, and hunting and fishing regulations.
- Managed public information requests from local, regional, and national media outlets; nongovernmental and governmental agencies; and the public.
- Managed the Department's official Outdoor Alabama social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram. Facebook continued to be the most effective social media platform to connect with our constituents. The Outdoor Alabama Facebook page has seen continued growth in users, engagement, and reach. In FY 2021-2022, the Outdoor Alabama Facebook page grew by 2,984 followers, for a total of 56,325. Total reach of the Outdoor Alabama Facebook page for the fiscal year was 920,618 Facebook users, an increase of 406% over the previous year. Additionally, the Outdoor Alabama Instagram page grew to 6,183 followers. Outdoor Alabama's Instagram reach grew by 779% over the previous fiscal year to 272,434 Instagram users.
- Oversaw and maintained content for two official Department websites – OutdoorAlabama.com and AlabamaForeverWild.com.

## **OutdoorAlabama.com**

**Users:** 1,974,691

**New Users:** 1,929,497

**Pageviews:** 5,652,565

- Served as the liaison with the website contractor to provide solutions for various website issues as well as administrative and troubleshooting services for the Department.
- Designed various promotional items, digital and printed marketing materials, various annual species reports, advertisements, maps, calendars, signage, business cards, retirement certificates, and vehicle graphics and wraps.
- Shot photographs and video both on location and in studio in support of Department programs and events. Section staff also maintained video and photo archives for various departmental projects and distribution to news media, outdoor writers, and print and digital publications.
- Created public surveys and produced reports through the Qualtrics survey platform in support of Departmental staff research.

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## **INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY**

The Information Technology (IT) Section provides computer hardware, software, and networking services for the Department. Hardware services include setup and installation of computers and mobile devices, management of departmental servers, and installation and support for printers, monitors, copiers, and scanners. Software services include web-based application development and maintenance; analysis, design, and support for the Department's E-Gov applications; support for all mainframe applications; and support and maintenance of Department websites. Networking services include support for all wired, wireless, and cellular technologies used throughout the Department. IT support also provides support for email and cloud storage platforms through the Microsoft Office 365 Enterprise Agreement.

### **Facilities and Personnel**

The IT staff consists of 17 employees: IT manager, programmer analysts (3), system specialists (6), system technicians (2), clerk (1), laborer (1), and contractor-filled positions (3). There are currently eight vacant merit positions in IT.

### **Accomplishments**

- Continued project to convert all ADCNR locations to cloud-based Cisco Meraki networks for increased visibility, management, and security for both internal and public networks.
- Created a new ADCNR Meraki Voice over Internet Protocol (VOIP) phone hub to facilitate the conversion of both external and internal offices to modernized cloud-calling services.
- Expanded security awareness training platform to include other Department training and policies. Added tiered refresher training based on user activity.

- Implemented suspicious email reporting system with automated machine learning to help identify and address phishing attacks.
- Maintained an industry standard phish-prone percentage through regular testing.
- Performed both an internal and external cybersecurity audit to create a yearly roadmap, remediating any gaps in ADCNR data protection and privacy.
- Increased bandwidth for external office locations to facilitate cloud storage and communication.
- Participated in tabletop exercises with Alabama OIT, Department of Homeland Security, Alabama Emergency Management Agency, and FBI.
- Completed server infrastructure upgrades to launch new ADCNR development framework.
- Conducted quarterly IT webinars to communicate upcoming changes and initiatives with ADCNR staff.
- Rewrote the process that pulls citation files from the Administrative Office of Courts to show the revenue that is received by the agency off the legacy mainframe and rewrote it in the new development framework.
- Rewrote the process that builds travel reimbursement so that it does not depend on the legacy mainframe but resides solely in the client server environment.
- Designed a new SQL server GEO coding compatible database for the Geographic Information Systems (GIS) Unit and created the program that reloads the new database on a weekly basis using the heritage legacy database for the GIS Unit to use with their mapping tools.
- Created a new rest web service that performs driver license verification with the Alabama Law Enforcement Agency (ALEA) for hunting and fishing license sales. This new service was needed because ALEA implemented a new driver license system and the old webservice was no longer viable. Modified ADCNR website and processes to use the new web service to include DLIARS, CELSRELACS, and RELACS.
- Rewrote the hunts web service used for hunts that involve a registration fee.
- Upgraded the license sales calls during the sale process from web service to an API. Added saltwater privileges to be required for reef fish endorsement privileges purchase.
- Rewrote both applications for the Boat Ramps and Boat Ramps admin websites in the new development framework.
- Expanded COORS scope for Department Accounting to see various division accounting information. Added the State Parks Division to COORS with park specific statistics. Allowed daily leave types of entry for specific days of extended leave. Allowed the Marine Resources Division (MRD) to report on external ADCNR vessels.
- Created a voting website for the Personnel Unit to allow employees to vote on their favorite costume for its Halloween contest.

- Rewrote the tracing piece of the admin Game Breeders website in the new development framework and provided training on how to use it.
- Upgraded processes within the current Heritage website to ensure that the site continues to run until we are able to do a full rewrite. It now runs faster and more smoothly for the employees when they are doing table maintenance. Fields were changed on the collection permits for greater accuracy when recording methods of collection.
- Modified the Hunts website to allow the hunt admin to copy a created hunt, send emails to auto declined hunters and alternates; added a hunt cancelled field; and added a training grid to include sandhill crane training to the EELS website.
- Created an Oyster Management website for the MRD that allows employees to issue tags and track the oyster harvest.
- Created a website for the Personnel Unit to maintain a client-servicer based employee file. It also allows them to manage and approve training records for agency employees. Included is a training coordinator section that allows trainers to request training for their employees.
- Updated the RELACS website. The deer enclosure privilege allows a license to be sold for next license year. Created a privilege demographic report for the R3 (Recruit, Retain and Reactivate) section. Added resident proof license validation to be used for DLIARS incidents for Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries (WFF) Division investigations.
- Updated Game Check system to include the following: Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) emergency regulation information; reporting harvests in CWD zones in specific counties via website, mobile app, and call center; season maintenance of counties within the CWD zones; added ability to report doe with points; added harvest method to deer and turkey; changed turkey bag limit on emailed harvest records; added harvest method compare report. The confirmation code length in the Outdoor AL mobile app was also reduced.
- Deployed and removed R3 days, requests, approval, and reports for WFF within the CORES system.
- Updated Snapper Check API to include datetime entered on mobile app.
- Updated hunter education website. Instructors can now print their own instructor card through the hunter education admin site. Added NRA as a vendor for online hunter education course. Created unique licensed hunters report for WFF.
- Created reports based on ADCNR's Deer Club website limited to the user's managed clubs.
- Updated Fishing Tournaments website to retain a portion for tournament data for multiple entries with the same base information.
- Finished moving the legacy pieces of the development framework from WebForms into MVC and incorporated the data tables used by ADCNR into the framework as well. Re-

designed the shared MVC website layout and MasterPage to incorporate Bootstrap.

- Updated standard operating procedure documentation to include an instructional document for developers on how to create rest web services project, MVC website, and MVC menu component in the development framework.
- Updated standard support procedure documentation to include several instructional documents on how to support various applications and business processes to include, but not limited to, active directory, data extracts, game breeders, heritage, hunts, ivory, lands, and licensing.

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## LEGAL SECTION

The Legal Section provides legal counsel and advice to the Commissioner, Deputy Commissioner, division directors, law enforcement personnel, and other employees of the Department.

The Legal Section also performs work relating to the acquisition of real estate for the Department, including procuring title evidence (title insurance, title opinion, title research), preparing deeds, issuing Attorney General Title Opinions, closing acquisitions, recording deeds, and obtaining the final title policies/opinions, tax assessments, and payment of taxes due.

The section handles departmental contracts and legal instruments of all types including, but not limited to, oil and gas leases, real estate leases, personal-service agreements, construction contracts, engineering contracts, easements, lease purchase agreements, State Parks concession contracts, and other documents as requested.

The section corresponds with, meets, and advises members of the Governor's Office, the Alabama Legislature, and fellow state attorneys on matters of legal, legislative, or regulatory interest related to the Department.

The section drafts, reviews, and monitors legislation affecting the Department. It also drafts rules and regulations pursuant to the Alabama Administrative Procedures Act.

Litigation against the Department and its employees, as well as litigation initiated by the Department, is also managed by the Legal Section. This includes cases and appeals filed in state and federal courts, as well as those before state agencies and boards. The representation provided by the Legal Section includes all facets of conflict resolution and litigation, preparation of pleadings and briefs, and oral arguments.

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## PERSONNEL AND PAYROLL

The Personnel and Payroll Section provides personnel-related support services to the Commissioner's office, division directors, section chiefs, and each employee of the Department. The section serves as liaison to the State Personnel Department for ADCNR's personnel actions and activities.

The section is responsible for processing all payrolls as well as maintaining all employee files and payroll records. The section supports the advancement of ADCNR's employees in various ways, including facilitating training opportunities and assisting with the administration of benefits. Contact the Personnel Office at (334) 242-3501.

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## ENGINEERING SECTION

The Engineering Section provides professional planning and programming, engineering, architectural, landscape architecture, surveying, cartographic, and related administrative services to the Department's divisions. The section's facilities are in Montgomery.

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## PROPERTY INVENTORY

The Property Inventory Section is responsible for tracking all new assets acquired by the department as well as the disposal of all assets once they have reached their end of service. This includes assuring that all new property is barcoded and entered into the State Inventory Database as well as tracked throughout its lifetime within the department.

The Property Inventory Section is also responsible for coordinating and implementing the Department's yearly internal inventory of property as well as the bi-annual audit by the State Auditor's office.

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## DEEPWATER HORIZON OIL SPILL RESTORATION

The Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill Restoration Section (DWHRS) coordinates administrative and technical aspects of restoration in coastal Alabama associated with the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill.

Specific activities include participating in Natural Resource Damage Assessment (NRDA) Trustee Council meetings, participating in Trustee Implementation Groups, conducting public meetings

related to NRDA activities, soliciting public input regarding potential restoration ideas, assisting with development of draft restoration plans and implementation of early restoration projects, and representing the interests of the NRDA trustees and the Governor's office.

The DWHRS assists the Commissioner related to his service as the Governor's designee to the Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council, established pursuant to the Resources and Ecosystems Sustainability, Tourist Opportunities, and Revived Economies of the Gulf Coast States Act of 2012 (RESTORE Act), which directs 80% of Clean Water Act civil penalties resulting from the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill for restoration projects within the five Gulf states.

The DWHRS also provides administrative support to the Alabama Gulf Coast Recovery Council, which was established by the federal RESTORE Act to oversee certain funds allocated directly to the State of Alabama.

In addition, the DWHRS staff assists the Commissioner and coordinates with the Governor's office in relation to efforts by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) to distribute grant proceeds for coastal restoration from the Gulf Environmental Benefit Fund (GEBF). This fund resulted from two plea agreements entered in early 2013 resolving the criminal cases against BP and Transocean arising from the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill.

### Significant accomplishments in FY 2021-2022

- Implemented NRDA Restoration Plan III containing seven projects valued at more than \$23 million
- Acquired a 2,684-acre parcel in the Perdido Watershed to place in state conservation management
- Coordinated an amendment to the State Expenditure Plan (SEP) adding more than \$37 million to Spill Impact Component projects
- Worked with the U.S. Department of Treasury to amend 11 federal awards adding more than \$43 million to Direct Component projects
- Hosted a Governor's Restoration Summit and published the "State of Alabama Deepwater Horizon Restoration Progress Report 2022"
- Implemented \$2.1 million Commitment and Planning Support grant from the Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council (RESTORE-Federal Council) to support the state's efforts in collaborative planning for Gulf-wide restoration efforts
- Continued support, as administrator, for the Alabama Gulf Coast Recovery Council implementing Alabama's Multiyear Implementation Plan (MIP) and SEP as required under the RESTORE Act. The two plans describe more than 40 projects valued at more than \$390 million.

- An overview of restoration projects benefiting the State of Alabama, organized by funding stream, is provided below. Additional project details are available at [www.outdooralabama.com/alabama-coastal-restoration-program/alabama-coastal-restoration-about-us](http://www.outdooralabama.com/alabama-coastal-restoration-program/alabama-coastal-restoration-about-us).

### **NRDA Early Restoration Projects**

- Marsh Island Restoration Project (Portersville Bay) - \$11,300,000
- Dune Restoration Project (Gulf Shores and Orange Beach) - \$1,500,000
- Nesting Sea Turtles Habitat Improvement Project - \$345,000
- Avian Habitat Enhancement Project - \$279,000 (Complete)
- Gulf State Park Enhancement Project - \$85,500,000
- Alabama Oyster Cultch Restoration - \$3,400,000
- Alabama Swift Tract Living Shoreline Project - \$5,000,080
- Point aux Pins Living Shoreline Project - \$2,300,000
- Osprey Restoration in Coastal Alabama Project - \$62,580
- Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge Trail Enhancement - \$545,110

### **NRDA Restoration Plan I Projects**

- Fort Morgan Pier Rehabilitation Project - \$3,075,000 (Complete)
- Laguna Cove Little Lagoon Natural Resource Protection Project - \$4,400,000
- Bayfront Park Restoration and Improvements Project - \$1,000,000 (Engineering and Design Complete)
- Dauphin Island Ecotourism and Environment Education Area - \$4,000,000
- Mid-Island Parks and Public Beach Improvements Project - \$1,900,000

### **NRDA Restoration Plan II Projects**

- Magnolia River Land Acquisition (Holmes Tract) - \$4,144,162 (Complete)
- Weeks Bay Land Acquisition (East Gateway Tract) - \$4,247,000 (Complete)
- Weeks Bay Land Acquisition (Lloyd Tract) - \$3,606,900
- Lower Perdido Islands Restoration, Phase I - \$994,523
- Southwestern Coffee Island Habitat Restoration Project, Phase I - \$825,225

- Little Lagoon Living Shorelines - \$210,999
- Restoring the Night Sky - \$399,658
- Toulmins Spring Branch Engineering and Design - \$479,090
- Fowl River Nutrient Reduction - \$1,000,000
- Weeks Bay Nutrient Reduction - \$2,000,000
- Coastal Alabama Sea Turtle (CAST) Conservation Program - \$935,061
- CAST Triage - \$622,915
- CAST Habitat Usage and Population Dynamics - \$1,631,697
- CAST Protection: Enhancement and Education - \$906,874
- Enhancing Capacity for the Alabama Marine Mammal Stranding Network - \$2,432,389
- Alabama Estuarine Bottlenose Dolphin Protection: Enhancement and Education - \$686,374
- Assessment of Alabama Estuarine Bottlenose Dolphin Populations and Health - \$3,059,229
- Colonial Nesting Wading Bird Tracking and Habitat Use Assessment - \$1,547,500
- Oyster Cultch Relief and Reef Configuration - \$480,262
- Side-scan Mapping of Mobile Bay Relic Oyster Reefs - \$104,229
- Oyster Hatchery at Claude Petet Mariculture Center - \$2,949,472
- Oyster Grow Out Restoration Reef Placement - \$962,370

### **NRDA Restoration Plan III Projects**

- Perdido River Land Acquisition (Molpus Tract) - \$4,792,540 (Withdrawn)
- Bayfront Park Restoration and Improvement, Phases IIa and IIb - \$4,683,304
- Gulf State Park Pier Renovation - \$2,447,021
- Perdido Beach Public Access Coastal Protection - \$383,300
- Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge Enhancement (Mobile Street Boardwalk) - \$1,189,899
- Stewardship of Coastal Alabama Beach Nesting Bird Habitat - \$2,067,381
- Dauphin Island West End Acquisition - \$7,938,770 (Complete)

## **NRDA Regionwide Trustee Implementation Group Restoration Plan I Projects**

- Restore and Enhance Sea Turtle Nest Productivity on Gulf of Mexico Beaches - \$9,020,000 (\$1,000,000 allocated to Alabama)
- Regionwide Enhancements to the Sea Turtle Stranding and Salvage Network and Enhanced Rehabilitation - \$5,400,000 (\$500,000 allocated to Alabama)
- Regionwide Bird Nesting and Foraging Area Stewardship - \$8,043,000 (\$800,000 allocated to Alabama)
- Reducing Marine Debris Impacts to Birds Region-wide Habitat Restoration and Sea Turtles Gulf-wide - \$3,575,000 (\$705,000 allocated to Alabama)
- Conservation and Enhancement of Nesting and Foraging Habitat for Birds - \$21,000,000 (\$6,500,000 allocated to Alabama for Pilot Town Acquisition and Restoration) (Complete)
- Improving Resilience for Oysters by linking Brood Reefs and Sink Reefs - \$35,819,974 (\$7,123,995 allocated to Alabama)
- Reducing Injury and Mortality of Bottlenose Dolphins from Hook and Line Fishing Gear by Utilizing Fishery Surveys, Social Science, and Collaborative Problem Solving: Alabama Component - \$340,000
- Pilot Implementation of AIS in the GOM Inshore Shrimp Fishery to Better Understand Fishing Effort to Inform Efforts

to Reduce Sea Turtle Bycatch: Alabama Component - \$446,225

- Reducing Sea Turtle Bycatch at Recreational Fishing Sites: Alabama Component - \$729,872

## **NFWF-GEBF Projects**

- Restoration and Enhancement of Oyster Reefs - \$3,750,000 (Complete)
- D'Olive Watershed Restoration - \$12,700,000 (Complete)
- Fowl River Watershed Restoration - \$3,300,000 (Complete)
- Alabama Barrier Island Restoration Assessment - \$4,400,000 (Complete)
- Alabama Marine Mammal Conservation and Recovery Program - \$1,900,000 (Complete)
- Coastal Habitat Restoration Planning Initiative - \$4,200,000
- Enhanced Fisheries Monitoring in Alabama's Marine Waters - \$1,800,000 (Complete)
- Multifaceted Fisheries and Ecosystem Monitoring in Alabama's Marine Waters - \$2,200,000
- Grand Bay Acquisition - \$5,770,000 (Complete)
- Mobile Bay Shore Habitat Conservation and Acquisition Initiative, Phase I - \$286,000



- Mobile County Conservation Acquisition - \$4,260,000 (Complete)
  - Alabama Artificial Reef and Habitat Enhancement - \$12,500,000
  - Alabama Coastal Bird Stewardship Program - \$1,460,000 (Complete)
  - Lightning Point Acquisition and Restoration Project, Phase I - \$5,900,000
  - Dauphin Island Conservation Acquisition - \$3,560,000
  - Fowl River Spits Restoration, Phase I - \$1,100,000 (Complete)
  - Bon Secour/Oyster Bay Acquisition (Gulf Shores) - \$12,500,000
  - Gulf Highlands Acquisition (Gulf Shores) - \$36,000,000 (Complete)
  - Enhanced Fisheries Monitoring in Alabama's Marine Waters, Phase III - \$4,400,000
  - Little Dauphin Island Restoration Assessment - \$1,480,000
  - Salt Aire Shoreline Restoration - \$12,700,000
  - Mobile Bay Shore Habitat Conservation and Acquisition, Phase II - \$6,900,000
  - Dauphin Island Bird Habitat Acquisition and Enhancement Program - \$4,500,000
  - Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge Acquisition - \$5,900,000 (Complete)
  - Enhanced Fisheries Monitoring in Alabama's Marine Waters, Phase IV - \$2,800,000
  - Alabama Artificial Reef and Habitat Enhancement, Phase II - \$22,499,000
  - Lightning Point Acquisition and Restoration Project, Phase II - \$16,578,000
  - Restoration of the North Side of Dauphin Island, Phase I - \$329,000
  - Deer River Shoreline Stabilization, Phase I - \$750,000
  - Bon Secour River Headwater Restoration, Phase I - \$1,528,000 (Complete)
  - Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge Acquisition (Three Rivers), Phase II - \$4,423,000 (Complete)
  - Dauphin Island Causeway Shoreline Restoration Engineering and Design - \$250,000
  - Lower Halls Mill Creek Protection - \$2,687,000
  - Blackwater River South Tract Acquisition - \$5,212,000 (Complete)
  - Lower Fish River Watershed Restoration - \$6,554,000
  - Dauphin Island Causeway Shoreline and Habitat Restoration, Phase II - \$22,631,385
  - Dauphin Island East End Beach and Dune Restoration, Phase I - \$1,400,000
  - Bon Secour River Headwater Restoration, Phase II - \$5,100,000
  - Wolf Creek Headwaters Restoration, Phase I - \$500,000
  - Deer River Shoreline Stabilization, Phase II - \$22,855,000
  - Fowl River Spits Restoration, Phase II - \$19,798,000
  - Restoration of the North Side of Dauphin Island, Phase II (Graveline Bay Marsh) - \$6,437,000
  - Dauphin Island Beach Nourishment Engineering and Design - \$1,143,000
- RESTORE - Direct Component Projects (Bucket 1)**
- Alabama State Port Authority RO-RO Terminal - \$29,935,331 (Complete)
  - Baldwin Beach Express Interstate 10 to Interstate 65 Exit, Right-of-Way Acquisition - \$11,678,481
  - Dauphin Island Aloe Bay Harbour Town - \$17,412,014
  - Historic Africatown Welcome Center - \$6,375,969
  - Redevelop City Docks (City of Bayou La Batre) - \$30,683,840
  - Mount Vernon Water Treatment Plant - \$1,545,000
  - Mobile Greenway Initiative - \$14,284,128
  - Northwest Satsuma Water and Sewer Project - \$3,938,520
  - Innovating St. Louis Street, Mobile's Technology Corridor - \$11,501,990
  - Bayou La Batre Water Distribution System Upgrades - \$7,990,180
  - Mobile County Blueway Trail Development - \$14,264,355
  - Gulf Shores Gulf Coast Center for Ecotourism and Sustainability - \$13,666,271
  - Baldwin County ALDOT Capacity Improvements - \$69,649,000
  - Fairhope Working Waterfront and Greenspace Restoration - \$6,386,000
  - Planning Grant for Amended MIP - \$300,000

