



PHOTO BY CHARLES MILL

# State Wildlife Grants

## Keeping Oklahoma Native, Natural and Healthy Today and Into the Future.

By Jenny Thom

Oklahoma's state bird, the scissortail flycatcher, is one of more than 60 neotropical migrant birds that nest in the state. State Wildlife Grants is a preventative care program for these special birds and other wildlife. It builds upon the good work already being done in the state by increasing resources aimed at keeping common wildlife species common.

**1.5 million Oklahoma residents and nonresidents fished, hunted or watched wildlife in 2001. Of those enjoying outdoor recreational activities in Oklahoma, 74 percent watched wildlife.**

Oklahoma has seen great success over the last half century restoring populations of wildlife such as white-tailed deer, wild turkey, largemouth bass and bald eagles. While many species have benefited from management practices of the Wildlife Department, other wildlife organizations, and wildlife conscious private landowners, many more species have not received the same focus. This has been the trend nationwide, and today, more than 80 percent of the nation's wildlife have been left with very little funding for wildlife management.

Over the past five years, the Wildlife Department's conservation ability has expanded through a new federal program called State Wildlife Grants, from which Oklahoma has received \$4.6 million. Priority for use of this funding is placed on species with the greatest conservation need and takes into consideration the relative level of funding available for the conservation of those species.

State Wildlife Grants is the nation's core program for keeping America's wildlife at healthy population levels. During 2005, the federal appropriation provided \$64 million in cost-share funding to the states. The Oklahoma Department of Wildlife

Conservation received \$928,000 to distribute among conservation partners, research and monitoring projects and habitat projects on public land.

Through State Wildlife Grants, Oklahomans can see first hand how an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure as citizens and organizations work together to ensure Oklahoma's common wildlife remain common by focusing funding on those species in the greatest need of conservation.

## Focus on Oklahoma's Waterways

### Alligator Snapping Turtles

Turtles and tortoises, the oldest living groups of reptiles, have changed very little since they first appeared on earth more than 200 million years ago. The alligator snapping turtle is the largest freshwater turtle in the United States with a record weight of 249 pounds, and it once could be found in all major river systems in eastern Oklahoma.

Habitat alterations and unregulated harvesting for meat in the past have resulted in population declines throughout the species' entire range. Today, it appears only in scattered parts of the Arkansas and Red rivers. Through survey work and genetic assessments, biologists will identify the current range of alligator snapping turtles in Oklahoma.

### Paddlefish

Paddlefish are planktivores, meaning they feed on microscopic organisms filtered from the water as they swim with their mouths open. The species grows quite large, with the state record standing at 121.2 pounds.

Paddlefish populations in many states have diminished in numbers during the last century due to destruction of spawning grounds, over-exploitation, dam construction, river channelization, dewatering of rivers and pollution. Paddlefish are remarkably long-lived (20 – 30 years) and do not reach sexual maturity until six to 10 years of age. Continuous removal of the older segment of the population could skew the population structure and remove egg-bearing females from the population.

A five-year study being conducted by the Wildlife Department will determine the current status of paddlefish populations in the Neosho River system (Grand, Hudson and Fort Gibson lakes) to develop management strategies for long-term paddlefish population stability.



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*An alligator snapping turtle lures fish into its mouth by wiggling the tip of its tongue, which has a special appendage shaped like a worm.*



*Department Fisheries Biologist Brent Gordon collects paddlefish to estimate population size, structure and exploitation rates.*

NELS PRODFELD



*The Texas horned lizard, commonly called a horny toad, is well-known by many Oklahomans and has experienced a population decline over the years. It is just one of more than 700 different vertebrate species in the state. Many species prosper within Oklahoma's varied ecological regions and habitat types. This diversity is unmatched by any other state in America, except for California or Texas.*

## **Learning More about Oklahoma's Wildlife Wildlife Inventories on Public Lands**

The Wildlife Department owns or manages more than 1.5 million acres for wildlife. Little is known about 84 percent of species on these lands. Biologists are completing a four-year, comprehensive, species inventory on four Department Wildlife Management areas. Information—never before collected—is being discovered about the mammal, bird, reptile, amphibian and fish communities and their

