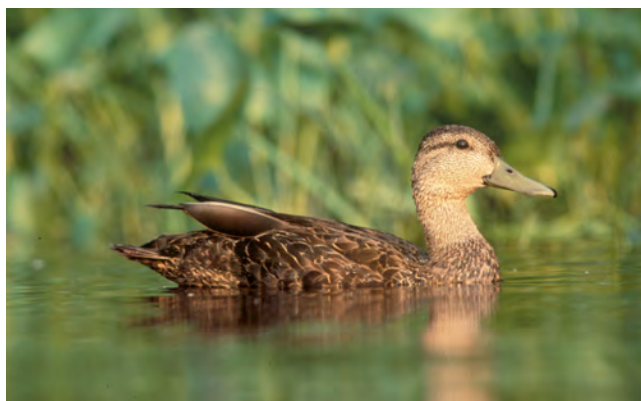


Regional perspective advances habitat goals for Chesapeake Bay watershed

Product: *Nature's Network* (working title)

The first version of a landscape conservation design for the Northeast region lays the groundwork for unified conservation action across 13 states, based on scientific consensus. More than a map, it offers a suite of decision-support tools representing the following conservation approaches:

- **Terrestrial and Wetland Core Networks** - Connected networks of intact and diverse terrestrial, wetland, and coastal systems that provide habitat for wildlife and benefits for people, such as access to intact forests and sources of clean water.
- **Aquatic Core Networks** - Connected network of intact and diverse aquatic systems that provide habitat for resident and anadromous fish, as well as other organisms, and benefits such as recreation and clean water for people.
- **Habitat for Imperiled and Regional Species of Greatest Conservation Need (RSGCN)** - Important habitat for hundreds of vulnerable species not fully captured in core habitat networks that provide additional perspective on opportunities to support biodiversity.
- **Restoration Opportunities** - Degraded or fragmented places where restoration will make the most difference.
- **Regional Connectivity and Marsh Migration** - Best opportunities to maintain regional connections and connect tidal marshes to adjacent uplands.



The Habitat Goal Implementation team is charged with identifying the best actions to support a set of priority resources in the watershed, including American black duck. Credit: Scott Nielson/FWS

DEVELOPED BY:

A team of experts from 13 states, the North Atlantic LCC, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, nongovernmental organizations, and academic institutions

WHO IS USING NATURE'S NETWORK?

Christine Conn, Landscape Conservation Planner for the Maryland Department of Natural Resources, Co-Chair of the Chesapeake Bay Program's Habitat Goal Implementation Team (HGIT)

HOW IS IT ADVANCING HER WORK?

In 2015, Christine Conn had a chance to see how Maryland fits into the big conservation picture when she was invited to co-chair the Habitat Goal Implementation Team (HGIT) for the Chesapeake Bay Program, a regional partnership that has led and directed the restoration of the Bay since 1983. In less than a year, she says, "My conservation universe expanded from Maryland to the entire Chesapeake Bay watershed."

The Chesapeake Bay Program has a high-level habitat goal to restore, enhance, and protect a network of lands, waters, and associated benefits resulting from higher water quality. It's the job of the HGIT to drill down to the nitty-gritty: What needs to happen on the ground across the five watershed states to achieve this goal?

In her role as co-chair with David Whitehurst from the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, Conn coordinates and supports six sub-teams that are working to answer that question as it relates to six priority resources that span the watershed's ecological gradient: American black duck, Eastern brook trout, fish passage, wetlands, stream health, and submerged aquatic vegetation (SAV).



Regional perspective will help partners protect enough of the right kinds of habitat, in the right places, to support Chesapeake Bay watershed fish and wildlife, now and into the future. *Credit: Chesapeake Bay Program*

Each priority resource is linked to specific management objectives that incorporate a combination of spatial, temporal, and numeric attributes. For example, the goal for American black duck is to “restore, enhance, and preserve habitat that can support a population of 100,000 by 2025.”

With those targets in mind, each work-group focuses on setting and advancing incremental goals that reflect both the expertise and limitations within each of the five watershed states.

“What we are really trying to do is make sure individual actions to address these management outcomes at the state level will enable us to collectively leverage our money, time, and resources in a way that optimizes fish and wildlife diversity on a regional scale,” explained Conn. “That’s where I see the *Nature’s Network* products being so important.”

Conn explained that each of the HGIT workgroups is developing two-year milestones detailing what can be accomplished in the short term to advance their long-term goals. Returning to the black duck example, the first management approach is to

restore degraded wetlands in historic breeding grounds.

“In order to make that happen, we need to develop a decision-support tool to evaluate current and future habitats, looking at the long-term resilience of areas that are already considered important. Since the *Nature’s Network* models already include that kind of forecasting, we can fine-tune the information based on other data products from our partners,” she said. “So the data works its way down to help us identify exactly where we need to work to meet our goals.”

By complementing the maps and data with local knowledge, the team can determine the most appropriate actions to take in those places.

“More than just where to prioritize, it can help us figure out where we need to develop funding, or where to conduct outreach to communities,” she explained. “The specific objectives for these resources are all very different, but when you start to look at addressing common management challenges in order to make the most of limited funding, and figuring out how partners can work together in the most important areas, you can see that *Nature’s Network* will be really important for helping us align our efforts.”

In the big picture, Conn said, “It will also be the recipe for conserving enough of the right kinds of habitat, in the right places, to support Chesapeake fish and wildlife, now and into the future.”

LEARN MORE:

- **Nature’s Network:** <http://www.naturesnetwork.org>
- **Chesapeake Bay Program:** <http://www.chesapeakebay.net>
- **Habitat Goal Implementation Team:** http://www.chesapeakebay.net/groups/group/habitat_goal_implementation_team
- **Maryland Department of Natural Resources:** <http://www.dnr.state.md.us>