## **RESTORE - Federal Council FPL 1 Projects (Bucket 2)**

- Coastal Alabama Comprehensive Watershed Planning Project - \$4,342,500
- Alabama Living Shoreline Restoration Program, Categories 1 and 2 - \$6,250,000
- Comprehensive Living Shoreline Monitoring Program, Categories 1 and 2 - \$4,000,000
- Submerged Aquatic Vegetation Restoration and Monitoring Program - \$875,000
- Marsh Restoration in Fish River, Weeks Bay, Oyster Bay, Meadows Tract, Categories 1 and 2 - \$3,158,043
- Enhancing Opportunities for Beneficial Use of Dredged Sediments - \$3,000,000

## **RESTORE - Federal Council FPL 2 Projects (Bucket 2)**

- Alabama Commitment and Planning Support Grant - \$2,100,000

## **RESTORE - Federal Council FPL 3a (Bucket 2)**

- Perdido River Land Conservation and Habitat Enhancements - \$26,800,000

## **RESTORE - Federal Council FPL 3b Proposed Projects (Bucket 2)**

- Coastal Alabama Regional Water Quality Program - \$35,000,000
- Enhancing Hydrologic Connectivity in Justins Bay (Mobile Bay) - \$1,000,000
- Developing Ecological Flow Decision-Support for Mobile River and Perdido River Basins - \$3,400,000
- Perdido Watershed Water Quality Improvements and Restoration Assessment Program - \$1,500,000
- Enhancing Gulf Waters Through Forested Watershed Restoration - \$9,000,000
- Gulf Coast Conservation Reserve Program - \$1,000,000

## **RESTORE - Spill Impact Component Proposed Projects (Bucket 3)**

- Characterization and Delineation of Significant Sand Resource Areas Essential for Beach Restoration, Offshore Alabama - \$975,170
- Alabama Gulf Seafood Marketing Program - \$2,972,699

- Development of a Regional Strategic Plan for the Coastal Alabama Region - \$666,375
- Replacement of Substandard Facilities at the ADEM Coastal Office and Mobile Field Office - \$8,088,599
- Extension of Effluent Force Main from Bayou La Batre Wastewater Treatment Facility - \$19,092,770
- Three Mile Creek Watershed Restoration - \$15,070,822
- Aloe Bay/Mississippi Sound Water Quality Enhancement Project - \$19,860,000
- Dirt Road Paving Program (Sediment Reduction) - \$10,395,914
- Bayou La Batre Collection System/Lift Station Upgrades - \$14,701,150
- Mobile Area Storm Water Mapping and Resiliency Planning - \$3,600,000
- Perch Creek Area Sanitary Sewer Trunk Line Cured In-Place Pipe - \$3,665,048
- Implementing Storm Water Management Improvements for Toulmin Springs Branch and Gum Tree Branch - \$1,222,744
- One Mobile: Reconnecting People, Work, and Play Through Complete Streets - \$1,287,500
- City of Chickasaw Sewer Rehabilitation Project - \$2,649,000
- Longevity, Stability, and Water Quality Improvements (Bon Secour) - \$665,908
- Orange Beach North Sewer Force Main Upgrade - \$6,099,389
- Fairhope Sewer Upgrade, Phase I - \$13,515,000
- Eastern Shore Sanitary Sewer Overflows Prevention Plan (Fairhope) - \$1,030,000
- Expansion of the Orange Beach Wildlife Rehabilitation and Education Program - \$722,255
- Environmental Restoration of Cotton Bayou and Terry Cove - \$515,000
- Auburn University Gulf Coast Environment Research Station - \$11,295,000
- Lillian Park Beach Habitat and Shoreline Protection - \$2,095,385
- Fairhope Area Community-Based Comprehensive Land Use Plan - \$714,500
- Canal Road Improvements East of SR161 - \$6,067,878
- Little Lagoon Restoration Project - \$6,175,557
- Fort Morgan Parkway Trail Extension - \$7,591,608
- Meaher State Park Improvements - \$4,853,500
- Alabama Point Seawall Repair - \$2,562,640
- Planning Grant to Amend SEP - \$300,000



# MARINE RESOURCES DIVISION



The mission of the **Marine Resources Division (MRD)** is to manage the state's marine fishery resources through research, enforcement, and education for the maximum benefit of the natural resources and the citizens of Alabama. MRD consists of the Biological (Fisheries), Enforcement, and Administrative sections.

**The Fisheries Section** makes recommendations regarding fishery-related matters to MRD managers. To meet this responsibility, section staff conduct varied monitoring programs to gather data for many species of fish and invertebrates. These programs are divided into fishery-dependent and fishery-independent programs. Fishery-dependent data is collected from commercial sources such as vessel or dealer reports as well as recreational sources such as individual anglers and party or charter boats. Fishery-independent data is collected by scientists conducting long-term resource monitoring projects. Section staff also manage programs focused on oyster restoration, inshore and offshore artificial reef programs, and the mariculture

program located at the Claude Petet Mariculture Center. The section worked with the public as well as state and federal agencies along the Gulf of Mexico to collect data through various projects to determine the status of state and federal marine resources. Each year, the Fisheries and Enforcement sections partner to participate in public outreach programs.

**The Enforcement Section** is responsible for patrolling Alabama's shorelines, coastal waters, and adjacent federal waters and enforcing state and federal laws and regulations relating to the conservation and protection of marine resources. Officers also enforce boating safety as well as hunting and freshwater fishing laws and regulations. The section coordinates

extensively with other state and federal agencies in cooperative enforcement operations, investigations, training, public safety, search and rescue, and other natural resource issues. In FY 2021-2022, the Enforcement Section employed 19 Conservation Enforcement Officers.

**The Administrative Section** is responsible for accounting, billing, payroll, license sales, and public inquiries. MRD is housed at two facilities, one on Dauphin Island and the other in Gulf Shores. In FY 2021-2022, the two facilities supported 69 full-time employees and seven temporary positions. There were 78 full-time, one part-time, and 12 seasonal employees budgeted during the year.

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## Accomplishments and Activities FISHERIES SECTION

Staff monitored oyster densities on Alabama's public oyster reefs to assist in the development of the 2021-2022 oyster season. They collected and processed 187 SCUBA quadrat samples. Samples were collected from reefs that were planted with cultch between 2013 through 2016 and from non-planted reefs for comparison. Low numbers of legal-sized oysters were observed on many reefs; however, the overall numbers of legal-sized oysters increased slightly from the previous year's quadrat survey. The numbers of young and juvenile oysters were lower in the 2020-2021 survey than in the current survey. The higher spat and sublegal oyster densities were probably a result of favorable water conditions during the summer and fall of 2021.

Staff continued monitoring several sites in Mobile Bay to compare oyster larvae settlement and growth using oyster reef materials of varying heights and configurations. Although the results showed low survival rates for oysters on the mounds from the top to the bottom, they found that surrounding bottoms had no oysters. Given the presence of some oysters on the lower portion of the mounds, the structures appeared to be facilitating mixing of waters to help alleviate poor oxygen conditions.

Staff continued to address permitting issues related to construction of a new oyster hatchery and grow-out facility. Once completed, the hatchery will produce an estimated 65 million



larvae. The oysters produced in the grow-out facility will be distributed to various locations in Mobile Bay and Mississippi Sound to bolster natural populations, which can be negatively affected by periods of drought, floods, and hurricanes.

Staff collected biological samples (age structures, length, sex, and weight) from 275 fish, representing 12 saltwater species. This data is helpful to fishery managers because it conveys the age of fish being harvested by anglers in Alabama. Knowing the age distributions of the fish anglers keep assists section staff with determining appropriate regulations for each species.

Fisheries Section staff participated in the NOAA Fisheries Access Point Angler Intercept Survey (APAIS) during FY 2021-2022. This survey gathers catch information directly from recreational saltwater anglers. That information is then combined with information from NOAA Fisheries to determine recreational catch estimates and stock assessments for many of Alabama's finfish. Staff surveyed 2,800 anglers at various marinas, public boat ramps, and shore sites during FY 2021-2022 – a decrease of approximately 2,816 surveys compared to the previous year. The decrease is due to poor weather conditions and increased season lengths, which decreases angler pressure on fish.

The Fisheries Section is currently participating in an at-sea observer program funded by the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission (GSMFC) for the next four years. This program was implemented on June 1, 2022. The program consists of scheduling an at-sea observer to ride on for-hire vessel trips where marine reef fish species will be targeted to collect release conditions and discard methods of reef fish caught and released during the trip. Priority reef fish species will also be tagged and released when time allows. These priority species include, but are not limited to, red snapper, gag, red grouper, gray triggerfish, and greater amberjack. From June 1 through September 30, 2022, 49 observer trips were successfully completed. During 2022, 846 reef fish were tagged and eight have been recaptured and reported to MRD.

During FY 2021-2022, MRD managed Alabama's portion of the Gulf-wide private recreational angler red snapper quota. Harvests were monitored through Alabama's mandatory Snapper Check reporting program to ensure compliance with the 1.12-million-pound quota provided Alabama in 2022. Snapper Check allows calculation of cumulative harvest within several days of being reported, which allows managers to monitor

the quota very closely and reduces the risk the quota will be exceeded. The red snapper season for private vessel anglers in FY 2021-2022 was the fifth calendar year of an alternative management system whereby each state along the Gulf of Mexico used data collection systems to monitor harvests against their respective quotas allocated by NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service. The May to September period ended with the highest number of red snapper fishing days (127) provided to Alabama's recreational anglers since 2007. The additional access is primarily the result of improving science that has shown a larger population of red snapper and the ability to monitor daily harvests via Snapper Check to document when harvests are reduced or non-existent during poor weather days, including tropical weather systems.

### **The Claude Peteet Mariculture Center (CPMC)**

The CPMC in Gulf Shores continued its fish stocking program. Three species of fish were raised at CPMC in FY 2021-2022: Florida pompano, southern flounder, and spotted seatrout. Florida pompano releases totaled 5,300 fish. The spawning of southern flounder at CPMC resulted in 118,954 fish (sized 1-2 inches) being released in local waters during spring 2022. Spotted seatrout were spawned and 215,000 fish were reared and released. Production of Florida pompano was down due to advanced aged of brood fish. However, new brood fish were collected in the spring of 2022.

Staff used gillnets, otter trawls, and seines to gather information about the abundance and age of a variety of recreationally and commercially important marine species. Staff completed 260 field days with the sampling gear in Mobile and Perdido bays and Mississippi Sound. Gillnet sets were deployed on 100 days, and 160 days were used for seine and otter trawl sampling activities. This sampling provided helpful data for establishing population trends-information for a variety of species, including those that are key indicators of ecosystem health as well as those that are harvested commercially or recreationally. These sampling activities began in 1981. This data represents one of the oldest continuous datasets of its kind on the Gulf of Mexico.

A multi-year grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) supported multiple projects managed by Fisheries staff. These projects included sampling of reef fish associated

with artificial and natural reefs, open water bottoms with hook and line gears, and mapping of water bottoms with side-scan sonar to monitor habitat. These programs provided valuable data MRD staff use to manage Alabama's nearshore and off-shore marine fisheries.

Staff continued artificial reefing activities to enhance the availability and quality of reef fish habitat and provide increased recreational/commercial fishing opportunities. During FY 2021-2022, 2,115 high-relief reef modules were deployed to create new reef sites and 1,203 low-relief juvenile shelters enhanced existing reef habitat within the nearshore and offshore artificial reef zones. Reef GPS coordinates to those sites were published at [www.outdooralabama.com](http://www.outdooralabama.com) in January 2023. Staff also inspected and permitted 531 reef structures proposed by private reef builders. Each structure was evaluated to ensure compliance with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission's Guidelines for Marine Artificial Reef Materials, 2nd Edition.

In cooperation with the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission and the other four Gulf states, staff completed a study to improve the quality and accuracy of commercial landings information. The group collected and analyzed reef fish samples to validate, verify, and update conversions of reported gutted weights and units from seafood dealers to whole weight. The development of updated conversion factors allows commercial landings to be reported accurately for use in fisheries stock assessment and management.

MRD provided financial assistance (from Sport Fish Restoration Program funding) to the Town of Dauphin Island for parking lot, finger pier, and dredging improvements at Little Billygoat Hole boat ramp. That work was completed in September 2022. In addition, MRD provided funding to the City of Daphne for parking lot renovations and installation of a kayak launch to be completed in FY 2022-2023. Public access to fishing was maintained by repairs to the Pines boat launch and the completion of the Fort Morgan fishing pier. The re-opening of the iconic Fort Morgan fishing pier took place in FY 2021-2022. The new pier provides saltwater fishing access to many residents and visitors to the Alabama Gulf Coast and has been renamed after State Representative Steve McMillan.

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## **ENFORCEMENT SECTION**

During FY 2021-2022, MRD enforcement officers conducted 5,166 commercial angler inspections, 17,994 recreational angler inspections, 14,021 patrol hours, and 7,894 vessel boardings.

MRD officers continued to participate in joint investigations with the NOAA Office of Law Enforcement (OLE) regarding Gulf reef fish, marine mammals, sea turtle protection, and international unreported/undocumented seafood. Additionally,

staff conducted joint patrols with uniformed NOAA Enforcement Officers.

The Enforcement Section entered the 21st Joint Enforcement Agreement (JEA) with NOAA/OLE. The JEA provides equipment and funding for officers to enforce federal laws and regulations. The most recent contract included funding for patrol vehicles, outboard engines, and vessel repairs. Additionally, it provided funding for underway and dockside patrols for federal priorities such as reef fish and turtle excluder devices, as well as training for patrol officers.

The Enforcement Section continues to work on two grants funded with monies from the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill. The first grant, Coastal Alabama Sea Turtle (CAST) Protection: Enhancement and Education project, is aimed at collecting data related to sea turtle nesting and protecting those nests from human interaction. A secondary aim of the CAST grant is to help educate the public about the dangers of interfering with sea turtles during vulnerable nesting periods. To help with this, the section purchased two portable camera systems that connect to the coastal remote monitoring system. Two side-by-side utility vehicles (with trailers) were also purchased with grant funds to aid with enforcement and data collection. The second grant, Alabama Estuarine Bottlenose Dolphin Protection: Enhancement and Education, provides funding for educational materials to teach the public how to limit negative dolphin and human interactions.

The Enforcement Section continues to participate in the South Alabama Regional Search and Rescue group to provide regional search and rescue support. During FY 2021-2022, Alabama officers worked closely with officers from other states, NOAA Law Enforcement Officers, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in a variety of activities, including the investigation, apprehension, and prosecution of persons in multiple federal fisheries violations that occurred in Alabama as well as other jurisdictions.

MRD Enforcement Officers participated in several outreach and education events, including boat shows in Mobile and Orange Beach. These events provide opportunities for officers to educate the public about fishing laws and management.

## **Future Issues**

The federal management of red snapper and other reef fish continues to be a high priority in the fishing community. MRD will continue to work with the federal government and the other Gulf states to manage the shared federal species to the maximum benefit of all user groups.

The health and production of Alabama's public oyster reefs continue to be a significant concern. Several oyster projects will continue in 2023 with a priority being construction of an oyster hatchery and a larval setting facility at the CPMC. These

facilities will assist in recovery and rehabilitation efforts by producing larval oysters to stock on Alabama's reefs to supplement natural production.

In response to the 2019 flooding events that impacted the Gulf states, MRD has developed a plan to provide \$8 million dollars in disaster relief funding for commercial anglers and seafood

processors. Approval from NOAA and the Office of Management and Budget is anticipated in 2023.

MRD will continue to address infrastructure damage caused by hurricane Sally. Both the Dauphin Island and Gulf Shores offices required multiple storm-related construction projects that will continue into 2023

Marine Resources Budget FY 2022 BUDGETED ITEM	FUND 0303 (Seafood Funding)		FUND 1402 (NRDA Funding)	
	BUDGET	EXPENDITURES	BUDGET	EXPENDITURES
PERSONNEL COSTS	\$3,487,508.00	\$2,913,074.00	\$356,428.00	\$112,366.00
EMPLOYEE BENEFITS	\$1,556,544.00	\$1,300,005.00	\$168,168.00	\$52,625.00
TRAVEL- IN-STATE	\$6,000.00	\$14,198.00	\$7,500.00	\$-
TRAVEL -OUT- OF-STATE	\$21,000.00	\$4,023.00	\$4,000.00	\$-
REPAIRS AND MAINTENANCE	\$1,324,659.00	\$964,860.00	\$8,700.00	\$2,869.00
RENTALS AND LEASES	\$120,000.00	\$35,223.00	\$7,200.00	\$156.00
UTILITIES AND COMMUNICATION	\$360,000.00	\$182,396.00	\$27,154.00	\$2,293.00
PROFESSIONAL SERVICES	\$611,000.00	\$150,312.00	\$84,191.00	\$1,626.00
SUPPLIES, MATERIALS & OPERATING EXPENSES	\$613,061.00	\$429,982.00	\$125,460.00	\$7,229.00
TRANSPORTATION EQUIPMENT OPERATIONS	\$532,722.00	\$236,258.00	\$41,010.00	\$15,161.00
GRANTS AND BENEFITS	\$3,252,862.00	\$1,802,980.00	\$536,500.00	\$-
CAPITAL OUTLAY	\$8,428,558.00	\$1,603,567.00	\$49,500.00	\$-
TRANSPORTATION EQUIPMENT PURCHASES	\$334,450.00	\$85,374.00	\$2,586.00	\$-
OTHER EQUIPMENT PURCHASES	\$1,110,909.00	\$822,841.00	\$297,787.00	\$5,623.00
ADMINISTRATIVE TRANSFER	\$797,000.00	\$686,634.00		
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$22,556,273.00</b>	<b>\$11,231,727.00</b>	<b>\$1,716,184.00</b>	<b>\$199,948.00</b>





# A SALTWATER SEASON FOR THE RECORD BOOKS

Alabama's saltwater anglers have been on a record-setting pace with 11 fish entering the record books from October 2021 to October 2022, and two of those records remained on the books for only months. The only year that compares with the recent spate of record fish is 2006, when 13 records were set.

Two records being broken twice in the same year is unique over the history of saltwater fish record keeping in Alabama. The primary contributors to those records falling in such a brief period were increases in sales of both saltwater licenses and boats. More people took advantage of the fishing opportunities in Alabama. With more people on the water fishing, they had more opportunities to break state records. Many trends have helped to feed this increased interest in saltwater fishing.



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One finds anglers shifting away from more traditional species and fishing methods and exploring new territory. "Deep dropping" is the term used for anglers fishing in very deep water, approaching 1000 feet in areas that are relatively far from shore. Due to bigger boats, bigger and more efficient engines, and more sophisticated electronics, anglers can reach these far-off waters more quickly, target their species more accurately, and do it all much more safely. These new and exciting opportunities are giving Alabama a reputation as a fishing destination for both inshore and offshore species.

Additionally, social media has become a great resource for anglers, helping them to expand their fishing horizons. Forums and videos provide abundant information on topics like what equipment to use, when to go, where to go, and what bait to use. Gone are the days of going to the library or waiting on the next issue of a fishing magazine to arrive in the mail.

The State of Alabama, through ADCNR's Marine Resources Division (MRD), works diligently to enhance and increase fishing habitat both inshore and offshore, primarily through developing artificial reef zones. On the inside waters of the state — including Mobile Bay, Mississippi Sound, the Intracoastal Waterway, the Perdido system, and all the tributaries of those waters — 34 areas have been created specifically for fishing. These are marked with wooden pilings and have material such as stone, concrete, and oyster shell placed on the bottom. Offshore, Alabama has the world's largest series of permitted artificial reef zones consisting of over 1,200 square miles and more than 10,000 artificial reefs. They are built and deployed by MRD, private anglers, and fishing organizations. The reefs are made from a variety of materials including ships, Army tanks, old factory boilers, and other repurposed equipment that must be cleaned and meet very specific standards. Additionally, concrete and steel designed reef structures specifically made to create habitat for a variety of species are also deployed in the reef zones. Each reef must be inspected and approved by MRD staff prior to deployment.

Alabama anglers are familiar with one of the species that had its record broken twice last year — sheepshead. Wesley Olsen landed a huge sheepshead that weighed 14 pounds, 4 ounces, but it didn't stay on top long. Kendale Jeans reeled in a monster sheepshead that hit the scales at 16 pounds, 6.6 ounces.

Spring is prime time to catch sheepshead in Alabama. Sheepshead spawn in the nearshore waters during the early spring before scattering. Before the spawn, the fish hang around inshore structure and feed on barnacles and other crustaceans. They are often found around rock and concrete jetties and pilings as well as oil platforms, bridges, and oyster reefs.

The other twice-broken record came from a fish not seen as often, permit, a cousin of the Florida pompano in the jack family. Pompano and permit look very much alike, although pompano don't grow nearly as large, topping out at around 7 pounds. Permit that weigh 20 pounds are fairly common in south Florida. Annalise Wilson set the Alabama record in October 2021 with a permit that weighed 6 pounds, 0.54 ounces. In August 2022, Patrick Willis landed a permit that weighed 8 pounds, 2.4 ounces.