**Who owns wildlife? We all do. Wildlife species are a public trust resource, and state fish and wildlife agencies have the primary responsibility for their management. To maintain wildlife populations in Oklahoma, the Wildlife Department works in conjunction with other organizations and Oklahoma's private landowners.**

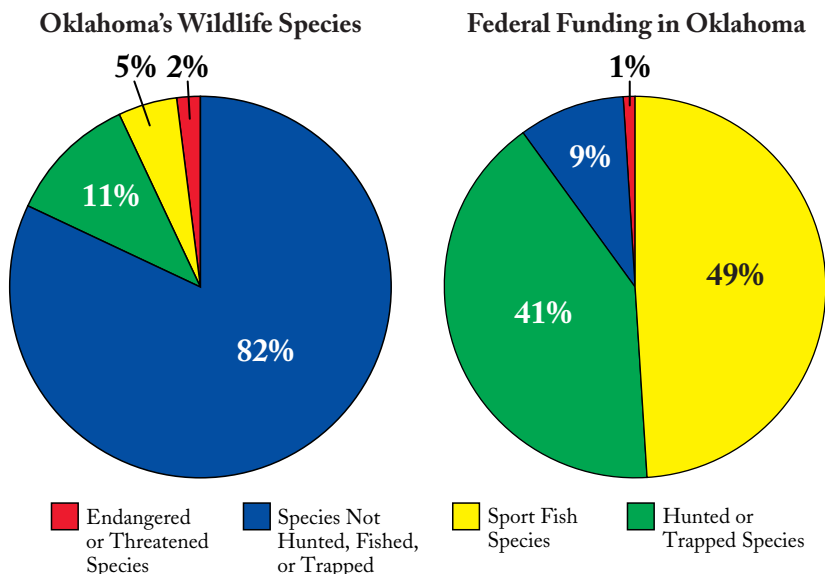
habitat needs on these lands. With this information, biologists will be better able to develop management strategies to maintain population levels of common species and improve the status of uncommon or declining species.

## **Understanding Wintering Bird Populations**

Biologists are about to gain increased insight about Oklahoma's wintering bird populations. Studies of breeding birds are commonplace in North America, but win-

*(Continued on page 36)*

## Percentage of Species vs. Percentage of Federal Funding



The Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation receives no state tax appropriations. Wildlife management is funded through state sales of hunting and fishing licenses, federal excise taxes on equipment and gear, and federal grant programs.

**Oklahoma's wildlife consists of:**

- 17 Endangered or threatened species
- 36 Sport fish species
- 88 Hunted or trapped species
- 627 Wildlife species not hunted, fished or trapped  
(This category accounts only for vertebrate wildlife species)

Sources: U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service; Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation

### Today's Strategy for the Future

The Wildlife Department is creating a Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy to conserve Oklahoma's diversity of wildlife and their habitats. To maintain healthy wildlife population levels, the Strategy identifies statewide wildlife issues and necessary conservation actions.

The Strategy will guide future use of State Wildlife Grant funding beginning with species in the greatest need of conservation. The number one threat to wildlife populations is habitat loss, and Oklahoma's Strategy for Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation looks first at the state's habitat types and then at the wildlife living in those habitats in order to determine priority actions.

Oklahoma's Strategy is designed for the entire state, not just areas managed by the Wildlife Department. For this reason, the Wildlife Department has been working with citizens as well as technical experts from outside the agency for its development. All states are working on similar documents, and together, they will present an accurate picture of the state of America's wildlife.

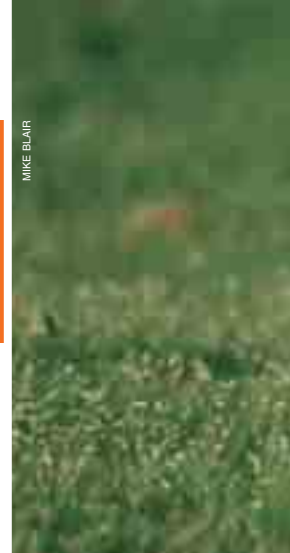
With an overwhelming majority of Oklahoma's land and water resources privately owned, wildlife conservation is a joint effort of private land managers and public agencies. Because everyone has limited resources, Oklahoma's Strategy will be successful only if everyone works together in partnerships where overlapping interests and efforts are mutually beneficial.

