



COSEWIC
Committee on the Status of
Endangered Wildlife in Canada

COSEPAC
Comité sur la situation des
espèces en péril au Canada

More Species Closer to Extinction

So concluded COSEWIC (Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada), which met in Ottawa from November 23 to 27, 2009, to assess the risk of extinction for Canadian wildlife species. Of the 28 wildlife species assessed, many plants and animals are habitat specialists requiring specific and increasingly rare conditions to survive – all of these wildlife species suffer from habitat loss and fragmentation.

The Greater Prairie-Chicken that once numbered in the millions on the grasslands of the Canadian prairies, the Atlantic population of the Grey Whale on Canada's east coast and the Dwarf Wedgemussel, a mollusc whose habitat was destroyed by a causeway were all reassessed as Extirpated. The Eskimo Curlew, a bird known to nest only in Canada, was assessed as Endangered. Given there have been no verified sightings of this wildlife species anywhere since 1963, the Eskimo Curlew is on the brink of becoming the first Canadian bird to be declared Extinct since the Passenger Pigeon nearly 100 years ago. Without a reversal in habitat loss, climate change and direct human impacts, these assessments of Extirpated and Extinct will become more frequent.

Swift Rebound for Swift Fox – A Good News Story?

Known as one of the fastest animals in North America, this beautiful small fox holds considerable appeal as a symbol of prairie conservation and First Nations spirituality. Unfortunately, unrestrained harvest and poisoning decimated the Canadian population; the last sighting in the wild occurred in 1938 in Alberta. Efforts to reintroduce the Swift Fox beginning in 1983 appear to have been successful. Although the wildlife species was designated as Endangered in 2000, numbers in Alberta and Saskatchewan have since doubled leading to a reduced likelihood of extinction and a designation of Threatened. The wildlife species is, however, still imperilled because of habitat loss and risk of disease, which can rapidly spread through fox populations.



Photo © Gordon Court 2009

Big Shark in Deep Trouble

Despite this success, many wildlife species are still considered to be at risk in Canada. The Atlantic population of the Basking Shark, the largest fish in Canadian waters, was assessed as a wildlife species of Special Concern. Feeding on tiny plankton, it grows up to 12 meters – nearly the length of a city bus. This wildlife species is particularly susceptible to population declines because it takes up to 18 years to reach maturity and females are pregnant for about two and half years, one of the longest periods of any animal. The total population is estimated to be about 5 000 adults. The Pacific population of Basking Shark, which was once abundant and now rarely seen, was assessed as Endangered in 2007. This highlights the vulnerability of the wildlife species as a whole.

Fire Suppression Harms Wildlife

Over the decades, humans have become increasingly vigilant at preventing wildfires to protect human property and lives. Unfortunately, this comes at a cost to many native wildlife species that depend on periodic fires integral to ecosystem renewal. Three eastern Canadian wildlife species assessed at the meeting are particularly reliant on habitats produced by wildfire and all were assessed as Endangered. These include: the Northern Barrens Tiger Beetle, a globally imperiled, showy green beetle of the pine savannahs; an annual herb the Pink Milkwort, which depends on the wet prairie habitats of Ontario; and, a tall herb from the pea family, the Virginia Goat's-rue which lives in oak savannahs of Ontario.

Next meeting

COSEWIC's next scheduled wildlife species assessment meeting will be held in Victoria, BC, on April 25-30, 2010.

About COSEWIC

COSEWIC assesses the status of wild species, subspecies, varieties, or other important units of biological diversity, considered to be at risk in Canada. To do so, COSEWIC uses scientific, Aboriginal traditional and community knowledge provided by experts from governments, academia and other organizations. Summaries of assessments are currently available to the public on the COSEWIC website (www.cosewic.gc.ca) and will be submitted to the Federal Minister of the Environment in late summer 2010 for listing consideration under the *Species at Risk Act* (SARA). At that time, the full status reports will be publicly available on the SAR Public Registry (www.sararegistry.gc.ca).

There are now 585 wildlife species in various COSEWIC risk categories, including 250 Endangered, 150 Threatened, 162 Special Concern, 23 Extirpated (i.e. no longer found in the wild in Canada), and 13 wildlife species are Extinct. In addition, 45 wildlife species are Data Deficient.

COSEWIC comprises members from each provincial and territorial government wildlife agency, four federal entities (Canadian Wildlife Service, Parks Canada Agency, Fisheries and Oceans Canada, and the Federal Biodiversity Information Partnership, chaired by the Canadian Museum of Nature), three non-government science members, and the co-chairs of the Species Specialist and the Aboriginal Traditional Knowledge Subcommittees.

Definition of COSEWIC terms and risk categories:

Wildlife Species: A species, subspecies, variety, or geographically or genetically distinct population of animal, plant or other organism, other than a bacterium or virus, that is wild by nature and is either native to Canada or has extended its range into Canada without human intervention and has been present in Canada for at least 50 years.

Extinct (X): A wildlife species that no longer exists.

Extirpated (XT): A wildlife species that no longer exists in the wild in Canada, but exists elsewhere.

Endangered (E): A wildlife species facing imminent extirpation or extinction.

Threatened (T): A wildlife species that is likely to become Endangered if nothing is done to reverse the factors leading to its extirpation or extinction.

Special Concern (SC): A wildlife species that may become Threatened or Endangered because of a combination of biological characteristics and identified threats.

Not at Risk (NAR): A wildlife species that has been evaluated and found to be not at risk of extinction given the current circumstances.

Data Deficient (DD): A category that applies when the available information is insufficient (a) to resolve a wildlife species' eligibility for assessment or (b) to permit an assessment of the wildlife species' risk of extinction.

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Further details on all wildlife species assessed, and the reasons for designations, can be found on the COSEWIC website at: www.cosewic.gc.ca