Also going into the Alabama record books was a black jack caught by William Atkins at 13 pounds, 1.6 ounces; a blackline tilefish caught by Gavin Dunnam at 1 pound, 6.4 ounces; a horse-eye jack caught by Bennie Goldman Jr. at 30 pounds, 4 ounces; a red cornetfish caught by Wayne Akin at 2 pounds, 5.4 ounces; a silvery John Dory caught by Mark Russo at 5 pounds, 0.28 ounces; and a lizardfish caught by Nelson Wingo at 1 pound, 11.2 ounces. These are all species that are caught relatively far from shore.

Additionally, Chase Mitchell's 9-pound, 2.88-ounce jolthead porgy set a new record last year. The porgy is a fish that was not listed in Alabama before last year when the record was established.

Alabama has very specific rules for establishing and breaking records. The rules are modeled on those of the International Game Fishing Association (IGFA). The IGFA is the organization that certifies an angler's application for a world record. Alabama's rules ensure state records are also eligible for world record consideration.

The current list of Alabama's record saltwater fish, rules, and a record fish application are available on the Department's website at [www.outdooralabama.com/saltwater-fishing/current-saltwater-state-records](http://www.outdooralabama.com/saltwater-fishing/current-saltwater-state-records).

Thanks to the State's wise stewardship and conservation efforts, the fishing is good in Alabama. ■

# STATE LANDS DIVISION



The **State Lands Division (SLD)** manages undeveloped, state-owned trust lands that are specific as to their identity as well as to the income beneficiary. The land management program includes Sixteenth Section and Indemnity School Lands of approximately 30,000 acres; approximately 7,000 acres of Department of Mental Health trust lands; Muscle Shoals Grant Lands of approximately 8,000 acres; and other state agency lands, including submerged lands (inland and coastal), of approximately 600,000 acres. Resource uses include oil and gas exploration and development, timber harvesting, farming, coal mining, hunting leases, and commercial uses. SLD continues its efforts to identify additional means of revenue generation through management of these trust lands.

The Forever Wild Land Trust program is administered by SLD at the direction of that program's Board of Trustees. Division personnel provide administrative support including coordination of the assessment and appraisal process, land acquisition transactions, budget preparation, and annual reporting to the Governor and Legislature. In addition to these administrative services, SLD manages many of Forever Wild's 285,000 acres, as well as complementary tracts owned by SLD.

SLD conducts sales and leases of excess state-owned lands pursuant to the State Land Sales and Leasing Act. This law establishes a procedure aimed at ensuring the state receives full fair market value for lands that state agencies sell or lease and that the process is open, competitive, and subject to public scrutiny.

SLD maintains the state Land Resource Information Center (LRIC), which is a database of lands owned by the State of Alabama and its departments, agencies, and institutions. The database offers search capabilities, providing members of the public the ability to readily access information about state-owned lands. The LRIC database can be found by following the "state properties" and then "state land" links on the Open Alabama.gov website. The LRIC currently contains more than 6,500 land records.

Animal and plant species and areas of biological significance that make up the rich natural diversity of our state are identified and inventoried as part of the Alabama Natural Heritage Data-

base maintained by SLD. This effort, which includes more than 5.2 million records, provides important biological information to conservation organizations, developers, governmental agencies, and the public. It also complements SLD's role in evaluating land acquisition nominations submitted to Forever Wild and implementing a multiple-use management strategy designed to maximize public access to Forever Wild tracts.

SLD operates three facilities dedicated to conservation and land stewardship educational programs and a fourth dedicated to sporting dog field trials, habitat restoration, and hunting programs for youth and individuals with physical disabilities. Located in Spanish Fort, the 5 Rivers Delta Resource Center serves as a gateway to outdoor recreation, conservation education, and land stewardship in the Mobile-Tensaw River Delta. The Weeks Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve (NERR), located in Fairhope on Weeks Bay – an estuary of national significance, conducts education and outreach, research, coastal training programs, and stewardship activities related to the estuary and its watershed. The Wehle Land Conservation Center is located in Midway (Bullock County) and consists of the Robert G. Wehle Nature Center and the Elhew Field Station, both funded in part through the Robert G. Wehle Charitable Trust. Located in Alabama's Black Belt region, the M. Barnett Lawley Forever Wild Field Trial Area is south of Greensboro in Hale County.

SLD oversees the administration of Alabama's Coastal Area Management Program (ACAMP), which was approved by the

National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) in 1979 as part of its national Coastal Zone Management Program. ACAMP's purpose is to promote beneficial management of the lands and waters located in Alabama's coastal area through a comprehensive and cooperative program designed to preserve, enhance, and develop these valuable resources for the benefit of present and future generations. SLD works in cooperation with the Alabama Department of Environmental Management (ADEM) to implement ACAMP and receives federal Coastal Zone Management Program grant funding from NOAA to support ACAMP and other federal coastal resource programs. SLD's Coastal Zone Management activities, as well as research activities and educational programs at the Weeks Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve, complement the Division's responsibilities for managing submerged lands, including promoting public trust resource awareness and the understanding of riparian/littoral area development and associated impacts on private property and public use of Alabama's tidal waters.

SLD administers a regulatory program that manages impacts and improvements to public tidal submerged lands in conjunction with the Alabama Department of Environmental Management (ADEM) and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and their respective jurisdictions on state and federal waters. The SLD regulations are designed to balance the rights of riparian prop-

erty owners with the public use of those tidal submerged lands for navigation as well as fishing and other recreational uses.

SLD staff supports the ADCNR Commissioner and Governor Kay Ivey in the administration of grants and programs funded by the Gulf of Mexico Energy Security Act (GOMESA). This act directs the U.S. Department of Interior to distribute a portion of revenues generated from offshore oil and gas leases in federal waters of the Gulf of Mexico for purposes such as natural resource restoration, coastal protection, implementation of conservation plans, and other efforts to mitigate impacts of Outer Continental Shelf activities. SLD staff conducts an annual solicitation for project proposals, executes grant awards for projects approved by Governor Ivey, and monitors GOMESA project implementation and compliance.

SLD manages its responsibilities through a Land Management/Administrative Section, which includes Land Stewardship/Enforcement, Asset Management, Recreational Programs, and the Natural Heritage Program, as well as its Coastal Section, which oversees Coastal Zone Management activities and submerged land regulations, Weeks Bay Reserve, and the 5 Rivers Delta Resource Center. At the end of FY 2021-2022, SLD employed 57 employees, including part-time or seasonal employees, in support of its programs.



**EXAMPLES OF VARIOUS PROGRAM AND FACILITY ACCOMPLISHMENTS DURING THIS PAST FISCAL YEAR:**

**ASSET MANAGEMENT ACCOMPLISHMENTS**

- Generated approximately \$73.6 million in revenue for distribution to state agency/entity beneficiaries including, but not limited to, the Alabama Trust Fund (\$68.0 million), Department of Education (\$1.87 million), Alabama Historical Commission (\$848,608), State of Alabama General Fund (\$497,348), and Department of Corrections (\$337,256)
- Assisted state agencies with revenue generation on trust lands through initiation of leases and sale of excess property pursuant to the Land Sales and Leasing Act's appraisal and bid process
- Administered revenue-generating activities on state-owned lands, including timber sales and issuance of hunting leases, shellfish aquaculture easements, riparian easements, river-crossing permits, submerged/upland pipeline rights of ways, dredge permits, farming/hay leases, oil and gas leases, and coal leases
- Completed reforestation activities on various tracts to provide potential future revenue streams for state beneficiaries, including the Department of Mental Health and the State Lands Division
- Continued a statewide leasing process associated with the 2020-2025 Hunting Lease Auction where a total of 145 tracts were offered for bid to generate revenue. As part of that program, SLD offered 15 tracts of state-owned land in three counties for multi-year hunting leases. The 130 current leases are expected to generate more than \$303,000 annually for state agency beneficiaries.

**FOREVER WILD LAND TRUST ADMINISTRATION ACTIVITIES**

- Administered and fully closed acquisition of seven tracts across four counties adding a total of 3,660 acres to the program. These acquisitions leveraged approximately \$600,000 in federal grant funds as well as a \$100,000 landowner value donation. The closed program acquisitions included the following:
  - o Coldwater Mountain-Carroll Addition (43 acres, Calhoun County)
  - o D'Olive Bay Addition (29 acres, Baldwin County). Forever Wild acquisition cost was supported by \$120,640 of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) national coastal wetland grant funds.
  - o Oak Mountain State Park-Belcher Lake Addition (1,611 acres, Shelby County)

- o Red Hills-Parris Trust Addition (305 acres, Monroe County)
- o Styx River Wetlands (approximately 140 acres, Baldwin County). Forever Wild acquisition cost was supported by \$479,064 of USFWS national coastal wetland grant funds and \$100,000 landowner value donation.
- o Turkey Creek Nature Preserve-Parker Addition (173 acres, Jefferson County)
- o Thigpen Hill Option A Phase II (2,290 acres, Butler County)
- Awarded \$491,640 in federal grants and submitted new grant applications seeking more than \$99,200 in nongovernment grant funding
- Provided administrative support to improve the awareness and understanding of the Forever Wild Land Trust and the outdoor recreation opportunities it provides to Alabama's citizens
- Reviewed 44 nomination inquiries that resulted in 29 willing-seller tract nominations being processed and evaluated for potential acquisition by the Forever Wild Land Trust Board of Trustees
- Began implementing a Board of Trustees initiative to offer counties in which Forever Wild acreage is located an opportunity to enter a Memorandum of Understanding establishing cooperation and providing annual funding

**FOREVER WILD RECREATIONAL AND LAND STEWARDSHIP ACTIVITIES**

- Offered 21 youth hunts, 11 days of physically disabled hunting, and 32 sporting dog field trial/hunt test events, involving approximately 2,000 sporting dogs at the M. Barnett Lawley Forever Wild Field Trial Area. Also hosted Alabama Audubon field trips including one in conjunction with the Alabama Black Belt Festival. The Field Trial Area also served as a site for law enforcement training events. Activities brought more than 3,750 visitors to the tract and surrounding areas.
- Hosted 1,600 visitors at the Wehle Land Conservation Center facilities for outdoor recreational and educational activities
- Expanded on existing public access opportunities by offering 36 open woods days at the Forever Wild Land Trust Sipsey River Recreation Area, and offered 25 open gate days during the hunting season at Old Cahawba Prairie, Splinter Hill Bog, and Lillian Swamp tracts
- Maintained approximately 390 miles of public recreation trails for activities such as horseback riding, hiking, biking, and canoeing at the Shoal Creek Nature Preserve, Walls of

Jericho, Wehle Land Conservation Center, Splinter Hill Bog, Old Cahawba Prairie, Jacinto Port, Coldwater Mountain Complex, Dothan Park Trails, Grand Bay Savanna, Cahaba River Park, Perdido River Complex, Freedom Hills Complex, Indian Mountain Complex, Mobile-Tensaw Delta Wildlife Management Area (WMA), Gothard-AWF Yates Lake WMA, Turkey Creek Nature Preserve, Coosa County WMA, Tannehill Complex, Blakeley Addition, and Coon Creek Forever Wild tracts. For individual tract locations, visit [alabamaforeverwild.com](http://alabamaforeverwild.com).

- Began construction of a trailhead access, parking area, and 2.5 miles of trail at the Indian Mountain Tract in Cherokee County. This project is funded in part by a Recreational Trails Program grant of \$70,000 from the Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs (ADECA)
- Coordinated with the City of Springville to review and construct 2.6 miles of new trail at the Big Canoe Creek Trail. Funding for trail construction was provided by the City of Springville.
- Received 218 reservations for shelters and camping platforms associated with the Bartram and Perdido River canoe trails
- Performed annual informational kiosk updates including maps, guidelines of use, and hunting regulations at various Forever Wild tracts statewide
- Replaced hiking trail footbridge on the Overlook Loop Trail at the Coon Creek Tract in Tallapoosa County
- Constructed two new footbridges for trails located on the Wehle Land Conservation Center
- Continued a citizen science habitat monitoring project at three locations (Grand Bay Savanna, Wehle Land Conservation Center, Old Cahawba Prairie) that invites visitors to photograph the habitat from a fixed camera bracket and share via social media, creating a long-term photo documentation of the landscape and attracting additional visitors
- Employed both chemical and mechanical methods for control of exotic plant species as well as various trapping techniques for removal of invasive animal species on various tracts throughout the state
- Initiated timber contracts for thinning 194 acres on Barbour WMA, 199 acres on Coosa WMA-Weogufka State Forest Addition, and 381 acres on Uchee Special Opportunity Area (SOA). Also conducted a final harvest of 30 acres of sand pine on Uchee SOA.
- Completed harvest of a 1,100-acre sale of Eastern red cedar on Cedar Creek SOA for habitat enhancement in cooperation with DCNR's Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division
- Conducted prescribed burns on almost 8,000 acres of public land statewide to maintain and enhance natural plant communities. Several fires were coordinated with partners including The Nature Conservancy.

## **NATURAL HERITAGE SECTION ACCOMPLISHMENTS**

- Performed biodiversity survey work, conducted habitat assessments, participated in trail planning, and continued collecting detailed GPS and GIS (geographic information systems) data of existing Forever Wild tracts to aid management and research of these tracts
- Maintained GIS server software, allowing greater transparency of Forever Wild holdings and ADCNR facilities to the public by providing an interactive online map. This software is also being used to improve geographic information transmission within SLD and the Department.
- Maintained the Natural Heritage Section database, which is partially funded by a State Wildlife Grant. The database is accessible via a secure internet website for more than 1,000 approved users and currently contains more than 5.2 million records of plant and animal species occurrences throughout Alabama.
- Continued to increase the number of specimens in the Natural Heritage Section Herbarium collection to 7,250. Most of those have been digitized, photographed, and databased.
- Continued coordination of Section 6 funding from USFWS to support research benefiting at-risk plant species. Administered \$89,800 in federal matching funds, including sub-awards to Alabama universities.
- Coordinated fulfillment of grant awards for land acquisition and habitat restoration through the National Coastal Wetland Grant Program and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation's Cumberland Plateau Stewardship Fund

## **GULF OF MEXICO ENERGY SECURITY ACT (GOMESA) ACCOMPLISHMENTS**

- Provided administrative support to the GOMESA program by overseeing the disbursement of funds and providing support to the awarded entities
- Executed grant agreements for the following:
  - Corn Creek Tributary Restoration (City of Loxley - \$250,000)
  - 5 Rivers Delta Resource Center Facility Improvements (SLD - \$253,275)
  - Windscape Lift Station Force Main Extension at D'Olive Creek (City of Daphne - \$607,500)
  - Fairhope North Triangle Nature Park (City of Fairhope - \$999,989)
  - ADEM Coastal Area Litter Traps (ADEM - \$1,000,000)

- Billy Goat Hole Boat Ramp Replacement (ADCNR Marine Resources Division - \$1,313,400)
- Wastewater Facilities for Southeastern Mobile County, Fowl River Road to Joe Carl Road (Mobile County Water, Sewer, and Fire Protection Authority - \$1,612,500)
- Bayou La Batre Utilities Board Sewer, North System Improvements (Bayou La Batre Utilities Board - \$1,629,477)
- University of South Alabama Healthy Ocean Initiative (University of South Alabama - \$2,018,880)
- Dauphin Island Aloe Bay Living Shoreline, Habitat Protection and Public Access Amenities (Town of Dauphin Island - \$2,211,700)
- Cedar Point Public Access Acquisition (Mobile County Commission - \$2,254,500)
- Foley Nature Parks Expansion & Enhancements (City of Foley - \$2,500,000)
- Public Access Improvement Project through the Expansion of Bayfront Park (City of Daphne - \$4,000,000)
- Magnolia River Watershed Constructed Wetlands and Regional Detention – Kelly Pit Mitigation Site (Baldwin County Commission - \$4,000,000)
- Mobile Riverfront Park Enhancements: Reconnect with the River (City of Mobile - \$8,000,000)
- Cypress Point Land Acquisition (City of Spanish Fort - \$8,500,000)

## COASTAL ZONE MANAGEMENT SECTION ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Alabama Coastal Area Management Program staff provided technical support, funding, and oversight for 16 subawards benefiting projects and activities in Mobile and Baldwin counties. These subawards, totaling more than \$581,046 in federal funds provided by NOAA, supported the following:

- Promoted sustainable tourism and improved public access in Alabama’s coastal area through the Alabama Gulf Coast Convention and Visitors Bureau
- Supported multiple municipal planning efforts, including comprehensive planning, zoning, and mapping updates, stormwater management, subdivision regulation updates, and public access improvements (City of Foley, City of Gulf Shores, Town of Dauphin Island, City of Daphne, Town of Semmes)
- Continued integration of the Alabama Coastal Nonpoint Pollution Control Program into the Mobile Bay National

Estuary Program Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan

- Completed a survey of public access sites in Mobile and Baldwin counties in partnership with the Mobile Bay National Estuary Program
- Completed coastal Alabama open space mapping with assistance from the University of South Alabama GIS Department
- Administered the Coastal Geospatial Data Group by the Geological Survey of Alabama to increase opportunities for data sharing and to improve management of coastal resources
- Sponsored and organized the 35th annual Alabama Coastal Cleanup in partnership with Alabama People Against a Littered State. During the event, SLD staff provided volunteers with supplies to clean up waterways and shorelines across Alabama. More than 2,100 volunteers participated at more than 26 locations throughout Mobile and Baldwin counties removing over 23,298 pounds of trash from the waterways and shorelines.
- Published and distributed bi-annual Current Connection Newsletters in partnership with the Mobile Bay National Estuary Program
- Supported aerial mapping of gulf-fronting shorelines through the Geological Survey of Alabama

## SUBMERGED LANDS REGULATORY ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Coordinated with federal, state, and local governments as well as individual property owners regarding potential impacts to state-owned submerged lands
- Continued to provide information about the SLD regulations to efficiently manage uses of public submerged lands
- Updated Alabama Administrative Code 220-4-.09 (“Placement and Configuration of Piers and Other Improvements on State Owned Submerged Lands”) to clarify and streamline submerged lands regulations
- Received, reviewed, and/or approved 258 permit applications for activities impacting near-shore public trust submerged lands through the Notice of Intent to Impact State Owned Submerged Lands permit application process, in addition to processing dredge permits and riparian easements
- Received two Shellfish Aquaculture Easement applications for off-bottom oyster farms as part of Alabama’s Shellfish Aquaculture Program, which promotes the cultivation and harvesting of hatchery-spawned oysters for commercial purposes. More than 55 acres of off-bottom Shellfish Aquaculture Easements have been permitted since 2014.