Wildlife management area biologists, ranchers, farmers, timber companies, utility companies, sportsmen's clubs and individual landowners are just some of the many land stewards taking steps to ensure today's wildlife resources are around for future generations. 🌿



The State Wildlife Grants Program is endorsed by the Teaming with Wildlife coalition. Representing more than 3,000 groups and individuals nationwide, including 175 in Oklahoma, the coalition endorses increased federal funding for state-level fish and wildlife conservation, education and recreation to ensure a bright future for all fish and wildlife and the habitats on which they depend.

MIKE BLAIR



ter populations are less well studied. While nearly every state has completed a breeding bird atlas, this project is the first standardized effort to record winter bird populations statewide.

This monumental study surveys nearly 600 evenly distributed locations across the state during both early and late winter over the course of five consecutive years to provide an accurate snapshot of Oklahoma's winter bird distribution. The study is being conducted through the Sutton Avian Research Center and the Oklahoma Biological Survey.

### **Working to Keep Species Numbers Healthy to Avoid Them Becoming Threatened or Endangered**

The number of species on the federal threatened and endangered list has doubled in the past 10 years and now totals more than 1,000 species. No one likes to see a species become endangered. Recovery efforts are often too little too late, and waiting to work with a species until it is on the brink of extinction is costly and often brings restrictive federal regulations.

#### **High Plains Conservation**

A broad-reaching project is implementing conservation strategies for several species in the High Plains region of western Oklahoma. Those species include the swift fox, black-tailed prairie dog, burrowing owl, ferruginous hawk and mountain plover.

One of those species, the swift fox became a federal candidate for listing under the Endangered Species Act in 1995. State wildlife agencies throughout the central U.S. conducted population surveys and determined the species' population was greater than currently thought. Due to those findings, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service removed the swift fox as a federal candidate species in 2001.

The black-tailed prairie dog was also on the Candidate List for Threatened Species listing. Available information in 2000 indicated prairie dogs occupied 676,000 acres of habitat in the U.S., which is less than one percent of their historic range. Using State Wildlife Grants, biologists discovered black-tailed prairie dogs actually occupy 1,842,000 acres, almost three times more than previously thought. Biologists also discovered populations are more stable and interconnected than formerly known. Together, these findings indicate the species is not likely to become endangered in the foreseeable future. On August 12, 2004, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service removed the black-tailed prairie dog from the Candidate List.

To maintain these species' current populations, voluntary conservation efforts occur on private lands in Oklahoma through the Wildlife Department's Landowner



BILL HORN

*Preferring open areas with low ground cover, burrowing owls live side-by-side with prairie dogs. This ground-dwelling owl stands no taller than 10 inches and primarily eats small rodents and insects, especially grasshoppers and beetles. These tiny birds use prairie dog holes for nesting and to escape predators, such as badgers and ferruginous hawks.*



**Above:** Due to low population numbers, the swift fox is a state species in need of conservation. Swift foxes are about 12 inches tall and rarely weigh more than five pounds. They primarily feed upon mice, rabbits, prairie dogs and other small mammals as well as birds, reptiles, amphibians, insects, berries and seeds.

Incentive Program. For more information about that program, visit [www.wildlifedepartment.com](http://www.wildlifedepartment.com).

