



New Jersey Division of Fish and Wildlife and New Jersey Audubon Partner to Protect the Bog Turtle

New Funds Allow for 50 Acres of Salem County Habitat Improvement for Endangered Turtle

BERNARDSVILLE, NJ - August 14, 2019 – The New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection’s Division of Fish and Wildlife and New Jersey Audubon are on a mission to save the state’s official reptile: the bog turtle. Once abundant throughout New Jersey, bog turtles are now listed in the state as endangered and are restricted to rural portions of southern and northwestern New Jersey. Thankfully, new funds provided by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and National Fish and Wildlife Foundation as part of the Delaware Watershed Conservation Fund will allow for restoring and connecting 50 acres of wetland and upland turtle habitat in Salem County.

“The bog turtle is the state’s rarest turtle and with continual threats on the horizon, we must protect this unique reptile. It’s thrilling to see the Division of Fish and Wildlife and New Jersey Audubon working together to maintain current bog turtle populations and to establish new ones in my district. I’m grateful for additional federal dollars that are being invested in the wildlife and environment of New Jersey,” said **Congressman Jeff Van Drew (NJ-2)**.

A site in Salem County, managed by the Division of Fish and Wildlife, will serve as a starting point for restoring and connecting 50 acres of bog turtle habitat in the Upper Salem River Watershed. A six-year-old bog turtle found at this location in 2013 jump-started restoration because it showed the area had the ability to sustain new turtles, since the last bog turtle found there was in 2001. Tracking the turtles through radio telemetry began in 2015, and there are currently at least 10 bog turtles known to be living on-site.

“The bog turtle, which depends on clean water and clean habitat, is an important indicator of a healthy ecosystem,” **DEP Commissioner Catherine R. McCabe** said. “The DEP is proud to partner with New Jersey Audubon to restore and protect this important piece of their habitat in southern New Jersey. Partnerships such as this are vital to managing and promoting thriving natural resources, a key priority for the DEP.”

“While the bog turtle is small, typically about 4 inches, it’s importance to New Jersey is paramount. These turtles face many challenges, including poaching and development, and since they are semi-aquatic, they also need very specific habitat to ensure their success. Bog turtles need everything from muck and mud to dry patches for nesting and abundant sunlight. We’re optimistic that at this particular site we can improve nesting habitat and potentially see the 10 turtles that live there turn in to 20 or 30 for increased genetic variation,” said **Bill Pitts, Zoologist for the Division of Fish and Wildlife**.

The bog turtle is endangered because it is a victim of habitat loss and degradation, development and illegal collecting. In addition to these setbacks, bog turtles need a dynamic habitat that includes wet and mucky areas, while also needing open areas with plenty of hummocks for nesting and basking and shrubby areas for overwintering. The DEP’s Division of Fish and Wildlife acquired the land in the 1990s, and New Jersey Audubon has worked with them since 2013 to restore the site by removing invasive

plants, thinning out woody vegetation and creating new wetlands and buffer areas by planting old agricultural fields with native grasses, sedges, rushes, forbs and native shrubs.

“Our goal for this site is to double the current bog turtle habitat from about three acres to at least six acres in order to improve nesting habitat that will allow the turtles to reproduce more successfully,” added **Kristen Meistrell, Southern NJ Stewardship Project Director for New Jersey Audubon**. “This involves wetland creation on an adjacent field, restoring buffer areas and creating overwintering habitat by planting native shrubs, and restoring natural hydrology to the surrounding areas since the land had been historically drained and ditched for agricultural purposes.”

Earlier this year New Jersey Audubon was granted \$88,300 from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, as part of the [Delaware Watershed Conservation Fund](#), to continue restoration efforts at this site and to begin creating, restoring and connecting habitat throughout the rest of the Upper Salem River Watershed. The project aims to reach at least 200 private landowners who have currently occupied, suitable or connecting habitat for bog turtles. Habitat assessments will be conducted to determine if any management activities are needed, with a goal of restoring and creating 50 acres of suitable wetland habitat and surrounding uplands.

The Delaware Watershed Conservation Fund was realized thanks to the [Coalition for the Delaware River Watershed](#) advocacy on behalf of the Delaware Watershed and the water, wildlife and people that it supports. Previous project funds for bog turtle habitat restoration have been generously provided by the New Jersey’s Corporate Wetlands Restoration Partnership, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and Atlantic City Electric.

The bog turtle population has declined by at least 50 percent across the U.S. during the past 20 years, and in 1997 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service added the bog turtle to the list of federally threatened species. The Salem County project is also expected to improve water quality as new wetlands are being created within the headwaters of the Salem River that will filter water before it enters the Delaware River.

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About New Jersey Audubon: New Jersey Audubon is a privately supported, not-for profit, statewide membership organization. Founded in 1897, and one of the oldest independent Audubon societies, New Jersey Audubon fosters environmental awareness and a conservation ethic among New Jersey's citizens; protects New Jersey's birds, mammals, other animals, and plants, especially endangered and threatened species; and promotes preservation of New Jersey's valuable natural habitats. For more information, visit www.njaudubon.org.

About the New Jersey Division of Fish and Wildlife: The Division of Fish and Wildlife is a professional environmental agency dedicated to the protection, management and wise use of New Jersey's fish and wildlife resources. The Division is part of Natural and Historic Resources within the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection. To learn more, visit njfishandwildlife.com.

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