## 5 RIVERS DELTA RESOURCE CENTER ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Hosted approximately 36,420 visitors from 47 states and 13 countries; hosted more than 300 events, receptions, meetings, guided tours, field trips, and educational classes
- Hosted the Annual Delta Woods and Waters Expo in conjunction with the City of Spanish Fort. The three-day conservation event attracted more than 2,080 participants.
- Conducted or assisted with more than 85 educational programs serving over 1,700 participants of all ages
- Hosted statewide exhibits in the Apalachee Exhibit Hall, including the Outdoor Alabama Photo Contest Exhibit and South Alabama Land Trust Photo Contest Exhibit
- Hosted the Annual Alabama Coastal BirdFest, which attracted 729 participants from 18 states and Canada for three days of guided birding tours, lectures, and workshops
- Attended Earth Day Mobile Bay and educated more than 600 guests during the single-day event
- Hosted several law enforcement training sessions, including drone training
- Provided meeting space for more than 13 state or federal agencies associated with conservation
- Hosted the premier of the newest Discovering Alabama Series: Alabama Birds; also provided staff interviews and filming locations
- Assisted several facilities with education programming, including Weeks Bay NERR and Meaher State Park
- Hosted two art camps and a STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art and Math) camp for youth ages 5-12
- Hosted 234 receptions and business meetings for nearly 8,000 participants; continued to provide a venue for various public meetings conducted by local conservation organizations
- Continued to organize and host Outdoor Market events. These events showcase an average of 30 local vendors per event with an estimated 900 total visitors.
- Hosted Spanish Fort Education Enrichment Foundation's 5K trail run with approximately 400 runners
- Served as Coastal Cleanup canoe/kayak site for 35 volunteers who removed litter from Sardine Pass, Justin's Bay, Blakeley River, and other surrounding waterways
- Continued chemical and mechanical efforts to control exotic plant species, including cogongrass and Chinese tallow tree throughout property

## WEEKS BAY NATIONAL ESTUARINE RESEARCH RESERVE ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Provided field trips and online, virtual programming that introduced 1,165 students ranging from preschool to college students to local environmental and coastal related topics
- Partnered with Mississippi State, Jacksonville State, and Athens State universities to conduct three multi-day, field-based Teachers on the Estuaries workshops that engaged 37 local high school and elementary teachers in increasing their knowledge and appreciation of local environments, as well as acquiring the necessary skills to act as stewards of coastal resources
- Provided educational vessel tours of the Weeks Bay estuary for 461 participants from civic groups, educational institutions, and regional agencies
- Conducted eight workshops for 265 community members, providing 1,311 training hours related to coastal resource management along the Gulf Coast
- Hosted 864 guest nights in the research dormitory, including researchers, GulfCorps volunteers, workshop participants, visiting educators, and state personnel. This was an 11% increase in occupancy over the previous year.
- Received \$603,227 in NOAA Procurement Acquisition and Construction funds for replacement of the Reserve Visitor Center Boardwalk
- Acquired 60 acres of critical habitat (Lloyd Tract) along the confluence of Waterhole and Green branches (tributaries of Fish River) using funds from the Alabama Deepwater Horizon Natural Resource Damage Assessment Trustee Implementation Group
- Coordinated scientific research with universities and agencies on 16 projects within the Weeks Bay Watershed
- Conducted a successful prescribed burn on 300 acres of the Damson Tract to clear Hurricane Sally storm debris and promote biodiversity within this pine flatwoods ecosystem
- Collaborated with GulfCorps team members to implement habitat management activities on Reserve parcels. The work included the removal of a storm-damaged nature trail boardwalk and overlook prior to reconstruction. Additionally, GulfCorps prepped fire lanes for prescribed fire on a 250-acre parcel of the Damson Tract.
- Performed habitat monitoring collection of 432 sediment elevation data points and more than 75,000 groundwater level, conductivity, and temperature data points as part of Weeks Bay NERR Sentinel Site Project Plan
- Facilitated citizen science microplastics sampling and participated in monthly nurdle (i.e., a small plastic pellet) surveys as part of the Gulf Nurdle Patrol
- Participated in National Reading Month with schools throughout Alabama by offering virtual and in-person programs that integrated science, social studies, and language arts standards by promoting grade-level reading resources that focus on environmental themes relating to the estuaries and biodiversity of Alabama



- Hosted a NOAA Hollings Scholar who successfully conducted preliminary investigation into the effects of shading on primary productivity (the rate at which energy is converted to organic substances by photosynthetic plants) in Weeks Bay
- Collected continuous water quality and weather data from five sites in Weeks Bay as part of the Reserve's system-wide monitoring program
- Increased partnership with local real estate association by collaborating on flood resilience training and education
- Served the needs of coastal resource managers by providing technical training on the following: Facilitation Basics, MS4 Permit Requirements, FEMA Risk Rating 2.0, Wetland Regulations and Compliance, and Wetland Plant Identification for Wetland Delineation
- Assisted efforts to map septic systems, to identify opportunities to reduce pathogen pollution, and to identify stream/river segments for restoration with partners on the Weeks

Bay Watershed Management Plan Implementation Team

- Conducted quarterly meetings of Weeks Bay Advisory Committee
- Coordinated with the South Alabama Land Trust in publishing quarterly newsletters

### **WEHLE LAND CONSERVATION CENTER AND ELHEW FIELD STATION ACCOMPLISHMENTS**

- Hosted 535 visitors during 16 open trail weekends
- Hosted 504 visitors associated with state and county agency meetings and events, technical workshops, and organized field trips
- Hosted 389 youths and adults for the Annual Bullock

- County Fishing Derby, co-sponsored by ADCNR's Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division, the Bullock County Sheriff's Department, and Children and Mentors Outdoors
- Provided 172 students in grades four through seven from schools in Bullock and Macon counties access to conservation and environmental outreach programs
- Conducted a prescribed burn on approximately 300 acres of the Wehle Forever Wild Tract to maintain or enhance the natural plant communities for the benefit of associated wildlife species
- Continued assisting Auburn University and Tall Timbers Research Station with the out-planting of additional American chaffseed plants to establish a viable population on the Wehle Forever Wild Tract
- Collaborated with ADCNR's Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division, Mississippi State University, and other conservation partners toward establishing gopher frogs on the Wehle Forever Wild Tract through head-starting as part of broader multi-state objectives of increasing populations
- Coordinated scientific research with universities on four separate projects on the Wehle Forever Wild Tract
- Continued trapping efforts to manage feral hog populations for the benefit of habitats and native wildlife
- Continued hosting an iNaturalist Project with more than 2,700 species reported to date
- Continued participation as an official stop on the Wiregrass section of the Alabama Birding Trail. Wehle remained a popular hotspot on eBird with over 180 species of birds documented.
- Administered U.S. Geological Survey Breeding Bird Survey in Alabama
- Continued leading an annual bird identification workshop for U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service biologists and conservation partners at Bankhead National Forest through a cooperative cost-share agreement
- Monitored and oversaw management actions for the red-cockaded woodpecker population on the Forever Wild Coosa WMA
- Continued operation of a Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survivorship banding station on the Wehle Forever Wild Tract for the 17th year
- Continued Eastern bluebird monitoring and Northern bobwhite covey count surveys on the Wehle Forever Wild Tract
- Published findings from select Elhew Field Station research projects and/or partnerships in peer-reviewed journals

## STATE LANDS BUDGET AND EXPENDITURES FY 2022

Section Name	* Budget	† Expenditures
Land Management & Stewardship Activities	\$8,595,524	\$4,871,689
Administrative Transfer to Department	\$961,930	\$874,010
Coastal Zone Management Program	\$2,247,699	\$2,135,128
Weeks Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve	\$1,670,738	\$918,616
<b>Total per State Lands Fund</b>	<b>\$13,475,891</b>	<b>\$8,799,443</b>
<b>Forever Wild Land Trust Fund</b>	<b>\$15,471,784</b>	<b>\$22,259,801</b>
<b>Forever Wild Stewardship Fund</b>	<b>\$1,500,000</b>	<b>\$964,798</b>

\*AMOUNTS INCLUDE REQUESTED BUDGET SPENDING AUTHORITY ASSOCIATED WITH EFFORTS TO APPLY FOR GRANT AWARDS AND OTHER LEVERAGE FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES.

† INCLUDES EXPENDITURE OF PRIOR YEAR FUNDS THAT WERE AUTHORIZED FOR MULTI-YEAR CAPITAL OUTLAY.



## WEEKS BAY'S SQUEAKY SNEAKERS PROGRAM HELPS CONNECT STUDENTS TO ESTUARIES

From its humble beginnings as a grassroots effort to its current status as a thriving educational program, the State Lands Division's Weeks Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve (NERR) serves coastal communities by offering experience-based programs of art and science. Located in Fairhope, Weeks Bay Reserve encompasses over 10,000 acres of estuarine marsh and tidal habitat, vital nurseries for commercial and recreational fisheries, as well as large tracts of forested wetlands that serve as stopover and feeding locations for migrating birds.



The Weeks Bay Reserve was designated as a NERR within the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Agency's (NOAA) reserve system in 1986 through the support of then Senator Jack Edwards, who recognized the importance of land stewardship in rapidly growing coastal communities.

Baldwin County's school system educates more than 30,000 students in 46 schools, half of which are classified as Title I schools serving low-income students. Reserve staff work closely with teachers to provide no cost field trips to students who otherwise might not have an opportunity to explore Alabama's unique estuarine and coastal natural resources. During this fiscal year, the reserve provided more than 5,000 visitors with educational programming.

As youth spend less time outdoors, many of them can experience a sense of unfamiliarity or discomfort when led into natural surroundings. Being sensitive to this issue, reserve staff lead students through outdoor experiences teaching them how to make discerning observations and use tools such as binoculars, hand lenses, or seine and cast nets that aide them in exploring the natural environment. They are also given notebooks for sketching and writing about their nature experience. Staff engage students in ways that are meaningful and memorable, providing them with opportunities to experience and learn through cross-curricular methods.

These educational efforts are supported by several partners and local organizations that leverage the learning opportunities provided by reserve staff. The Eastern Shore Art Center in Fairhope, Alabama, is one such partner that collaborates on a community outreach program called Squeaky Sneakers. Utilizing hands-on environmental education and innovative forms of artistic expression, Squeaky Sneakers promotes the conservation of estuaries and other coastal resources. The program began as a summer camp for young children but has grown to include participants ranging in age from preschool students to senior citizens, all with diverse backgrounds and abilities.

Squeaky Sneakers received its name after one of the many seining trips offered through the program. Seining requires individuals to get in the water, sometimes waist deep, with shoes on, and drag a large net towards the shore in hopes of capturing marine creatures to be observed and then carefully released. After trudging through water, the participants' wet shoes make squeaking noises as they eagerly gather around the net to see if any creatures were collected – thus, Squeaky Sneakers was born. The seining activity is then followed by a catch of the day artwork activity, where students draw the seine net, animals retrieved, and, of course, their sneakers!

Participants use a wide variety of materials when creating their artwork. For example, students from local Boys and Girls Clubs learned about the environmental impacts of the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill by using black tar paper and acrylic paints to create art featuring marine life found in the Gulf of Mexico. Students also used materials, such as preserved fish specimens from the reserve to create prints. The students painted directly on the

preserved fish and then pressed paper over the fish to create lifelike, colorful prints.

The art and nature programs have also been adapted to reach a variety of audiences. With visually impaired or blind students, staff teach through touch, hearing, and smell. Staff lead students into the bay to seine and discuss the different fish, crabs, and shrimp caught as they feel the bodies and fins. Students take nature walks with staff and listen to birds with the help of amplifiers, feel the texture of different marsh grasses and tree bark, and smell leaves of sweet bay, red bay, and wax myrtle. In the classroom, students are assisted in outlining leaf shapes and fish bodies with puff paint they can feel. They then paint within the outlines with their fingers.

Field trips to the reserve provide an on-the-ground opportunity to learn about conservation efforts and experience research tools used to study our estuaries. Reserve staff work with middle and high school students, including environmental science and engineering classes from Robertsdale High School's STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) Academy, to guide them in handling instruments such as survey equipment and to illustrate how the reserve monitors environmental conditions and develops restoration strategies.

For classes unable to visit the reserve, staff take the educational programs on the road. At Fairhope High School, Squeaky Sneakers instructors worked with consumer sciences and fashion design students to create estuary-themed fabrics using batik, a style of art that uses resistant materials on fabric to create unique patterns. Students used a batik method of toothpaste mixed with hand lotion as the resistant material to create patterns on a canvas. The toothpaste/lotion mixture was later washed off leaving behind various beautiful, handcrafted designs. The fabrics were used to create clothing, pillows, and bags that were put on exhibit at the Eastern Shore Art Center. Fairhope High School art and science students also created artwork designs for storm drain markers depicting local coastal animals in an effort to reduce waste going into the drains. Elberta Middle School art students designed an award-winning mural for the Wyland National Art Challenge after an in-class Squeaky Sneakers lesson.

Reserve programs encourage participants of various ages and abilities to immerse themselves in science through art, technology, and real-world experience. The goal of the program is to help students develop an appreciation for the coastal environment and to become stewards of coastal natural resources – and maybe even pursue a career in science!

To learn more about Squeaky Sneakers, visit the Eastern Shore Art Center website, <https://esartcenter.org/education/community-outreach/>, or contact Nancy Raia at [nancy@esartcenter.org](mailto:nancy@esartcenter.org) or Angela Underwood at [Angela.Underwood@dcnr.alabama.gov](mailto:Angela.Underwood@dcnr.alabama.gov). Virtual education lessons can be found online at <https://www.facebook.com/WeeksBayNERR> and <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCRrm0qtwCPJrx3YCG4sMAaA/videos>. ■



# ALABAMA STATE PARKS

The **State Parks Division** administers 21 state parks encompassing 48,850 acres of land and water in Alabama. The parks range from Gulf Coast beaches to the Appalachian Mountains and provide opportunities and facilities from basic day-use activities to resort convention lodging, restaurants, and golfing areas.

The mission of the Division is to acquire and preserve natural areas; develop, furnish, operate, and maintain recreational facilities; and extend the public's knowledge of the state's natural environment.

The Division's goals are to manage and operate the Alabama State Parks System in an economically sound and efficient manner on the most self-sustaining basis possible; to provide and maintain high-quality facilities and services to meet the needs of visitors; to provide an opportunity for personal growth and development of individuals through outdoor experiences; to promote the use of State Parks facilities; to preserve the unique natural features and integrity of our state parks for future generations; and to promote goodwill and enhance the public image of Alabama and the Alabama State Parks through dedicated, courteous employees.

In FY 2021-2022, ADCNR's parks system continued to adapt to many challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic as well as several adverse weather events. Despite those unexpected circumstances, the parks system completed several major renovation and improvement projects, and business operations continued to return to normal patterns. Throughout the year, parks staff served an increasing number of park guests who were seeking safe exercise opportunities and respite in Alabama's outdoors. They served with distinction and are a credit to Alabama's commitment to outdoor recreation and tourism.

## Accomplishments

ADCNR's 21 state parks typically average 5 million guests annually. In FY 2021-2022 the parks system recorded 5.6 million guest occurrences. That number is up slightly from the previous year, when parks attendance was affected by Hurricane Sally along the coast and high gasoline prices statewide.

Alabama State Parks made significant improvements in purchasing procedures, computer systems, operation and maintenance policies, financial management analysis, advertising and marketing, and natural resource management. Parks also implemented a comprehensive, statewide renovations program. One of the most notable accomplishments in FY 2021-2022 was the public's approval of the State Parks Bond Amendment that provided the parks system with \$80 million in funds for renovations and improvements. The ballot measure was approved by 77% of voters.

## Facilities and Personnel

Of the 21 State Parks, 17 are maintained with an internal park staff determined by the size, development, and operation of each area. The total number of employees for all parks varies from approximately 700 during the peak season to approximately 500 during the off-season. Four parks are staffed and operated through management agreements with local governments or concessionaires. The State Parks Division central office in Montgomery includes eight sections: Operations, Promotions, Natural Resources, Recreational Trails, Planning and Visitor Services, Education and Interpretation, Law Enforcement, and Management Analysis.



## **OPERATIONS SECTION**

The Operations Section oversees five district supervisors for 21 state parks and multiple lodges throughout the state. The section is divided into North and South regions. The North Region consists of the Northeast, Northwest, and Central districts. The South Region consists of the Southeast and Southwest districts and the Montgomery office staff. The Montgomery Operations office has one full-time employee. The North and South regions are managed by two Operations supervisors.

This section manages daily park operations, maintenance programs, law enforcement, property and automobile insurance programs, property inventory, fee waiver requests from nonprofit organizations, and Board of Adjustment claims. It also processes all personnel actions for approximately 600 hourly and merit employees.

In addition to the accomplishments listed below, Operations replaced 1,200 mattresses and 165 bed frames throughout the state parks system during FY 2021-2022.

### **NORTH REGION:**

#### **Joe Wheeler**

- Welcomed 243,589 guest visits during FY 2021-2022
- Hosted 67 interpretive programs for 2,224 guests

- Reopened campground in February that was damaged by a tornado in December 2019
- Sold more than 16,000 rounds of golf
- Replaced phone system with VoIP
- Installed Wi-Fi system in the campground
- Installed new water lines in the primitive campground
- Made electrical improvements within the day-use area for bass tournaments and events
- Replaced nearly half of golf cart fleet for golf course
- Replaced roofing on lodge
- Hosted annual park managers meeting
- Renovated the tennis and basketball courts
- Installed a new split rail fence around the park
- Repaired Americans with Disabilities (ADA) sidewalk at fishing pier in day-use area
- Constructed new beach pavilion
- Hosted a camping group with more than 1,000 guests
- Hosted many social events including trail runs, holiday packages, the Parade of Lights, and Rollin' on the River

## Monte Sano

- Welcomed 139,071 guest visits during FY 2021-2022
- Hosted First Day Guided Hike with 53 hikers
- Hosted Japanese Fall Festival
- Hosted Huntsville Cave and Rescue Unit Car Show
- Hosted North Alabama Zoological Society Kids Fest with 500 visitors
- Hosted Huntsville Obedience and Training Club Dog Fair with 1,500 visitors
- Hosted 2022 Huntsville Art Show with 1,100 visitors
- Hosted 82 private events at Monte Sano Event Lodge
- Hosted a two-day hospitality training by Alabama Mountain Lakes Tourist Association
- Completed all campground electrical upgrades
- Hosted Little Mountain Forest School with 39 kids attending
- Hosted several races for Huntsville Track Club with more than 600 runners

## Cathedral Caverns

- Welcomed 74,749 guest visits during FY 2021-2022
- Increased revenue by 39.5% from the previous year
- Opened new campground with 25 full-service campsites
- Provided cave tours to more than 100 school groups ranging from 25 to 300 students
- Hosted the following annual Running Lane events: Race to the Cave Half Marathon and 10K Runs, Conquer the Cave 5K, Cathedral Caverns 5K and 10K Trail Run. Each race averaged 700 runners per event.
- Hosted annual Easter egg hunt with 150 participants
- Installed a laundry facility in the campground
- Installed new picnic tables throughout park
- Improved drainage in campground
- Initiated renovation of old gem mine
- Initiated the development of two primitive campsites

## Rickwood Caverns

- Welcomed 55,250 guest visits during FY 2021-2022
- Increased revenue 125% from the previous year
- Welcomed 17,301 guests to annual holiday event Wonderland Under Warrior

- Increased wedding and pool party rentals
- Hosted two teacher workshops through a grant from Legacy Inc.
- Renovated restroom at Nature Center to meet the ADA standards
- Provided cave tours for several school groups ranging in size from 25 to 100 students
- Hosted Cars at the Cave event that featured food trucks, live music, and awards for car entries

## Lake Lurleen

- Welcomed 85,935 guest visits during FY 2021-2022
- Hosted Mount Olive Fire Department car show with more than 1,200 visitors
- Hosted Santa in the Park with 1,500 visitors
- Hosted Camp Fear Halloween event with hundreds of visitors attending
- Completed lighting enhancement and wastewater system improvements in the campground
- Renovated park office

## Oak Mountain

- Welcomed 737,698 guest visits during FY 2021-2022
- Hosted the World Games 2022 with competitors and guests from around the world
- Sold more than 30,000 rounds of golf
- Hosted 90 interpretive programs and field trips for more than 2,000 park guests
- Hosted 255 events including Adult Mentored Hunt, Birmingham Urban Mountain Pedalers (BUMP), Alabama Interscholastic Cycling League, Southern Trails of Oak Mountain State Park (STOMP), XTERRA, BMX races, and several charitable fundraisers
- Partnered with Shelby County and the City of Pelham to host Fire on the Water fireworks show on July 3-4, 2022, bringing in more than 10,000 visitors
- Joined Global Conservation Consortium for Oaks to research, educate public, and protect the endemic Boynton oak tree. Oak Mountain is home to the oldest and largest population of this oak species.
- Presented the Spirit of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) Award to Howard Vaughn, one of the few living members of the CCC in Alabama. Vaughn helped build some Alabama's State Parks.

- Completed Phase III of a road project on State Park Road to include bike lanes to Highway 119 and a roundabout at one of the park entrances
- Completed a new bathhouse at Double Oak Lake Beach in partnership with Shelby County
- Finalized Forever Wild acquisition of 1,644 acres from EBSCO Industries to expand Oak Mountain State Park. A dedication ceremony was held on April 15, 2022.
- Partnered with Jefferson and Shelby counties to host the annual Exceptional Anglers event for more than 1,000 local students with special needs
- Accepted more than 1,500 injured and orphaned native birds at the Alabama Wildlife Center – a partner of Oak Mountain State Park. The facility hosted more than 500 conservation education programs in FY 2021-2022 and won Shelby County's 2022 Diamond Award for non-profit of the year.

### **Wind Creek**

- Welcomed 332,434 guest visits during FY 2021-2022
- Hosted large group booking of 234 campsites for 10 days in campground
- Expanded interpretive program with a consistent monthly schedule that included 126 events with approximately 1,500 attendees. The interest generated by these programs led to hiring a full-time park naturalist.
- Started Ranger Buddies Program in the months of June and July. The program covered multiple topics and various outdoors safety and stewardship programs.
- Hosted several events including Southern Trails Equine Competition Endurance Race, Christmas at the Creek, and Vulcan Orienteering Club meets
- Partnered with Alabama Forestry Commission to conduct prescribed fire on 147 acres
- Continued partnership with Lake Martin Resource Association and Renew Our Rivers clean-up efforts on Lake Martin and the surrounding roadways
- Hosted more than 40 professional, high school and college fishing tournaments
- Installed dehumidifiers in all climate-controlled bathhouses
- Replaced porches and rails on camping cabins and marina, installed new grills, upgraded several 200-amp distribution panels to 400-amp panels
- Repaired several water mains and multiple water leaks

### **Cheaha**

- Welcomed 266,378 guest visits during FY 2021-2022
- Hosted 322 interpretive programs for 6,065 park guests
- Hosted 5,739 visitors at the Interpretive Center, 10,701 visitors at the CCC Museum, and 1,950 visitors at the Native American Museum
- Partnered with AmeriCorps National Civilian Community Corps and Park Trail Crew to refurbish the Base to Summit Lake Trail: cleared trail of 211 snags and dangerous trees, built and shaped three stone staircases, installed 25 water bars (structures used for diverting water off trails), and removed several large rocks that were blocking the trail
- Hosted four international and national races, including the Cheaha Challenge and ULTRA, Pinhoti100, and Cheaha Xtreme Triathlon
- Started Ranger Buddies Program and participated in two large community outreach programs with the Ashland Library and Shinbone Fire Department
- Hosted 117 weddings
- Hosted 259 events at the Vista Event Center, Alexander Activities Building, and the Bald Rock Group Lodge
- Built and installed four new informational kiosks for campgrounds and Interpretive Center
- Improved campsite spacing in the Upper Primitive Campground
- Refurbished wooden floors in the main hall of the Bald Rock Group Lodge

### **Lake Guntersville**

- Welcomed 321,974 guest visits during FY 2021-2022
- Sold more than 13,000 rounds of golf
- Offered 35 interpretative programs for 323 guests
- Hosted 127 weddings, 29 church retreats, 65 family reunions, 20 dinners with live entertainment, and 17 large fishing tournaments
- Hosted four Eagle Awareness educational weekends with more than 160 lodging packages sold and an average of 300 attendees each weekend
- Hosted Eagle Ridge Race with hundreds of participants
- Hosted 200 events including the 2022 Oliver Travel Trailers Owners' Rally, Marshall County Sports Hall of Fame, and Mountain Top Round Up
- Installed 37 new TVs in cabins, chalets, and lodge
- Hosted Mother's Day weekend clambake, Mother's Day

buffet, and Thanksgiving buffet with more than 1,600 total attendees

- Installed new sunshades in chalets
- Converted four lodge rooms into pet-friendly units
- Updated kitchen equipment in the lodge
- Utilized \$1.6 million in Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs (ADECA) scrap tire program funds to repave several parking lots
- Completed new 1.5-mile multiuse trail
- Completed a connector trail to Short Creek parking area. A 60-foot bridge was also replaced on this trail.