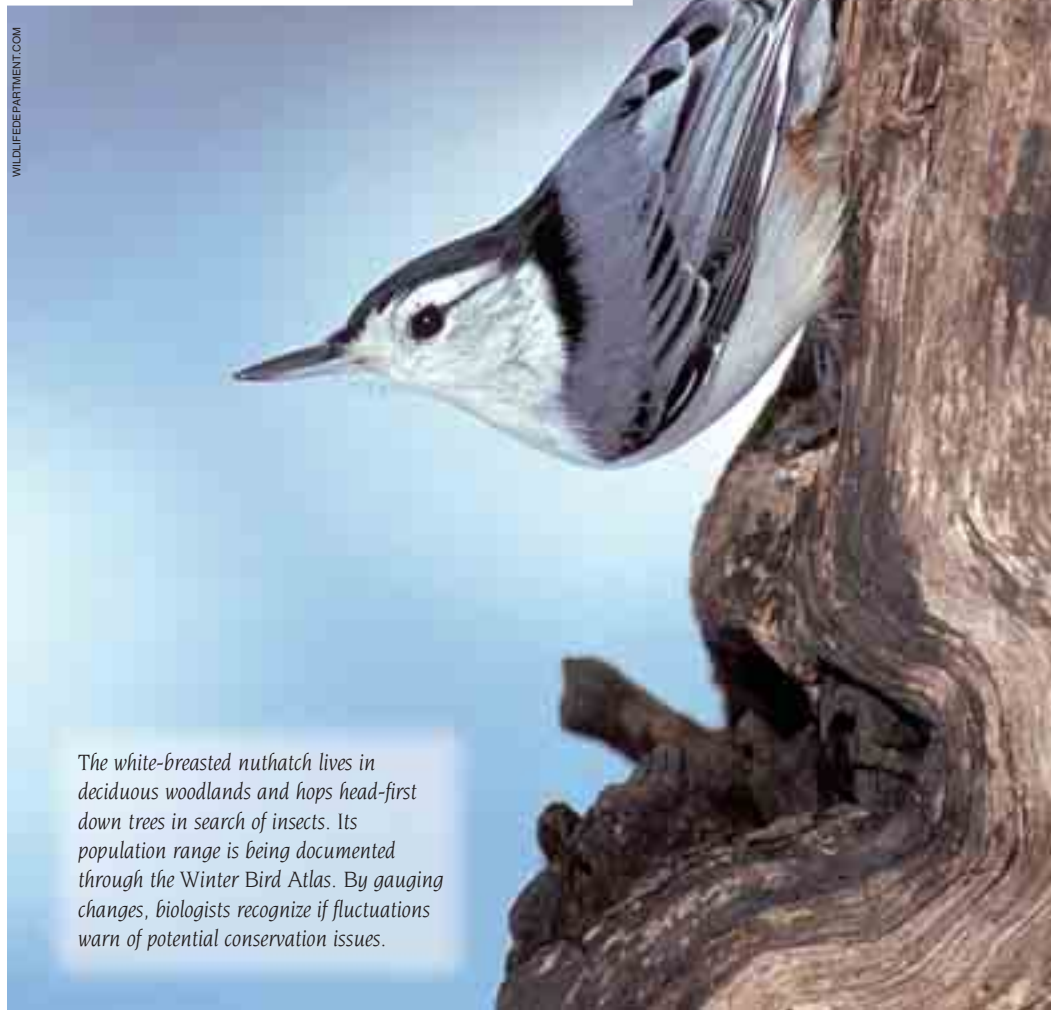
### **Promoting Nature Tourism Efforts through Conservation Partners**

The Great Plains Trail of Oklahoma, a road-based, wildlife viewing trail, is coming to highways in Oklahoma. Consisting of 12 – 13 loops throughout the western half of the state, the trail tells the story of the Great Plains. From buffalo and massacres to dust bowls and sod houses, the people of this region have always relied upon the land for survival.

The trail will highlight the unique landscapes, history, wildlife and charming small town hospitality found throughout the western half of the state. From its strong Native American heritage to its natural icons like the Wichita Mountains, Black Kettle National Grasslands, Black Mesa, Little Sahara, Alabaster Caverns and Great Salt Plains, western Oklahoma exhibits a sense of American history that has all but vanished elsewhere in the country.

The project is managed through a locally based partnership with the Oklahoma Wildlife and Prairie Heritage Alliance with guidance and support provided by the Wildlife Department. 🌿

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*The white-breasted nuthatch lives in deciduous woodlands and hops head-first down trees in search of insects. Its population range is being documented through the Winter Bird Atlas. By gauging changes, biologists recognize if fluctuations warn of potential conservation issues.*