### **Buck's Pocket**

- Welcomed 8,617 guest visits during FY 2021-2022
- Increased revenue through groups that rent entire campground on a regular basis
- Hosted trail maintenance classes
- Developed a trail to a rock-climbing area through a partnership with the Southeastern Climbers Coalition

### **DeSoto**

- Welcomed 261,119 guest visits during FY 2021-2022
- Hosted 118 interpretive programs for 3,832 park guests
- Completed a multi-year project at DeSoto Falls overlook and picnic area that included new safety railing, beach area dredging and restoration, repaving the parking lot, and installing a kayak launch
- Hosted several annual events, including Wildflower Saturday, Spookapalooza, Creative Spirit Art Market, and Fourth of July festivities
- Installed 20 additional bear-proof trash cans
- Remodeled public restrooms at the country store and picnic area
- Upgraded pool-vacuum system
- Continued training for Northeast Technical Rescue Team: Five staff members were certified as Rope Rescue Technicians; two staff members were certified as basic Emergency Medical Technicians; four staff members completed rope rescue awareness training; and SCUBA in-service training was held monthly

## **SOUTH REGION:**

### **Chewacla**

- Welcomed 105,599 guest visits during FY 2021-2022
- Hosted races for Big Dog, Go Nuts, and Auburn Flyers mountain bike groups
- Hosted the Chewacla Classic Camper Stay event
- Hosted Merit Badge University Boy Scouts Frank Jackson
- Welcomed 16,496 guest visits during FY 2021-2022
- Hosted Scarecrows in the Park with 1,365 visitors
- Hosted Fourth of July fireworks event for City of Opp
- Hosted Opp High School cross country competitions

### **Meaher**

- Welcomed 50,374 guest visits during FY 2021-2022
- Hosted nature walks, nature programs and fishing days for kids
- Completed first mural in an Alabama State Park
- Hosted South Alabama Land Trust Coastal Cleanup
- Hosted Spanish Fort Fire Department 5K run

### **Blue Springs**

- Welcomed 28,349 guest visits during FY 2021-2022
- Hosted Polar Plunge and Easter egg hunt community events
- Installed new gravel within campsite area
- Renovated cabin exteriors
- Renovated laundry facility
- Planted 12 trees

### **Lakepoint**

- Welcomed 176,402 guest visits during FY 2021-2022
- Renovated and improved 10 cabins, including new furniture
- Made improvements to walking trails and ADA trails within the campground
- Hosted multiple local, high school, and regional fishing tournaments
- Hosted several church and school events, weddings, and business conferences
- Hosted Alabama, Tennessee, and Mississippi Rural Tourism Conference
- Served Thanksgiving and Christmas lunches to more than 1,000 visitors

## Gulf

- Welcomed 2,744,538 guest visits during FY 2021-2022
- Opened Gulf State Park Information Center
- Renovated five campground bathhouses
- Replaced three fishing piers on Lake Shelby and Little Lake
- Replaced roof at Nature Center and pool complex
- Hosted Ballyhoo Festival at Lake Shelby with 80 artists and 10,000 visitors
- Hosted two beach campouts and kids surfing/water safety days
- Organized pier walk and angler academy with 600 attending
- Hosted Big Beach Marathon, We Run This Beach Marathon, Good Life Ride, MS Ride, Coastal Half Marathon, and Shrimp Festival 5K, with more than 5,000 runners and cyclists participating
- Hosted Shark Week and Turtle Festival at the Pier with 2,500 visitors

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## PROMOTIONS SECTION

The Alabama State Parks Promotions Section coordinates the advertising, marketing, and promotional efforts of the Alabama State Parks System. The section currently employs three people in the Montgomery office, including one Advertising and Marketing Manager, one Marketing Specialist, and one Administrative Support Assistant II.

Administrative functions include coordinating radio and television public service announcements; preparing and distributing promotional literature; coordinating print and photographic material for magazines, campground directories, and newspaper articles; cooperation and coordinating with the Alabama Department of Tourism, chambers of commerce, convention and visitors bureaus, Alabama Department of Transportation (ALDOT) rest areas, tourist associations, and special events promoters; evaluating advertising opportunities; purchasing advertising space; producing ads and advertising material; assistance with promotional efforts at individual state parks; special events and various promotional exhibit expos; continuous updating of photos; presentation of programs for various organizations; continued operation of the toll-free nationwide phone line; social media marketing, website management and promotion, and digital mobile-ready marketing; development of promotional park videos; and continued pursuit of affordable and effective marketing opportunities.

## Accomplishments

- Placed advertisements in statewide magazines and other publications, including the Alabama Vacation Guide, Alabama the Beautiful Magazine, Business Alabama, Golf Alabama Guide, Gulf Coast Vacation Guide, and Alabama Press Association Directory
- Maintained the Alabama State Parks website (alapark.com), which had more than 9 million pageviews in 2022 and continued to be the primary means of sharing information and promoting State Parks events
- Continued using social media accounts (Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube) to enhance the image of the parks and promote events and activities
- Distributed rack card brochures for all 21 state parks to various outlets, including Alabama welcome centers, convention and visitors bureaus, Alabama Mountain Lakes Tourism Association, and other tourism-related organizations
- Continued publication of the Alabama State Parks overview brochure that is distributed throughout the Southeast by Alabama Tourism and other tourism-related organizations to inform the public of the amenities and features offered at each park
- Attended trade shows, conferences, and other events as an exhibitor to distribute marketing materials and Alabama State Park branded giveaway items and to promote the parks
- Distributed the State Parks monthly e-newsletter to more than 350,000 subscribers
- Continued marketing efforts for the Alabama State Park license plate, which was in the top 10 of all vanity license plates sold in Alabama. This revenue is used for park improvements
- Promoted membership in the Dirt Pass Trail Crew Program, which encourages volunteer involvement in the maintenance of our trail system
- Continued promoting the Parks for Patriots program that offers veterans and active duty military free admission to Alabama's State Parks
- Continued promoting concessionaire partnerships in the parks, including cabin rentals, zipline activities, kayak and boat rentals, equestrian facilities, and water cable skiing
- Continued promoting the Partners Pay the Way campaign to raise awareness of the individuals, user groups, civic partners, and elected officials State Parks depends on for donations and funding

## Future Efforts

An online merchandise program will launch in 2023 that will feature Alabama State Parks logo-branded clothing and other products. Some of these items will be available at gift shops, camp stores, and marina stores within the parks. A State Park Ambassador Program is also planned to encourage visitors to share their photos, videos, and blogs on social media to assist us in promoting the parks. Marketing our conference rooms and meeting facilities will continue to be a priority as we encourage organizations to plan corporate functions, training events, and large group meetings.

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## NATURAL RESOURCES SECTION

The Natural Resources Section was created in 1982 to enhance the aesthetic, biological, historical, and recreational aspects of our land and water resources and to increase the public's understanding, appreciation, and enjoyment of those resources. This section uses the latest science and technology to assist the parks with diverse natural resources objectives each year. The section also administers and coordinates grants for natural resource improvement projects.

### Accomplishments

- Continued restoration efforts at Gulf State Park using prescribed fire on approximately 170 acres in the lakeside cabin area. These fires help reduce wildfire risk, enhance wildlife habitat, control brush thickets, and keep the forest canopy open for better visibility and airflow for visitors. This prescribed fire was in partnership with the Alabama Forestry Commission.
- Continued restoration of existing longleaf/loblolly pine ecosystem at Lakepoint State Park using prescribed fire on approximately 28 acres. The benefits of prescribed fire at Lakepoint include a reduction in the density of the young sweetgums, allowing an increase in sunlight and encouraging the growth of native grasses. This prescribed fire was in partnership with the Alabama Forestry Commission.
- Continued restoration of existing longleaf pine ecosystem at Wind Creek State Park using prescribed fire on 190 acres over two burning sessions. The first 30-acre burn session was conducted in partnership with the Alabama Cooperative Extension System as part of its Learn and Burn Program that teaches public and private landowners about the benefits of conducting controlled burns on their land. The second 160-acre session was conducted in partnership with the Alabama Forestry Commission.
- Initiated a management plan for Lunker Lake at Oak Mountain State Park in partnership with ADCNR's Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries (WFF) Division. As part of the management plan, a fish population survey was conducted and lake fertilization activities began. The goal of the plan is to transform Lunker Lake into a premier fishing destination.
- Awarded a 2022 Hearts of STIHL grant from STIHL, Inc., for the removal and management of invasive species such as Chinese privet, tallow tree, and thorny olive at Chewacla State Park
- Facilitated an 80-acre timber sale at Frank Jackson State Park as part of a longleaf pine restoration project. Additionally, 5,000 to 6,000 harvestable sized catfish and approximately 50,000 smaller catfish were stocked in the park's 1000-acre Lake Frank Jackson through a partnership with WFF. The catfish stocking is expected to supplement the existing catfish population and should increase the angler catch rates.
- Continued to support park staff with a robust Integrated Pest Management Plan to reduce and control the invasive Argentine ant population in the Southeast and Southwest districts. The Argentine ant population is at a level that negatively interferes with guests' enjoyment of the parks. The Integrated Pest Management Plan has been successful at Meaher State Park. It was expanded to include all the southern parks.
- Continued support for the Special Opportunity Area (SOA) hunting program at Oak Mountain and Frank Jackson state parks, in partnership with WFF. The SOA program allows more public access to hunting on public land and will help with the management of the deer herd in an urban park setting.
- Assisted with the continued use of herbicides for invasive and otherwise undesirable vegetation control. This management tool was used at several parks including Gulf, Wind Creek, Frank Jackson, DeSoto, Cheaha, Chewacla, and Oak Mountain.
- Assisted with land encroachment and boundary line disputes/discrepancies and other conflicts with private landowners. Also continued to work with local and state officials on specific projects regarding State Park land boundary management and projects that could have impacts on the long-term sustainability of our natural resources. The section continues to develop Alabama State Park deed files to maintain verified boundaries.
- Continued to work with academic researchers to issue permits for conducting research or collecting scientific data within a state park
- Continued to manage the design and engineering phase of the Fort Morgan Parkway Trail, an extension of the Backcountry Trail within Gulf State Park
- Participated in the 46th annual Southeastern State Parks Program Seminar, which was held at The Lodge at Gulf State Park. The event hosted 85 interpretive park naturalists, rangers, and resource managers from 14 southeastern states. The conference promotes educational opportunities at state parks.
- Attended the National Archery in the Schools Alabama State Championship



- Continued to participate in the Forever Wild Land Acquisition Program
- Attended the Prescribed Fire Council annual meeting to maintain burn manager status for select staff
- Facilitated Parks field staff to attend Prescribed Fire Certification classes and become Burn Managers. Five new Certified Burn Managers were added to facilitate a more robust fire program across the parks system.
- Attended a meeting at Monte Sano State Park to discuss the Huntsville Area Mountain Bike Riders Master Trail Plan
- Continued discussions with the Aimee Copeland Foundation about all-terrain wheelchairs at Alabama State Parks
- Completed classes and received certifications from McDowell Technical Community College in the following: U.S. Forest Service Chainsaw Safety and Maintenance, Trail Safety and Personal Protective Equipment Training; Basic Sustainable Trail Assessment and Maintenance; and Trail Types and Experiences

## Future Efforts

The section continues to determine the best options to address lake fertility at numerous parks, the addition of fish habitat structure, and controlling nuisance wildlife populations of invasive plant and animal species.

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## RECREATIONAL TRAILS

The Recreational Trails Section assists with the upkeep and management of more than 450 miles of trails within the State Parks System. The section also oversees the ongoing planning, development, and construction of future trails and trail amenities. Staff include a Trails Coordinator and an Equipment Operator.

### Accomplishments

- Worked to develop relationships with various state, national, and international trail organizations and associations
- Began planning a new beginner mountain biking system near the upper campground at Cheaha State Park
- Submitted plans for a new trail connecting Oak Mountain State Park and its recent Belcher Tract addition
- Constructed a new half-mile section of the Cutchenmine Trail at Lake Guntersville State Park. Additional trail improvements at the park are planned.
- Began work at Buck's Pocket State Park to create vertical climbing trails in partnership with the Southeastern Climbers Coalition (SCC). This new recreation opportunity is expected to introduce a new user group to the Alabama State Parks trails system.
- Transported trail equipment to a Public Lands Day event at Cheaha State Park to promote awareness of the new State Parks Trail Crew
- Assisted parks with ongoing trail maintenance
- Developed and implemented a plan to count trail users and user types on the Hugh S. Branyon Backcountry Trail System at Gulf State Park. The plan includes in-person counts, automated counts, and the possibility of geofencing in collaboration with Jacksonville State University's Department of Economic Development.
- Completed Mike Riter's Trail Master Trails Training Course hosted by Tennessee State Parks
- Attended the Alabama Baptist Disaster Relief and Helton Forestry Enterprises Chainsaw Safety Training
- Worked with Lakepoint State Park staff to plan a June 2022 ribbon cutting for the park's new Off-Road Vehicle Course
- Met with the Student Conservation Association to discuss the possibility of a trail maintenance partnership with Alabama State Parks
- Hosted an AmeriCorps crew at Cheaha State Park for four weeks as part of the Base to Summit initiative. During their stay the team camped and worked on-site resurfacing and removing tornado debris from the Blue Lake Trail. Despite heavy rain, intense sun, and a manhunt, they were able to remove considerable amounts of debris, implement corrective erosion-control methods, and more to improve the trail.
- Attended the annual convention of the National Off-Highway Vehicle Conservation Council where staff met with officials regarding Alabama State Parks hosting a Best Trails Workshop. The workshop was held at Buck's Pocket State Park in December 2022.
- Established a partnership with the Boy Scouts of America to assist with in-person trail surveys at Gulf State Park. The survey provided useful information, including 16,000 photos of visitors using the trails.

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## PLANNING AND VISITOR SERVICES

In 2020, the Division transitioned to a new online reservation system managed by US eDirect. During FY 2021-2022, the Planning and Visitor Services Section focused largely on the implementation and evaluation of this system. Based on guests' feedback and staff evaluations, the Division determined it should explore a new partnership for its reservation system.

### Future Efforts

In the coming year, Alabama State Parks will open a request for proposals and select a new vendor. The goal will be to implement a new reservation system by October of 2023.

## EDUCATION AND INTERPRETATION

Staff consists of two District Interpretive Naturalists located at Oak Mountain and Gulf state parks, eight Interpretive Naturalists at DeSoto, Gulf, Lake Guntersville, Cheaha, Oak Mountain, Joe Wheeler, Wind Creek, and Cathedral Caverns state parks, and a part-time Education Coordinator located at Cheaha State Park. In addition to educating guests about the natural environments found within our parks, naturalists also assist with safety communications, supporting recreational projects, and park-specific interactions with the media.

In FY 2021-2022, staff entertained and educated many guests and visitors within the parks through in-house recreational activities, interpretive environmental education programs, and special events throughout the year.

### Future Efforts

In the coming year, we will work to create a full-time Education Coordinator and focus on hiring an additional District Interpretive Naturalist. A more robust internship program is also planned.

### Future Efforts

In the coming year, we will work to create a Law Enforcement Coordinator position to help fill the gaps within our Law Enforcement team.

## MANAGEMENT ANALYSIS

The Management Analysis Section provides general administrative direction and coordination for management control, administrative cost analysis, performance reporting, data processing, general accounting, budgeting, payables, receivables, and purchasing.

### Accomplishments

Section personnel received, processed, and analyzed 2,184 performance reports for all state parks; prepared Parks system Performance Reports as required by the Budget Management Act; received, processed, and analyzed operations plans, budget reports, and related reports; prepared Parks system Operation Plans and fiscal year budgets; processed \$50,275,030 in revenue and 23,588 payments; and disbursed 16,208 checks to vendors.

Section staff also continuously monitored data-processing output, distributed it to statewide park cost centers, and monitored managerial audits as well as personnel actual versus budget for each park. Management Analysis continues to work with the State of Alabama Accounting and Resource System to develop detailed monthly financial statements of the State Parks System and specific operations. Management Analysis continues to revise resale inventory procedures to promote better accountability.

## LAW ENFORCEMENT

Four of the five State Park districts now have a District Ranger who coordinates law enforcement and guest safety programs with the respective district parks. Rangers within each park report to the District Ranger, who handles scheduling, training, evaluations, and other related operational coordination.

Rangers also play a large role in our emergency response through District Strike Teams. These teams lead emergency recovery efforts after storms, serving to clear roads of debris and support utility crews and other teams in coordinated recovery efforts.

## STATE PARKS BUDGET AND EXPENDITURES FY 2022

Section Name	Budgeted	Expenditures
Parks Revolving Operations	\$43,010,791	\$38,488,780
Parks Revolving Capital Outlay	\$3,000,000	\$2,376,219
Administrative Transfer	\$4,143,796	\$3,038,150
Parks Fund Repairs and Maintenance	\$2,723,244	\$2,091,235
Parks Fund Capital Outlay	\$6,823,259	\$4,237,544
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$59,701,090</b>	<b>\$50,231,928</b>

# THREE ALABAMA STATE PARKS EXPAND IN FY 2021-2022

Alabama's 21 State Parks are located in some of the state's most beautiful locations, from the Appalachian foothills in the northeast to the sugar white beaches along the Gulf Coast. These parks provide outdoor recreation opportunities for millions of visitors each year. From day-use areas, resort lodging, restaurants, and golf courses to back-country camping, hiking, mountain biking, and archery facilities, an adventure awaits each Alabama State Park visitor.





The mission of the Alabama State Parks Division is to acquire and preserve natural areas; develop, furnish, operate, and maintain recreational facilities; and extend the public's knowledge of the state's natural environment. As a primarily user-funded operation, the Division accomplishes these goals in the most self-sustaining manner possible. This often leaves inadequate resources to acquire new acreage for the State Parks System. However, through a variety of partnerships, the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (ADCNR) was able to add additional acreage to our Rickwood, DeSoto, and Oak Mountain state parks, during the fiscal year.

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## RICKWOOD CAVERNS

The cave in Blount County that would become known as Rickwood Caverns was made popular with the public when Eddie Rickles, a local Boy Scout troop leader, and his friend Sonny Arwood developed the location as a public attraction in 1954. Cave tours at Rickwood (named after Rickles and Arwood) were offered commercially there until 1974 when the location was acquired by the State of Alabama and became the first cave system operated by the State Parks Division. Today, the 380-acre State Park still offers cave tours in addition to hiking trails, 13 campsites, an interpretive center, and a large public pool. Each year, the park hosts several large special events including the popular Wonderland Under Warrior, which takes place annually from November through January. During the holiday season, park staff decorate the cave with thousands of lights, and children of all ages have the opportunity to meet Mr. and Mrs. Claus. The park recently expanded by 58 acres when property adjacent to Rickwood became available for purchase. This additional acreage will allow for new trails to be constructed in the park and will help protect the underground cave system.

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## DESOTO

Nestled atop beautiful Lookout Mountain near Fort Payne in northeast Alabama, State Park Number 5 was opened to the public in 1935. The park was developed by the hard-working and dedicated men of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), who made many enhancements to the park that have withstood the test of time, including 23 rustic cabins. On May 24, 1939, the State of Alabama took ownership of the park. Since then,

DeSoto State Park has increased its overnight accommodation offerings and outdoor recreation opportunities, including 94 campsites, a 25-room lodge, a zipline, and more than 30 miles of multi-use trails. Today, the park is a nature lover's paradise and an outdoor recreation destination that draws visitors from around the world. In FY 2021-2022, the Division renovated the day-use area at DeSoto Falls, one of the State's most popular natural attractions. Renovations include a new beach and picnic area, safety railing, new bathrooms, and improved parking. Additionally, 157 acres were added to the DeSoto Falls recreation area. A master plan for the addition is currently in the works.

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## OAK MOUNTAIN

Oak Mountain's original 940 acres were made available for outdoor recreation as a result of Alabama's State Land Act of 1927. By 1935, the location was established as a state park and had expanded to almost 2,000 acres. Like DeSoto, Oak Mountain was developed by the CCC, who constructed much of the park's original infrastructure such as roads, pavilions, cabins, and the Lake Tranquility Dam. In 1943, the National Park Service transferred nearly 8,000 acres that surrounded the park to the State of Alabama. This land was added to Oak Mountain State Park, expanding it to 9,940 acres. Today, the park offers some of the most beautiful mountain scenery in the state. The park also features 100 miles of trails, an 18-hole golf course and driving range, horseback riding facilities, fishing lakes, boat rentals, picnic and beach areas, and the popular Peavine Falls – all easily accessible from the Birmingham metro area. In FY 2021-2022, the State acquired the 1,644-acre Belcher Tract from EBSCO Industries with the support of the Forever Wild Land Trust. The Belcher addition expanded Alabama's largest State Park to more than 11,500 acres. This new addition to the park features three lakes and mountain longleaf habitat just off U.S. Route 280. New outdoor recreation opportunities are in development for the Belcher addition, including new multi-use trails.

These park expansions are examples of ADCNR and its State Parks Division leveraging resources and funding to provide additional outdoor recreation to the public and conserve Alabama's natural resources for future generations. ADCNR will continue working to provide its citizens and visitors with one of the best State Parks Systems in the country. ■

# WILDLIFE AND FRESHWATER FISHERIES



The **Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division**, charged by law with protection, management, and enhancement of the state's fish and wildlife resources, is composed of the Administrative, Enforcement, Fisheries, and Wildlife sections. The Division meets these responsibilities by carrying out coordinated, scientifically sound enforcement, management, research, development, and educational programs designed to ensure protection and enhancement of fish and wildlife populations and habitats for the sustainable benefit of the people of Alabama.

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## ADMINISTRATIVE SECTION

### Wildlife Grants

State Wildlife Grants and the Landowner Incentive Program are two federal funding sources intended to focus management on declining wildlife species and avoid their eventual listing under the Endangered Species Act. Federal funding for the State Wildlife Grants program in FY 2021-2022 was \$856,798. These funds were used to support research and restoration efforts. Both programs are administered by one biologist, the Habitat and Species Conservation Coordinator, who works closely with Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries (WFF) Division staff. Both programs interact with a broad range of partners, including federal and state agencies, universities, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and private landowners. Conservation efforts funded include the following:

#### Reintroduction of the Eastern Indigo Snake

The federally threatened Eastern indigo snake is considered to be absent from the state with the exception of snakes released at the Conecuh National Forest. The goal of this project is to reestablish a self-sustaining population. Twenty-six snakes were released in May 2022, bringing the total release number to 238. After being released they are monitored throughout the year.

#### Alabama Aquatic Biodiversity Center (AABC)

AABC was established in 2004 to promote clean water and to restore rare freshwater species. This is accomplished through the propagation and reintroductions of rare aquatic species. See the WFF Fisheries Section of this annual report for more information.

#### Statewide Stream and River Assessment Program for Aquatic Species of Conservation Concern

This project collects statewide information on the distribution, abundance, species composition, and habitat requirements of at-risk aquatic species in Alabama. Data generated from this project enables ADCNR to better plan for the management and protection of aquatic at-risk species. See the WFF Fisheries Section of this annual report for more information.

#### Black Bear Research

Tagging of black bears is conducted in the two main reproducing populations that are located in the Mobile River basin and in northeast Alabama. Once trapped, bears receive a general physical exam and yellow tags in each ear. They also received a passive integrated transponder (PIT) tag to help track their locations. Female bears are also fitted with GPS-enabled radio-telemetry collars to track their movements. Staff visit bear dens during winter months to document location, characteristics, and the number of cubs. Cubs receive an expandable collar to track their movements.

#### Habitat and Population Restoration of Gopher Frogs

The gopher frog is ranked as a Highest Conservation Concern species and is currently petitioned for listing under the Endangered Species Act. Gopher frogs are state-listed as imperiled due to low populations and are at a high risk of extinction. They were historically known to exist in multiple locations across the eastern portion of Alabama but now are only found at two wetlands within the Conecuh National Forest. Research and monitoring activities are underway at those locations.

## WILDLIFE AND FRESHWATER FISHERIES BUDGET AND EXPENDITURES FY 2022

Section	Budgeted Amount*	Expenditures
Admin	\$1,458,828	\$1,100,558
Law Enforcement	\$19,099,228	\$15,795,735
Fisheries	\$9,204,580	\$8,030,972
Wildlife	\$17,758,080	\$15,181,195
Wildlife Diversity	\$775,000	\$1,368,984
Transferred to Department Administrative Expenses	\$4,457,890	\$4,415,745
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$52,753,606</b>	<b>\$45,893,189</b>

\* The budget figures on this report reflect the approved spending authority for Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division. They are not a representation of the available cash.

Funding includes Federal Aid in Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration monies apportioned to Alabama based on the state's geographical size and hunting and fishing license sales.

Seventy-seven percent of the variance between the total budget and expenditures is unspent capital outlay monies that have been retained and carried forward to the subsequent fiscal year.

### WILDLIFE AND FRESHWATER FISHERIES DIVISION STAFFING

	FILLED	VACANT**
FULL-TIME POSITIONS	352	55
PART-TIME POSITIONS	30	0

\*\* Vacancy count is based on the 2021 operations plan.



#### Flattened Musk Turtle

The flattened musk turtle is a small, aquatic, freshwater turtle endemic to the upper Black Warrior River drainage of northwest Alabama. Since receiving a federal listing status of threatened in 1987, this turtle has continued to decline throughout the range in spite of federal protection. Objectives are to perform a habitat suitability model, to identify areas with threat and areas with potential for population reintroduction, to conduct field visits to assess sites, and to collect tissue samples to analyze genetic variability across the range and within populations.

#### Black Belt Prairie Assessment

Black Belt prairies have been devastated by land use alterations. The majority of the 1% of land in Alabama that remains prairie is highly fragmented. This study will acquire baseline data on rare species and perform an ecological assessment to assist managers with making conservation decisions.

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## FISHERIES SECTION

### Responsibilities and Functions

The Fisheries Section's mission is to manage, protect, conserve, and enhance the freshwater aquatic resources of Alabama.

### Accomplishments

**Technical Assistance:** Fisheries biologists conducted 323 biological checks of private ponds and provided practical solutions in writing for identified issues. Staff members participated in several meetings and conference calls concerning the licensing and relicensing of hydroelectric projects. Staff personnel provided technical assistance to government and nongovernment agencies on 372 occasions. District biologists investigated 16 reported fish kills and cases of pollution. Formal reports prepared by the investigators were sent to the appropriate agencies.

**Environmental Affairs:** Staff reviewed, investigated, and commented on 66 water-related permits and environmental impact statements with potential adverse impacts to state aquatic resources.

**Public Fishing Lakes (PFLs):** During FY 2021-2022, 85,958 anglers harvested 81,463 fish weighing a total of 71,808 pounds from 20 of the 23 state-operated PFLs. Each angler averaged 1.05 fish weighing an average of 1.13 pounds each per trip. The number of anglers fishing at Alabama's PFLs decreased by 16% from the previous fiscal year. The past two fiscal years have been very challenging for many of our lake managers and some PFLs have closed as a result. Although the PFLs saw a significant increase in usage in FY 2019-2020 due to the pandemic, the number of angler trips in FY 2020-2021 and FY 2021-2022 dropped 23% below the average visitation rates of FY 2018-2019 and prior. The decline in angler usage at PFLs has certainly been impacted by inflation, as anglers are forced to make difficult financial decisions.

Fisheries biologists and support staff made 122 visits to PFLs to evaluate the condition of fish populations and to conduct various operational and maintenance activities. The Carbon Hill, Eastaboga, and Marion fish hatcheries stocked 2,300,401 fish into Alabama's PFLs. Species stocked included bluegill sunfish, redear sunfish, channel catfish, Florida and Northern largemouth bass, and Southern walleye. Both Marion and Lamar PFLs were stocked with Southern walleye as a future source for hatchery broodfish. Additionally, 4,000 pounds of rainbow trout were stocked into the Madison and Walker county PFLs for a winter fishery.

Barbour County PFL remained closed after being drained in FY 2020-2021 to repair the drain valve and to enhance fishing opportunities. The lake never reached full pool due to dam failure and the future of this facility is to be determined. Chambers County PFL was also closed due to prior year renovation. The City of Luverne returned the management duties of Crenshaw County PFL back to our agency in May of 2022 due to their inability to operate with limited staff.

The Escambia County PFL managers resigned in September and the Walker County PFL manager passed away in June. Interviews have been completed to replace both lake manager vacancies at these locations. The Geneva County PFL managers resigned in August.

**Access Areas:** During the year, Fisheries Section personnel conducted routine maintenance inspections of 115 access areas. These facilities included 144 boat ramps with 189 launch lanes, 124 courtesy piers, and 4,016 parking spaces.

Fisheries personnel completed routine tasks such as servicing, repairing, and maintaining equipment and ordering materials for various maintenance activities. Fisheries personnel also completed general construction, Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) upgrades, and maintenance projects at 77 access areas statewide. Maintaining access areas makes up a large portion of the annual boating access budget. Overall, 117 repairs were completed at access areas statewide, including launching slab repairs, pier repairs, parking lot repairs, tree/debris removal, parking lot resurfacing and striping, erosion damage repairs, replacing signage, and storm damage cleanup.

New construction is another large and vital part of the boating access program. A large renovation was completed at Demopolis City Landing that included a larger boat launching slab, expanded parking lot, a new overflow parking lot, and new access pier. The section initiated a major boat ramp expansion project at Mink Creek Public Boat Ramp that will include an enlarged launching slab and expanded parking lot.

**Fish Hatcheries:** Fish production goals in FY 2021-2022 were met or exceeded for several fish species. Section staff stocked these and other fish species into public waters statewide, including PFLs, for a total of 4,388,367 fish (Table 1). Although infrastructure needs are extensive due to facility aging, improvements are routinely made at all three state fish hatcheries, as budgets allow. Carbon Hill Fish Hatchery was fully staffed in FY 2021-2022, and preparations were made for improved on-site employee housing. Water quality issues at Eastaboga Fish Hatchery were improved, and an extensive sink hole was repaired. Water quality issues were also improved at Marion Fish Hatchery and pond aeration capabilities were expanded.

Unanticipated staffing difficulties occurred during the spring culture season, impacting some production goals. However, this did not adversely impact the number of fish stocked into public waters statewide compared to FY 2020-2021, as overall numbers increased from the previous year.

**Public Water Fish Stockings by Permit Holders:** Eight permits for stocking fish in public waters were issued to individuals representing agencies and organizations. A list of the fish species and sites stocked by permit holders is provided in Table 2.

**Aquatic Nuisance Species (ANS):** Species introduced outside their native ranges can create negative impacts to endemic species in aquatic environments and pose a significant threat to the State of Alabama. ANS are a direct threat to recreational and

**TABLE 1:****FISH STOCKED INTO ALABAMA PUBLIC WATERS THROUGH FISHERIES SECTION PROGRAMS FY 2022**

Species	Inch Groups	Number
Largemouth Bass-Florida	1-14 inches	5,519
Largemouth Bass-Northern	1-2 inches	5,380
Striped Bass-Gulf Race	1 inch	305,821
Hybrid Striped Bass	1 inch	90,040
White Bass	1-3 inches	416,305
Channel Catfish	7-16 inches	69,484
Bluegill Sunfish	1-3 inches	2,270,288
Redear Sunfish	1-3 inches	1,118,710
Southern Walleye	2-12 inches	39,454
White Crappie	2-3 inches	9,010
Rainbow Trout	8-14 inches	41,976
Redeye Bass-Cahaba	1-5 inches	16,380
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>4,388,367</b>

**TABLE 2:****FISH STOCKED INTO ALABAMA PUBLIC WATERS BY PERMIT HOLDERS FY 2022**

Species	Location	Date	Number or Weight
Rainbow Trout	Black Creek (Gadsden)	11/5/2021	1,000
Rainbow Trout	Black Creek (Gadsden)	3/1/2022	1,000
Rainbow Trout	Mill & Mud Creeks at Tannehill State Park	4/28/2022	600 pounds
Largemouth Bass (Florida)	Guntersville Reservoir	5/21/2022	50,000
Channel Catfish	R. L. Harris Reservoir (Lake Wedowee)	5/24/2022	500 pounds
Grass Carp	Beaver Lake	9/28/2022	60
Grass Carp	Lake Tholocco	9/28/2022	70
Grass Carp	Thurlow Reservoir	10/4/2022	5,000

commercial fishing resources and can have significant adverse impacts to local economies dependent on aquatic recreational activities. The expansion of silver carp moving upstream in the Tennessee River from the Mississippi and Ohio rivers is the most immediate threat to Alabama waters. Our agency is currently conducting field sampling and cooperating with the state fisheries agencies of Tennessee, Mississippi, and Kentucky, as well as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), to monitor silver carp expansion in the Tennessee River.

Fisheries staff performed 166 field days sampling for invasive Asian carp and associated work on the Tennessee River. The primary sampling methods utilized were electrofishing and gill-netting. Staff provided a formal proposal to the USFWS that was subsequently approved for funding the statewide grant supporting the Alabama Aquatic Nuisance Species Management Plan.

Staff were involved in discussions with Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) and other relevant agencies regarding the need for several types of deterrents on the locks of the Tennessee River and upper Tombigbee River. Research is still being conducted on the effectiveness of these barriers.

**Publications:** Staff prepared several scientific journal articles for publication. Staff also provided their knowledge to outdoor writers upon request for information pertinent to Alabama's vast aquatic resources.

**Fisheries Research:** Through the Investigation and Management Techniques for Public Waters Project (formerly Sport Fish Restoration F-40), two studies concluded with investigators from the Auburn University School of Fisheries, Aquaculture, and Aquatic Sciences (AU-SFAAS): "Fish Kill Loss Valuation Through Estimation of Angling Effort and Use Valuation on Three Mid-Size Alabama Rivers," and "Development of a Database and Tools for Analysis of Alabama Reservoir Fisheries Data." One new study was initiated with investigators from the AU-SFAAS: "Estimating Population Impacts of Fishing and Natural Mortality of Black Bass at Neely Henry Reservoir, Alabama."

**Reservoir Management:** Largemouth bass, Alabama bass, spotted bass, striped bass, black crappie, white crappie, bluegill sunfish, redear sunfish, threadfin shad, gizzard shad, and blue-back herring populations were sampled by several methods, including electrofishing, trap netting, gillnetting, prod pole, seining, and/or long-lining in the following water bodies: Bear Creek, Big Creek, Eufaula, Lay, Neely Henry, Oliver, Pickwick, Point A, Smith, Tuscaloosa, Weiss, West Point, and Wheeler reservoirs as well as the Mobile Delta. Additional samples were collected from Bayou Sara, Dog River, and Fowl River. Specimens were collected, measured, and weighed. Many were also aged to determine growth rate and sexed to determine sexual maturity and ratios. Thermal and oxygen profiles were collected from most of the previously mentioned reservoirs. Reconnaissance surveys were completed on some reservoirs where standardized sampling was performed. The results are incorporated into reservoir management reports. Relative values of angler harvest, effort, and pressure were collected by creel surveys on selected reservoirs..

**General Surveys:** General surveys were completed at Cheaha, Demopolis, Eufaula, Harris, Livingston, Lay, Logan Martin, Martin, Neely Henry, Oak Mountain, Point A, Weiss, and Wheeler reservoirs as well as Bayou Sara, Ohatchee Creek, and the Sucarnoochee River. Redeye Bass were sampled at Buck Creek and Little Wills Creek. Southern walleye were sampled to determine abundance at Blackwater and Buttahatchee creeks, Marion County PFL, Oliver Reservoir, and the Mulberry Fork, Sipsey Fork, and Sucarnoochee rivers.

**Aquatic Education Program:** Staff, with assistance from other WFF sections and partner organizations, conducted 327 aquatic education events for 17,106 participants. These included 146 community fishing events offered to 6,732 participants. Staff also conducted 40 fishing classes for various audiences serving a total of 1,761 participants. Casting classes were taught to 1,759 participants during 51 events. Staff presented 38 talks about Alabama's aquatic resources to a total of 1,587 participants. Information on careers and other fisheries information was presented to 4,550 attendees at 27 display days. In addition, 25 other educational events were offered to 717 participants.

**Rivers and Streams Fisheries Program:** Section staff conducted 132 biological sampling trips during the fiscal year. Staff reviewed applications for 423 general and 145 state-protected scientific collection aquatic permits, 108 permit collection notifications, and 579 permit collection reports and penned six permit amendments letters. Staff also published three manuscripts in peer-reviewed scientific journals.

Southern walleye were collected from Hatchet Creek and Lake Mitchell to establish a broodstock. This is the only viable Southern walleye population identified in the state. Fin clips from these fish will be used to determine effective genetic population size. A manuscript that describes the Southern walleye as a new species continues to be written.

Staff set egg pads in the upper Pea River near Elba above the breached powerhouse and dam to determine if Gulf sturgeon are spawning in the fall in this area; however, no eggs were collected. In addition, 15 presumed fall spawning Gulf sturgeon were collected in the Choctawhatchee River near Geneva and implanted with 10-year acoustic tags to examine movements and spawning migrations of fall spawning fish. A passive acoustic array has been installed in the upper Choctawhatchee and Pea rivers to monitor their movements and habitats. Sampling for the Alabama sturgeon continues using trotlines; however, none were collected.

Staff completed sampling all identified sites for stippled darters. This species has been petitioned for listing under the Endangered Species Act. Our survey indicates it is found in more sites than previously known. Staff sampled 102 streams and river sites throughout the state to determine and assess the index of biotic integrity, which reveals the health of the stream based on fish species and abundance.

**TABLE 3:****FRESHWATER MOLLUSK STOCKING ACTIVITIES BY AABC STAFF FY 2022**

Species	Location	Date of Release	Number Stocked
Lampsilis virescens - E Alabama Lampmussel	Bear Creek adjacent to Natchez Trace Rest Area, Colbert Co., AL	6/22/2022	366
Lampsilis virescens - E Alabama Lampmussel	Bear Creek just upstream of Rock Creek confluence, Colbert County, AL	6/22/2022	400
Hamiota perovalis - T Orangenacre Mucket	Locust Fork, first 3 shoals above Wallstown Bridge, Blount County, AL	6/28/2022	4,000
Hamiota perovalis - T Orangenacre Mucket	Locust Fork, 1st and 2nd Shoal below Mount Olive Bridge, Jefferson County, AL	7/6/2022	3,000
Lampsilis ovata Pocketbook	Flint River, below US 72 Bridge Crossing, Madison County	7/21/2022	500
Toxolasma cylindrellus - E Pale Lilliput	Paint Rock River, PRRM 33.0, Jones Property, Jackson County, AL	7/26/2022	400
Lampsilis virescens - E Alabama Lampmussel	Paint Rock River, PRRM 33.0, Jones Property, Jackson County, AL	7/26/2022	1,000
Toxolasma cylindrellus - E Pale Lilliput	Paint Rock River, PRRM 50.7, Tractor Ford, Jackson County, AL	8/15/2022	400
Lampsilis virescens - E Alabama Lampmussel	Paint Rock River, PRRM 21.2, above Butler Mill, Madison and Marshall Counties, AL	8/15/2022	600
Toxolasma cylindrellus - E Pale Lilliput	Duck River, Venable Spring, Maury County, TN	8/24/2022	300
Lampsilis fasciola Wavey-rayed Lampmussel	Flint River, below Winchester Road Bridge Crossing, Madison County, AL	8/24/2022	1,000
Lampsilis fasciola Wavey-rayed Lampmussel	Flint River, below US 72 Bridge Crossing, Madison County, AL	8/24/2022	1,000
Leptoxis compacta - P1 Oblong Rocksnail	Cahaba River, Living River locality, Bibb County, AL	8/31/2022	963
Hamiota perovalis - T Orangenacre Mucket	Locust Fork of the Black Warrior, shoals below Wallstown Bridge, Blount County, AL	9/9/2022	1,800
Medionidus parvulus - E Coosa Mocassinshell	Lower Little Cahaba River, Wadsworth-TNC Property, Bibb County, AL	9/16/2022	120
Medionidus parvulus - E Coosa Mocassinshell	Yellowleaf Creek, Westervelt Company Mitigation Bank, Shelby County AL	9/30/2022	120
<b>TOTAL</b>			<b>15,969</b>

**Freshwater Mollusk Management and Research:** Staff conducted 41 biological field trips to sample streams throughout the state. These focused on mussels and snails to document distribution and population health, locate brood stock for use at the Alabama Aquatic Biodiversity Center (AABC), and provide specimens for various genetics studies. Staff provided assistance and consultation regarding mollusk issues to the USFWS, TVA, USGS, Natural Resources Conservation Service, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Smithsonian Institution, Alabama Department of Environmental Management, Geological Survey of Alabama, University of Alabama, University of West Alabama, University of North Alabama, University of Tennessee, University of North Carolina Charlotte, Dickinson College, North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences, the Black Warrior Riverkeeper, and the Center for Biological Diversity.

**Alabama Aquatic Biodiversity Center (AABC):** Staff assisted with numerous research, recovery, and monitoring activities. AABC assisted in research projects with USFWS, U.S. Forestry Service, USGS, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, University of Alabama, University of Tennessee, University of Mississippi, University of Michigan, and Auburn University.

Staff stocked 15,969 individual mollusks (mussels and snails) into freshwater water bodies (Table 3) and completed 72 biological trips in support of aquatic species research and recovery activities statewide. AABC staff provided technical assistance to other state and federal agencies as well as NGOs on more than 129 occurrences. Staff also participated in 42 technical meetings and 13 outreach activities with other government agencies, academic institutions, and NGOs. Additionally, staff assisted with the publication of three scientific articles and five technical reports.

**Endangered Species (Section 6) Aquatic Studies:** Through the Cooperative Endangered Species Conservation Fund (Section 6 of the Endangered Species Act), the following studies were conducted: Project 194, "Recruitment, Abundance and Habitat of Juvenile Gulf Sturgeon in the Upper Choctawhatchee and Pea Rivers"; Project 196, "Using Environmental DNA to Detect Alabama Sturgeon in the Tombigbee and Alabama River"; Project 206, "Assisting with the Collection of Environmental DNA Water Samples for the Detection of Alabama Sturgeon"; Project 215, "Using DNA to Verify the Identity of Gulf Sturgeon Eggs Collected from the Choctawhatchee River"; Project 216, "Pale Lilliput (*Toxolasma cylindrellus*) Survey in Paint Rock River Tributaries, Alabama"; Project 217, "Oblong Rocksnail (*Leptoxis compacta*) Status Survey, Culture and Reintroduction Effort in the Cahaba River Basin"; Project 218, "Epioblasma penita Distribution and Potential Habitat in the Buttahatchee River of Alabama"; Project 219, "Updated Surveys and Status Assessment for *Ptychobranchus jonesi*, in addition to other Federally and State-Listed Species, in the Pea River Watershed"; Project 221, "Conservation Genomic Analysis of the Spring Pygmy Sunfish (*Elassoma alabamae*)"; Project 222, "Status of Sturgeon in the Mobile River Basin - Phase One - 2021"; Project 224, "Recovery of Anthony's Riversnail, *Athearnia anthonyi*, in Alabama through Propagation, Reintroduction and Monitoring"; and Project 225, "Assessment

of Potential *Pleurobema taitianum* Habitat in Alabama River." Investigators prepared formal final and interim reports and sent them to the appropriate agencies.

## Future Efforts

**Public Fishing Lakes (PFLs):** The aging infrastructure at these lakes needs to be addressed. Without additional funding for extensive repairs and maintenance at these facilities, many locations will likely be closed. Contracting with qualified lake managers at rural lakes is also an ongoing issue. Low visitation rates at many rural PFLs and the increased costs of goods and services remain challenging. Alternative management options are being evaluated on a case-by-case basis, especially for less used PFLs.

**Aquatic Nuisance Species (ANS):** These species will continue to pose a significant biological and economic threat to the State of Alabama. Staff will continue to monitor their prevalence statewide and rely on public education as a preventive measure. Implementing regulations and recommending control methods will be utilized when applicable.

**Riverine Habitat:** The loss of riverine habitat due to flow and/or temperature related issues in Alabama has resulted in the decline or loss of numerous fish, snail, and/or mussel species. Due to this issue, our agency will continue to document habitat loss and advocate for hydropower companies to provide remediation measures. A statewide comprehensive water plan that emphasizes instream flow protection for the benefit of aquatic wildlife and habitats is needed.

**Fish Hatcheries:** The entire state fish hatchery system has numerous maintenance issues and renovation needs due to aging infrastructure. Many production ponds, drain kettles, water supply lines, drainage lines, facilities, and electrical power supplies either need to be repaired or replaced. A long-range plan has been developed that prioritizes improvements; however, this strategy can only be fully implemented with additional funding as maintenance and repair costs have increased.

**Fishing License Sales:** Fishing License Sales: The trend of stable to decreasing revenue from the sale of fishing licenses remains a concern, since this funding is the lifeblood of the Fisheries Section's conservation efforts. Efforts to reverse this trend include staff time conducting casting and fishing classes as well as increased assistance with other agency programs. Renewed and increased marketing efforts are now being conducted to encourage new fishing license buyers and increase lapsed license renewals.

**Employees:** The hiring and retaining of new employees is an issue that needs to be addressed. This issue is likely to impact our agency's ability to perform important tasks due to staffing shortages.

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## LAW ENFORCEMENT SECTION

The Law Enforcement Section of the Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division (WFF-LE) provides assistance in protecting and managing Alabama's wildlife resources and assists in public safety through a fair and balanced enforcement program.

### Accomplishments

The recently instituted nighttime feral swine and coyote season marked its first full year in 2022. License sales for this new hunting opportunity were high. With the price of night vision and thermal imaging equipment decreasing in recent years, public interest in nighttime predator control hunting has exploded. The need for new funding mechanisms has long been a priority for the Division. The special nighttime season is an excellent example of public demand for new hunting opportunities supplying this much needed new avenue of funding and license sales. The first full nighttime season saw large numbers of hunters in the field and zero hunting accidents in connection with the new season.

To better assist the public with the safe implementation of the new nighttime season, WFF-LE opened and staffed select ADCNR shooting ranges for nighttime shooting opportunities. Open range nights were advertised so that those wishing to participate in the new night season would have the ability to sight-in their nighttime hunting firearms and optics with guidance from WFF-LE staff. The feedback from those who attended the open range nights was overwhelmingly positive. This is a

great example of serving the public more efficiently by allowing different user groups to utilize state facilities outside of standard operational hours. More night shoots on ADCNR shooting ranges are scheduled for spring 2023.

New firearm ownership has reached historic levels over the last three years. With no signs of that trend slowing, federal funds available to states have grown substantially in connection with increased firearms sales. The increased funding provided to our agency through recreational and competitive shooting allowed WFF-LE to purchase land in Shelby County in 2022 with plans to develop it into a state-of-the-art public shooting complex. A large youth dove hunt was held there in September 2022, and several other conservation outreach programs have also taken place on the property. Development of the new facility is underway. Since sport shooting is closely related to hunting, it is important for the public to have safe areas to participate in this recreational opportunity. Alabama is at the forefront of delivering public shooting opportunities to the public.

The Opelika Community Archery Park opened in Lee County in the fall of 2022. This range was constructed through a partnership between ADCNR and the City of Opelika. The Opelika park, like many of Alabama's community archery parks, includes a covered shooting area and an elevated firing platform that allows for the simulation of elevated hunting positions. ADCNR's community archery park system receives excellent use and public support. Alabama leads the nation in community archery parks. There are currently 20 statewide with more being planned.



With Alabama's first confirmed case of chronic wasting disease (CWD) in winter 2022, WFF-LE stepped up to assist WFF's Wildlife Section with many tasks associated with this new challenge. Public outreach and education, sample collection, and increased WFF-LE presence within the CWD management zone are just a few tasks that are ongoing. Upon detection of the disease, baiting became unlawful within the two counties (Lauderdale and Colbert) located in the CWD management zone. WFF-LE continues to play a crucial role in educating the public about CWD and detecting regulation violations that have the potential to spread CWD outside of the management zone.

## Awards

Sergeant Scott Kellenberger of WFF-LE's Hunter Education Unit was selected as the Alabama Officer of the Year by the Southeastern Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies. The Alabama Chapter of the National Wild Turkey Federation presented its Officer of the Year Award to Senior Conservation Enforcement Officer (CEO) Drake Hayes of Shelby County. The Mississippi Flyway Council's Officer of the Year Award winner for Alabama was Senior CEO Mark Jolley of Russell County. The Shikar-Safari International Club presented Senior CEO Matt Moran of Jackson County their Conservation Officer of the Year award. The Alabama Wildlife Federation presented Senior CEO Thomas Bobo of Marshall County with its Conservation Law Enforcement Officer of the Year Award.

## Future Efforts

The section has operated at historically low staffing levels for the last several years. In 2022, the Alabama Personnel Department instituted a new raise structure that should assist in the recruitment and retention of enforcement personnel. The hiring of eight new CEOs in 2022 also helped relieve some of the burden on the law enforcement section.

Health concerns faced by our officers have diminished as the intensity of the pandemic continues to decrease. The safety and health of our CEOs remains a priority as we continue to respond to public concerns. The health and safety adaptations that our section has made during the pandemic will likely continue for many years to come.

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## WILDLIFE SECTION RESPONSIBILITIES AND FUNCTION

The Wildlife Section's mission is to manage, protect, conserve, and enhance the wildlife resources of Alabama.

### PUBLIC HUNTING OPPORTUNITY PROGRAMS

**Wildlife Management Areas:** Staff managed more than 790,000 acres within the Wildlife Management Area (WMA) and Special Opportunity Area (SOA) system. During FY 2021-2022,

staff held 6,545 managed hunt days on the 35 WMAs and 10 SOAs. WMAs also provided opportunities for trapping, fishing, hiking, picnicking, camping, research, and nature study. To support public recreation opportunities on the WMA/SOA system, staff maintained 139 office and operation support buildings, maintained equipment, painted and placed signs on 217 miles of property boundaries, maintained boat ramps, applied aggregate (crushed rock) to refurbish 80 miles of WMA public access roads, and maintained 86 access, parking, and campground areas.

Additionally, staff conducted prescribed burns on 42,510 acres of wildlife habitat, maintained 268 miles of fire lanes associated with prescribed fire activities, maintained 4,368 acres of wildlife openings and early successional habitat, and performed invasive species control for both plants and animals to enhance habitat for wildlife populations and public enjoyment.

**Physically Disabled Hunting Areas:** The Hunting Trail for People with Physical Disabilities continued to be a well-utilized program. The trail has 19 hunting areas located in 21 of Alabama's 67 counties. This innovative program provides opportunities for individuals with physical disabilities to participate in hunting in an environment developed to meet their needs.

**Youth Hunting Programs:** In FY 2021-2022, staff conducted 26 youth dove hunts across the state in 19 counties. The 2022 youth dove hunts had 678 youth participants with 105 being first-time hunters (16% of the total number of youth participants). Additionally, 22 WMAs hosted youth deer hunts and 23 WMAs hosted youth turkey hunts on the weekends prior to the opening of regular gun seasons.

### Land Acquisitions FY 2022

- Acquired 305 acres through the Forever Wild Land Trust (FWLT) for the Red Hills WMA in Monroe County
- Acquired 2,290 acres through the FWLT for the Thigpen Hill SOA in Butler County
- Acquired 195 acres for the Shelby County Shooting Range and youth dove hunting opportunities in Shelby County
- Acquired 2,886 acres for the Little River State Forest SOA in Escambia County

**Forest Management Activities:** WMA biologists, in coordination with Wildlife Section foresters, worked to promote forest health and enhance habitats within the WMA system to benefit wildlife year-round. Revenue generated from timber sales on Wildlife Section-owned lands was used for general management efforts such as tract reforestation and/or utilized to fund additional land acquisitions.

### Forestry actions for FY 2021-2022 included the following:

- Autauga WMA: 115 acres of recently harvested timber

reserve were reforested with longleaf pine. A 746-acre first pine thinning sale is also approximately 20% complete.

- Barbour WMA: 400 acres of recent clearcuts were reforested with loblolly and longleaf pine. A timber sale encompassing 425 acres of mixed pine and hardwood thinning and 234 acres of final harvest is approximately 20% complete. Also, harvests on 1,700 additional acres is approximately 65% complete.
- Cedar Creek SOA: A 1,070-acre timber sale targeting Eastern red cedar is approximately 90% complete. Additionally, 43 acres of recently clearcut areas were treated with herbicide and will be reforested with loblolly and slash pine in the winter of 2023.
- Fred T. Stimpson SOA: A timber sale encompassing 165 acres of first pine thinning was sold.
- Freedom Hills WMA: A 235-acre pine and hardwood thinning was sold – the harvest is 55% complete.
- Geneva State Forest WMA: A 772-acre microchip pine plantation thinning sale is approximately 60% complete. A timber sale encompassing 272 acres of second pine thinning and 43 acres of final harvest was sold. Additionally, 265 acres of recently clearcut reserve stands were treated with herbicide with plans to be reforested in the winter of 2023.
- Lauderdale WMA: Harvests on 1,747 acres of first pine thinning and 119 of final harvest is approximately 60% complete. An additional 115 acres were treated with herbicide with plans to be reforested with shortleaf pine in the winter of 2023.
- Portland Landing SOA: The 940-acre pine plantation first thinning sale is approximately 60% complete. An additional 360 acres of pine plantation second thinning was sold.
- Skyline WMA: A 225-acre pine clearcut and hardwood thinning harvest was completed. An additional 418 acres of pine and hardwood thinning is approximately 15% complete.
- Upper State SOA: An 88-acre hurricane salvage sale was completed. An additional 105 acres of mixed pine and hardwood first thinning was sold.

Timber stands on the WMA system will continue to be evaluated and monitored for emerging forest health issues. Treatments will be implemented as needed to ensure forest resources remain healthy and supply ample wildlife habitat to meet the section's needs. Future thinning sales are being planned for specific tracts located on Lauderdale, Freedom Hills, Skyline, Barbour, and Lowndes WMAs and the Cedar Creek SOA.

Invasive species such as tallow tree, Japanese climbing fern, and bicolor lespedeza were scouted and treated throughout the WMA system. Additionally, the aggressive nature of cogongrass has made section staff more vigilant in spotting and treating infestations statewide. Areas of cogongrass have been undergoing treatment on the Fred T. Stimpson, Upper State, Cedar Creek,

and Portland Landing SOAs, as well as the Upper Delta, Geneva State Forest, and Barbour WMAs for several seasons. The infested areas have been significantly reduced, but monitoring and chemical control will continue.

## GAME SPECIES PROGRAMS

**White-tailed Deer Management:** Information was collected on various WMAs and other sites to determine deer hunter participation and success, physical conditions of deer, and the status of deer populations. A hunting activity telephone survey was conducted that supplied valuable data. An estimated 237,878 deer hunters harvested 301,122 deer during the 2021-2022 hunting season (hunting activity telephone survey data). The data were used in determining recommendations for hunting seasons and bag limits and evaluating the success of each hunting season.

Hunters reported 186,358 deer harvested through the mandatory deer and turkey harvest reporting system (Game Check) during the 2021-2022 hunting season. The 2021-2022 season was the sixth year for mandatory reporting of all deer harvests.

Samples from 3,350 deer were collected and tested for chronic wasting disease (CWD) as part of WFF's statewide CWD surveillance efforts. Alabama's first two CWD-positive deer were detected in Lauderdale County as part of these surveillance efforts. WFF implemented response actions as specified in WFF's CWD Strategic Surveillance and Response Plan.

**Wild Turkey Management:** Wild turkey observation, harvest, and reproduction information was collected statewide through the Avid Turkey Hunter Survey (ATHS) and wild turkey brood survey. Data on gobbling activity (number of gobblers and gobbles heard), turkeys seen, and gobblers harvested for each day hunted during the spring season was collected by 189 avid turkey hunter survey participants.

ATHS data was used to monitor trends in gobbling activity, population, sex and age structure, harvest timing, and harvest rates. Section staff and volunteers collected observational wild turkey brood data in July and August 2022. They reported 1,044 observations of turkeys (hens, poults, and gobblers), and each observation during any day was recorded separately. The data were separated by five WFF districts, by six ecoregions (Piedmont, Southeastern Plains, Ridge and Valley, Southwestern Appalachians, Interior Plateau, and Southern Coastal Plain), and by public or private lands. Brood survey data was used to monitor trends in reproduction and the associated survival of poults being recruited into the population. The results of the ATHS and brood survey were published in the annual Full Fans & Sharp Spurs wild turkey report. The ATHS and brood survey data was also used in combination with results from the Game Check harvest reporting system and Responsive Management post-season harvest survey to structure recommendations for hunting seasons and bag limits.

Hunters reported 15,673 harvested male turkeys through the mandatory Game Check system for the 2021-2022 hunting season. The Responsive Management post-season harvest survey estimated 35,997 male turkeys were harvested in the 2021-2022 hunting season.

Staff also conducted game camera brood surveys in July and August 2022. These surveys took place on Autauga, Barbour, Blue Spring, Cahaba, Coosa, David K. Nelson, Freedom Hills, Geneva State Forest, Lauderdale, Little River, Lowndes, Mulberry Fork, Oakmulgee, Skyline, and Yates Lake WMAs. Staff also conducted surveys on Portland Landing and Uchee Creek SOAs. The game camera survey results will be compared to incidental observation results. These projects will continue in coming years.

**Mourning Dove Management:** The annual mourning dove study – part of a nationwide project – consisted of trapping, banding, and releasing mourning doves. For this project, 1,250 mourning doves were banded and released, and the data was submitted to the Bird Banding Laboratory of the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS). The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) will analyze data from reported band returns to provide parameters needed for dove population modeling such as band return rates, migration, harvest rates, and estimates for mortality and survival.

**Waterfowl Management:** Annual biological surveys and research continued throughout the state to obtain information on waterfowl and their habitats to inform management of species. Aerial waterfowl censuses were not conducted in FY 2021-2022 on the Tennessee River, Mobile Bay, and the Mobile-Tensaw Delta. Hunter bag checks were continued in the Mobile-Tensaw Delta and the Tennessee River Valley during fall and winter. As part of a nationwide project, 825 wood ducks were banded and released in Alabama, and data was submitted to the USGS Bird Banding Laboratory. USFWS will analyze the data to provide parameters needed for wood duck population monitoring such as band return rates, migration, kill rates, and estimates for mortality and survival.

**Research:** For FY 2021-2022, \$2.95 million in Wildlife Restoration Federal Assistance funds and approximately \$405,461 in external sponsorship funds were used to support seven cooperative research projects between WFF and five different universities.

Of these cooperative research projects, four were ongoing from previous years, and one new project was established in FY 2021-2022. Staff collaborated with colleagues from the following institutions: Auburn University, University of Tennessee, Cornell University, Eckerd College, and University of Maine.

## **NONGAME WILDLIFE PROGRAM**

**Bald Eagle Population Monitoring:** Bald Eagle Population Monitoring: Since the bald eagle was removed from the Threatened and Endangered Species List in 2007, bald eagle nests in Alabama have been randomly monitored for productivity and survivorship. Biologists continued to record newly discovered or

reported eagle nests and monitored the number of bald eagles overwintering in Alabama as part of the nationwide 2022 Mid-Winter Bald Eagle Survey. The number of bald eagles wintering in Alabama remains stable.

**Golden Eagle Migration Project:** Golden eagle camera surveys were conducted in Alabama on five WMAs, three SOAs, and one national forest with assistance from section staff and U.S. Forest Service (USFS) staff to assess the eastern population of golden eagles. The presence of golden eagles was confirmed at six camera sites. These surveys revealed more information on the winter ecology of golden eagles to allow for better management efforts. Biologists did not attempt to trap golden eagles during the 2022 season due to travel restrictions. Biologists continued to track the previously captured eagles with active transmitters. Data gathered from the tracked birds will help to assess wintering golden eagle habitat in Alabama as well as provide information about their migration pathways and breeding habitat.

**Annual Breeding Bird Surveys:** Biologists participated in the continent-wide Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) program administered by the USGS in 2022. Over the last 26 years, our nongame biologists have completed 220 BBS routes. The BBS program is the most important census program for tracking the population trends of landbirds across the landscape.

**Christmas Bird Count:** Conducted annually during December and January for more than a century, the Christmas Bird Count serves to gather winter population data on all bird species in the U.S., Canada, and many countries in the Western Hemisphere. Nongame Wildlife Program biologists assist by conducting one Christmas Bird Count in south Alabama on Dauphin Island. Nongame biologists also lead the Montgomery County Christmas Bird Count.

**Wading Bird Rookery Surveys:** Wading bird rookery surveys were conducted across the state to monitor known breeding locations and to survey for additional sites. A total of 23 rookeries were surveyed with 10 of those being active. During the surveys, five wading bird species were detected. Surveys will continue to better assess trends of breeding wading birds in Alabama.

**Coastal Shorebird Surveys:** The most important sites for nesting shorebirds in Alabama are located in Mobile County. These sites include Gaillard Island, Cat Island, Marsh Island, and Isle Aux Herbes. Gaillard Island, the 1,400-acre dredge disposal island in Mobile Bay, held over 10,000 pairs of nesting brown pelicans, laughing gulls, and four nesting tern species. Notable was an estimated 3,000-nest colony of royal terns. Terns nesting on the island benefitted from site construction work completed prior to nesting season. Cat Island, Marsh Island, and Isle Aux Herbes are located in the Mississippi Sound. Cat Island – three acres of mostly shell and sand – attracts terns and black skimmers. A colony of 150 Caspian tern nests was the largest nesting colony of this species in Alabama for 2022. Over 300 pairs of Caspian terns, royal terns, sandwich terns, and gull-billed terns nested on Cat Island along with a single pair of American oystercatchers. Nearby Marsh Island had an estimated 750 pairs of nesting

laughing gulls. This is by far the largest concentration of nesting laughing gulls ever located in the state away from Gaillard Island. West of Marsh Island on Isle Aux Herbes, 125 pairs of black skimmers, Caspian terns, and gull-billed terns nested on some of the narrow shell and sand beach areas. Also located here were four pairs of American oystercatchers. North of Isle Aux Herbes on the mainland coast is the Lightning Point Shoreline Restoration area at Bayou La Batre. Completed in 2021, this habitat creation project was hoped to attract nesting shorebirds. While a lone pair of Wilson's plovers used the area to nest, shorebirds mostly used the area for foraging and loafing.

**Bat Population Monitoring:** The Southeastern Bat Diversity Network Annual Bat Blitz was hosted by the Alabama Bat Working Group in the Bankhead National Forest August 1-5. The goal of the event was to replicate the same Bat Blitz conducted in 2008 and compare data from before and after the arrival of white-nose syndrome (WNS) in the forest. WNS is a deadly fungal disease that has killed more than 8 million bats in North America.

The nongame bat biologist contributed significant time to plan, prepare, host, and participate in the Bat Blitz. Over three nights, the same 24 sites sampled in 2008 were resurveyed in 2022 (plus an additional five sites). The resulting data provided a stark picture of the effect of WNS on certain bat species in Alabama. Captures of bats known to be heavily affected by WNS – northern long-eared bats, Indiana bats, and tricolored bats – were substantially reduced in 2022.

A second point of focus for the bat field surveys was to monitor two caves during the summer to ensure usage of the caves by bats was not diminished by the installation of bat-friendly gates that prevent disturbance by humans. Weaver Cave was monitored after installation of gates for comparison to pre-gating usage and Bat Cave was monitored prior to the installation of gates to determine a baseline against which to compare post-gating usage. Weaver Cave was monitored May 10, June 9, July 6, August 10, and September 8. Bat Cave was monitored May 19, July 7, and August 23. Analysis of the data is pending.

This year the USFWS Alabama Ecological Services Field Office funded continuation of the effort to radio-tag Indiana Bats and track them from their winter hibernaculum to their summer grounds. Nongame staff supported this effort by leading the effort to retrieve bats from Sauta Cave, assisting the radio-tagging process, searching for bats on the ground, and conducting aerial surveys to search for radio-tagged bats. Unseasonably cool temperatures combined with poor flying conditions greatly hampered this effort, resulting in no bats being tracked during their migration or located at their final destination.

**Eastern Spotted Skunk Research:** Nongame Wildlife biologists conducted camera surveys for eastern spotted skunks (ESS) in north Alabama from late January to late April. Data reported from numerous studies across multiple states show that most camera captures occur in March. Due to that discovery, camera surveys were started later this year than in previous years to maximize efficiency. The areas surveyed included the Bankhead

National Forest, Cane Creek Nature Preserve, Joe Wheeler State Park, Lake Guntersville State Park, and Sam Murphy WMA. Cameras were placed at 26 specific areas in the locations listed above.

In April 2021, a dead skunk reported by a hunter at Sam Murphy WMA was confirmed to be an ESS. For the winter survey season, six camera-traps were deployed on the WMA within a mile of where the dead ESS was reported. Cameras recorded an ESS at two of the sites.

Partners from the Poarch Band of Creek Indians and University of West Alabama also joined the survey effort by running cameras in their areas of interest in Escambia and Bibb counties, respectively. These efforts did not yield any ESS records.

Staff continues to occasionally receive reports of ESS from the public, generated by our outreach flyer and information at [www.outdooralabama.com](http://www.outdooralabama.com). Since the beginning of the project in 2016, staff have received 57 verified observations.

**Long-tailed Weasel Research:** In FY 2021-2022 an effort was launched to collect more records on long-tailed weasels in the state. Modeling the success of the Eastern spotted skunk campaign to solicit observations from the public, a "Have you Seen Me" flyer was created for long-tailed weasels. It illustrates the visual differences between a long-tailed weasel and a mink. A supporting page on ADCNR's website was also developed. The flyer was distributed through the Nongame Program's Conservation eNewsletter as well as social media to inform the public about the need for sighting information. The flyer and an accompanying article were also published in the Hunting & Fishing Digest. Since the flyer's release, staff have received 20 verified reports of long-tailed weasels from across the state – four in 2021 and 16 in 2022. The Nongame Wildlife Biologist for North Alabama has also joined the recently formed Long-tailed Weasel Working Group.

**Allegheny Woodrat Research:** Nongame staff began a collaboration with and Dr. Jacob Dittel and Dr. Jeff Ray from the University of North Alabama to investigate the distribution of the Allegheny woodrat, a state protected Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN) in Alabama. It is conventionally accepted that Allegheny woodrats in Alabama only occur north of the Tennessee River, with the exception of four specimens housed in the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History known to have been collected 10 miles southeast of Florence. The former site of LaGrange College in Colbert County was identified as a location matching this description with potential suitable habitat for a population of the Allegheny woodrat. These woodrats are closely associated with caves, rockhouses, rocky outcrops, and talus slopes. Following contact with the landowner, a site visit was made and signs of woodrats (cached acorns and stick nests) were discovered in a rockhouse formation. Ten cameras were set and baited with peanut butter and rolled oats protected inside a PVC pipe. Two cameras captured images of woodrats. Scat pellets were collected. Using published laboratory techniques, Dr. Ray conducted an analysis of DNA isolated from the scat and determined the subjects were the more common eastern wood-

rats. An additional 10 baited cameras were set at the TVA Muscle Shoals Trails Complex on the bluff line along the Tennessee River. No woodrats were documented at this location.

**Endangered Species (Section 6) Research:** WFF received \$444,727 in federal funds for projects on fish and wildlife species eligible for funding under Section 6 of the Endangered Species Act. Approximately half of those funds were for projects administered by the Wildlife Section. Population and status surveys for the gopher tortoise, red-bellied turtle, Eastern diamondback rattlesnake, and Black Warrior waterdog, along with red-cockaded woodpecker (RCW) translocation and habitat restoration on state lands, are examples of projects made possible by those funds.

**American Alligator Populations:** American alligator population and harvest surveys are conducted annually throughout its range in Alabama. Data from these surveys are used to manage our alligator resources and make harvest recommendations for each of the state's five hunt zones. Population surveys are used to evaluate overall trends in alligator abundance. Hunter harvest data is also collected annually from all alligators harvested within each zone to evaluate the health of the population. Harvest information such as body weight, length, sex, and harvest location are collected. This information provides insights regarding trends in health as well as sex and age structure of our alligator populations. Long-term trends from harvest and population surveys continued to indicate that Alabama's alligator population is stable and a conservative harvest is sustainable. Interest in the hunts increased in 2022 with a total of 7,167 applications being received for the 260 available tags. This was a 22.2% increase from the 5,865 applications received in 2021. Hunter success rates increased 0.8% from 2021 with a 59.2% success rate throughout the five hunt zones. Success rates within each hunt zone were as follows: Southwest: 74% with 74 harvested, Coastal: 56% with 28 harvested, West Central: 64% with 32 harvested, Southeast: 35% with 14 harvested, and Lake Eufaula: 30% with six harvested. The hunts continue to increase in popularity providing hunters with additional opportunities to enjoy a unique hunting experience. To further understand and manage alligator resources in Alabama, WFF initiated a collaborative research project with other state agencies and universities to obtain information regarding hunter harvest management, public satisfaction, and baseline population health within the Mobile-Tensaw Delta.

**Falconry Permits:** The Nongame Wildlife Program administers falconry permits for the state and provides technical assistance to permit holders. Staff administer falconry written examinations, conduct required falconry facility and equipment inspections, issue permits and input data to the federal falconry database. As of September 30, 2022, Alabama had 73 active falconry permits. These 73 permits were divided among 13 apprentice permits, 30 general class permits, and 30 master class permits. Ten falconers did not renew their permits by the August 31 expiration date. During FY 2021-2022, seven new apprentice falconers were issued permits.

## **PRIVATE LANDS TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAM**

**Technical Assistance:** The Wildlife Section employs seven biologists who provide technical assistance to private landowners, corporations, hunting clubs, and government agencies. Throughout the year, biologists provided onsite inspections, reviewed and drafted management plans, and conducted various other management outreach activities to enhance wildlife management. One of the most popular avenues for dispensing wildlife management advice is through the agency's Deer Management Assistance Program (DMAP). DMAP included 97 landowners and hunting clubs with 265,321 acres enrolled last year.

Providing landowners and land managers with strategies to improve wildlife habitat on their lands continued to grow in importance during FY 2021-2022. As a result, a mutually beneficial 10-year partnership continued with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). This partnership helps private landowners with obtaining farm bill program assistance and provides effective wildlife management advice. Under a cooperative agreement, technical assistance biologists worked out of NRCS offices and with NRCS personnel to deliver the programs. Biologists met with landowners to develop conservation plans and contracts. Biologists also participated in numerous workshops, tours, presentations, working groups, and training sessions that reached hundreds of landowners and dozens of natural resource agency personnel. This partnership with NRCS will continue in FY 2022-2023.

**Federal Energy Regulatory Commission Meetings:** Staff continued meetings and site visits with personnel from Alabama Power Company (APC) associated with the Coosa Wildlife Management Plan, Harris Dam APC hydroelectric relicensing project, and Martin Dam APC hydroelectric relicensing project. Staff reviewed documents regarding the development of wildlife, shoreline, threatened and endangered species, and recreation management plans for the hydroelectric projects at Martin, Jordan, Mitchell, and Weiss lakes. Plans are required by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission. Staff will continue active involvement in the development of wildlife, shoreline, threatened and endangered species, and recreation management plans for all projects associated with hydroelectric power generation.

**East Gulf Coastal Plain Joint Venture:** Wildlife Section personnel continued to participate in various aspects of the East Gulf Coastal Plain Joint Venture, a partnership of 13 state, federal, private, and academic organizations that leads a regional habitat conservation movement founded on a science-based, landscape-scale strategy. The partnership can more effectively secure a sustainable future for birds and habitats.

**Nuisance Wildlife:** Nuisance wildlife information was delivered to the public through a variety of media outlets, educational workshops, technical literature, and personal correspondence. Due to their destructive nature and negative impact on wildlife habitat, feral hogs are a serious concern in Alabama. Partnerships continued across the state with personnel from ADCNR,

the Alabama Cooperative Extension System, and USDA Wildlife Services to provide informative workshops regarding feral hog biology, impacts of feral hogs on wildlife habitat, disease implications, current control methods and techniques, and the need to eliminate relocation of this species. Control of other nuisance and predator species, such as beavers, coyotes, and raccoons, also generates many requests for assistance from landowners and land managers due to their potential impacts on game species, including white-tailed deer and wild turkeys. Personnel conducted and assisted with numerous workshops and seminars around the state to provide landowners, hunting clubs, and forestry owners with information that could be used in their nuisance wildlife management efforts. Additionally, informative articles about dealing with these species were made available to the public at ADCNR's website, [www.outdooralabama.com](http://www.outdooralabama.com). Personnel utilized the ADCNR nuisance manual to provide the public with current information on nuisance wildlife species and ongoing nuisance issues across the state.

**Trapper Educational Workshops:** The Wildlife Section conducted 10 furbearer trapping workshops for ages 7 and up during FY 2021-2022. The workshops were held in Marion, Butler, Bibb, Leeds, Jackson, Baldwin, Bullock, Macon, Escambia, and Pike counties. With 71 youth and 154 adults, a total of 225 students attended the workshops. The average age of the youth was 10.4 years old for males and 11 years old for females. Many of the youth participants were accompanied by a parent or guardian, extending the reach of the program. The 225 students consisted of 172 males and 53 females. Of the total participants, 212 were White, 1 was Hispanic, and 12 were Black.

The two-day program begins on a Saturday morning with classroom presentations on trapping history, furbearer management, responsible trapping and conservation, and trapping laws and regulations. Presentations then continue with additional discussion on trap and snare types, trapping equipment and lures/baits, and hands-on trap-setting training. Saturday afternoon is devoted to trapline scouting and making sets with mentors. On Sunday morning, the students meet at predawn to check traps and pull their trapline. The rest of the day is devoted to fur-handling methods and techniques. Plans for FY 2022-2023 are to conduct nine, two-day workshops throughout the state.

## FUTURE EFFORTS

**Public Hunting:** The loss of leased land in the WMA system is a continued concern. Land acquisitions supported with federal grant programs are pursued each year to help offset losses in our private land leases. During FY 2021-2022, Wildlife Restoration Federal Grant Assistance (Pittman-Robertson) funds were used to purchase 3,081 acres to create the Little River State Forest SOA and the Shelby County Shooting Range and Youth Dove Hunting Area. Additionally, 2,595 acres were purchased and added to Red Hills WMA and Thigpen SOA using federal grant funds and matching funds from FWLT. More leased land is likely to be lost

in the future as private and corporate landowners withdraw from their contractual agreements. The section will attempt to contractually lease or fee-simple purchase other lands and provide additional incentives to encourage landowners to include lands in the program. WFF will also continue to work with the FWLT to acquire land for public hunting.

**Nuisance Wildlife:** The occurrence of nuisance wildlife problems and conflicts continues to rise, especially as we deal with an increasingly urbanized society. This portion of the public is often unfamiliar with dealing with wildlife issues. Also, the urban/suburban setting limits common solutions to deal with many of these problems. At the district level, a considerable amount of time is spent providing assistance on nuisance wildlife calls. As the Division becomes more active in dealing with these non-traditional wildlife issues, time management and funding will become more challenging. The Division's Wildlife Section has issued approximately 103 nuisance wildlife control operator permits across the state. These permits allow private companies and individuals to deal with nuisance wildlife issues.

**State Funding:** Federal funding associated with the Federal Aid to Wildlife Restoration Act has increased significantly during the past five years. The matching state dollars required to fully utilize all the federal dollars (25%/75%) have been limited and could lead to reversions of federal dollars if matching opportunities are not available. WFF staff has collaborated with the Forever Wild Board and worked cooperatively to utilize Forever Wild funding as a state match source. This assists in capturing the federal apportionment that is beyond the amount our traditional state dollars can match, thereby providing aid for land acquisitions into the WMA system. We are exploring other options to fully utilize our federal dollars through partnerships with outside entities and third-party, in-kind match.

## RECRUITMENT, RETENTION, AND REACTIVATION

R3 is short for Recruitment, Retention, and Reactivation. This concept applies to every facet of the Department, from its educational outreach efforts to recruiting new hunters and anglers through programs such as Go Fish! Alabama and the Firearms 101 workshops. R3 also focuses on the retention and reactivation of hunters and anglers by providing quality outdoor recreational opportunities.

Since the funding model of state wildlife agencies relies on the sale of hunting and fishing licenses, the recruitment of new hunters, retention of existing hunters, and reactivation of license buyers are very important to the future of conservation. For that reason, a full-time R3 Coordinator focuses on R3 efforts for WFF. Here are just a few of the examples of WFF's ongoing R3 efforts:

### Recruitment, Retention, and Reactivation (R3) Training:

In FY 2021-2022, staff completed quarterly R3 training in conservation history, customer service, and how to increase community engagement. Each training session and outreach effort assists staff in supporting WFF's mission to manage, protect, conserve,

and enhance the wildlife and aquatic resources of Alabama for the sustainable benefit of the people of Alabama. This mission can only be accomplished with a concerted effort by WFF staff and a focus on the future of conservation.

**Adult Mentored Hunting (AMH) Program:** The AMH program provides participants who have little or limited experience an opportunity to learn basic hunting skills and receive one-on-one guidance from experienced mentors. New skills include firearm safety and handling; woodsmanship; game cleaning, preparation, and cooking; tracking; scouting; and identifying where to hunt. The learning process starts at one of the Hunting 101 Workshops, which are hosted around the state at wildlife management areas (WMAs). Afterward, participants are randomly selected to participate in one-day or three-day mentored hunting opportunities. In FY 2021-2022, WFF hosted seven Hunting 101 workshops, five single-day mentored hunts, and five multi-day hunts with a total of 152 participants. For those hunts, 26 percent were female and 29 percent were minorities. Five events were conducted in Dallas County, four in Shelby County, two in Bullock County, one each in Barbour, Mobile, Jackson, Russell, Autauga, and Barbour counties. These events were conducted in partnership with the Alabama Chapter of the National Wild Turkey Federation.

**Go Fish! Alabama (GFA) Program:** WFF staff conducted four Go Fish, Alabama! events at the Mobile First Catch Center from March to July 2022. Participants learned basic fishing skills from knot tying and lure selection to finding places to fish and how to cook their catch. The total number of program participants for this period was 197. Of those, 51 percent were minorities and 43 percent were female. Several participants caught their first fish and lots of families developed new traditions.

**Firearms 101 Program:** In the second year of the program, WFF Law Enforcement staff conducted 30 four-hour firearms classes that introduced new shooters to firearm safety and marksmanship skills. The classes were taught throughout the state at WMA public shooting ranges and other locations with community partners. These classes were developed in response to the national surge in new firearm ownership and have been an overwhelming success. In 2022, 358 participants took at least one of the four-hour courses. Many of the participants enjoyed it so much that they took additional courses. Of those 358 participants, 55 percent were female and 45 percent were first-time license buyers.

## **CONSERVATION OUTREACH**

WFF's Conservation Outreach Program provides public communication, outreach, and education services to proactively increase awareness of the Division's wildlife management programs, accomplishments, policies, and related topics. The program is also designed to encourage interaction between the public and the Division.

The Conservation Outreach Coordinator directly interacts with the public, answering questions and offering information via phone, through the mail, online, and in person regarding hunting, fishing, trapping, wildlife viewing, species' natural history, and all associated laws and regulations.

Throughout the year, the program coordinator monitors the Division's printed and personal interactions with the public and makes recommendations based on public needs and requests from the Division. The program coordinator also provides guidance and support to other ADCNR staff who are interacting with the public at a variety of outreach events to foster positive relationships and encourage sustainable use of Alabama's abundant natural resources.

### **The program coordinator's outreach efforts during FY 2021-2022 included the following:**

- Appeared on various TV and radio broadcasts throughout the state to discuss WFF-related topics
- Provided interviews to print and online media throughout the state
- Interacted with the public through WFF's social media to promote public engagement with the Division
- Represented the Division at various trade shows, expos, and professional meetings
- Responded to landowner and media questions regarding wildlife identification and other WFF-related topics
- Assisted hunters with details regarding usage of Wildlife Management Areas throughout the state
- Assisted non-resident hunters with planning their trips to Alabama
- Helped promote the Division's Firearms 101, Adult Mentored Hunt, and Go Fish, Alabama! programs
- Assisted with R3 programs and provided mentorship and support to new hunters
- Reviewed printed materials for distribution to the public and made recommendations to make those products more informative and easier to understand
- Helped produce educational videos about Alabama's wildlife, fisheries, and regulatory topics





# PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR HUNTING

By Chuck Sykes, Director of the Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division

## UNFORTUNATELY, HUNTERS CAN BE THEIR OWN WORST ENEMY WHEN IT COMES TO PUBLIC SUPPORT OF HUNTING.

While on an annual hunting trip in south Texas, I was having a very candid conversation about the public's attitude toward hunting with my fellow hunters and our outfitter. Their reactions to some of the statistics I was quoting prompted me to write this article. Like them, before I took this job, I was only privy to conversations and meetings with like-minded individuals who, for the most part, shared my same thoughts and opinions on hunting.



They thought I was crazy when I pointed out that less than 4 percent of Alabama residents purchase a hunting license annually. When all of your friends hunt and you operate a successful hunting outfitting service, you would assume that hunters are everywhere. But that's simply not the case. I also informed them of the overwhelming disdain for "trophy" hunting by the majority of the non-hunting public. Again, this came as a complete surprise to them.

In the book *How to Talk About Hunting*, Mark Duda refers to years of human dimension research conducted by his company, Responsive Management, on the topic of public support of hunting. His research has shown that approximately 85 percent of American adults support hunting when it is for the meat. On the opposite end of the scale, less than 30 percent of these same people support hunting for a trophy. This point is what I want to focus on for this article.

First, what is considered "trophy" hunting and who gets to make that decision? That's always been a huge question in my mind. So, let me describe a couple of hunting scenarios and see if you think they classify as "trophy" hunting.

Scenario 1: A hunter in his early 50s saves his money to go on a once-in-a-lifetime hunting safari to Africa. He has been dreaming of hunting Kudu since he was a child. During this hunt he takes hundreds of photos and hours of video of the animals, countryside, and indigenous people to document this momentous trip, and he is fortunate to harvest an incredible bull. He has purchased all of the necessary licenses, spent money in the rural areas, provided the meat from the animal to the locals, and has a shoulder mount of the animal to bring home. Is this hunter a "trophy" hunter?

I'd say absolutely. But is that a bad thing? Absolutely not! Money spent on the trip was utilized to maintain healthy animal populations. Protein from the harvested animal fed the local community. Tips, guide fees, and taxidermy fees were paid to support the local economy.

Scenario two: A hunter in his early 50s goes to his family's farm on Christmas afternoon to deer hunt with his 78-year-old father. The two have hunted together on that same farm since the hunter was 6 years old. During this hunt he takes photos and video of the deer and the surroundings to document this momentous trip, and he is fortunate to harvest a 3.5-year-old, four-point. He has purchased all of the necessary licenses, spent money in the area, provided the meat from the animal to a local family, and removed the antlers to save a memento of the hunt. Is this hunter a "trophy" hunter?

I'd say absolutely. But is that a bad thing? Absolutely not! The trophy in this case was not the biggest representative of the species. However, the years of hard work and sacrifices both men have made to manage the property to provide great habitat for the wildlife and, most importantly, the fact that they have harvested an animal together for the past 44 years make this deer a true trophy.

Anti-hunters have done a superb job of creating a misperception among the non-hunting public about trophy hunting. In my opinion, most "trophy" hunters are classified by antis into two categories: In the first, they are wealthy, heartless aristocrats who travel to exotic destinations to kill the biggest and best of each species, cut off its head for a mount to hang in the office, and throw the rest of the animal away. These hunters are accused of having no motivation for the hunt other than as a status symbol of their wealth and physical prowess. The second group of "trophy" hunters is seen as drunk rednecks who kill only for fun. These hunters are often portrayed as uneducated, unethical, and dangerous.

I'm not so naive that I don't realize a few people do exactly what the antis accuse all hunters of. However, both of the anti-hunters' classifications of "trophy" hunters, for the most part, are not correct. As you can imagine, I was the hunter in both scenarios, and I don't feel like I fit into either of those groups. However, according to the rationale of the antis, because I considered each animal a trophy, my hunting shouldn't be supported by the general public. We have to understand that many people don't hear what we say; they hear what they want to hear, and the word "trophy" has negative connotations. I don't agree with it, but it's a reality that we must deal with.

I guess what I really want you to take away from this article is the fact that we as hunters are always under scrutiny. Unfortunately, we can be our own worst enemy on many occasions. Bow hunters and gun hunters disagree; dog hunters and stalk hunters end up at odds with each other; and when we fight among ourselves, it makes us much more vulnerable to attacks from the outside.

Try to remember Responsive Management's statistics the next time you harvest an animal. Don't post pictures on social media that are disrespectful to the animal. Wipe off blood, poke the tongue back into the mouth, and pose respectfully. Your friends are not the only ones seeing these pictures on social media. In addition, choose your words carefully when you are in a crowd of strangers and are talking about hunting. Please don't give the antis any more ammunition against us or fuel their misperceptions. ■



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