

Final Meeting Minutes  
Wildlife and Boat Committee  
Board of Wildlife Resources  
7870 Villa Park Drive – Board Room  
Henrico, VA 23228

January 17, 2024  
10:00 am

**Present:** Mr. Jon Cooper, **Chair**, Mr. Brian Vincent, Mr. Leon Boyd, (virtual), Mr. Will Wampler (alternate); **Absent:** Mr. Michael Formica. **Board Members** in attendance: Mr. George Terwilliger (virtual), Mr. Woody Woodall, Mr. James Edmunds, **Executive Director:** Mr. Ryan Brown; **Deputy Directors:** Ms. Becky Gwynn and Mr. Darin Moore; **Director's Working Group:** Dr. Mike Bednarski, Mr. Bob Smet, Ms. Stacey Brown, Mr. George Braxton (virtual), Mr. Paul Kugelman, Mr. Rob Lewis

The Chair called the meeting to order at 10:00 am and noted for the record that a Quorum was present for today's meeting.

**Approval of the October 25, 2023, Committee Meeting Minutes:**

The Chair called for a motion to approve the October 25, 2023, Wildlife and Boat Committee meeting minutes. Mr. Wampler made a motion to approve the minutes of the October 25, 2023, committee meeting. Mr. Cooper seconded the motion. Ayes: Cooper, Wampler, Boyd, Vincent

**Public Comment - Non-Agenda Item:** The Chair called for Public Comment – Non-Agenda Items.

- Judge Charlton spoke regarding Property rights

**Migratory Game Bird Seasons and Bag limits:** The Chair called on Mr. Ben Lewis for a presentation.

Mr. Lewis presented the Migratory Game Bird seasons and bag limits for the 2024-2025 season.

After comments and questions, the Chair thanked Mr. Lewis for his presentation.

The Chair called for a motion. Mr. Boyd made a motion, Mr. Chair, I move that the Wildlife and Boat Committee approve the 2024-2025 Migratory Game Bird Season and Bag limit recommendations as present by staff, to be advertised for public comments. It was seconded by Mr. Cooper. Ayes: Cooper, Vincent, Boyd, Wampler

**Wildlife Disease Update:** The Chair called on Dr. John Tracey for an update.

Dr. Tracey gave an extension update on Chronic wasting disease and sarcoptic mange in Virginia and cursory update on other wildlife-related diseases in the Commonwealth and the work of the DWR's Wildlife Health Program.

After comments and questions, the Chair thanked him for his update.

**Regulations Process:** The Chair called on Dr. Mike Bednarski for an update.

Mr. Bednarski presented the Regulation Cycle for 2024 for Aquatic, Boating and Non-Game Wildlife. He explained the calendar timeframe.

**Wildlife Division and Nongame Program Updates:** The Chair called on Ms. Becky Gwynn for a Division Update.

Ms. Gwynn Reported:

### **Wild Turkey Management Plan**

- Staffs worked over the past few months to develop background information to update and inform the next iteration of Virginia's Wild Turkey Management Plan:
  - Rewrite background chapters to reflect changes and new information since 2013.
  - Conducted turkey hunter survey to understand motivations/preferences associated with the fall and spring turkey seasons.
  - Updated the habitat suitability model from 2013 to reflect currently available habitat data and new analysis tools
- DWR Technical Committee and Stakeholder Advisory Committee (SAC) will be organized in February/March
- Initial SAC meeting planned for April
- Committees will work in concert to inform and develop goals, objectives, and strategies developed through the planning process
- Additional SAC meeting(s) will be scheduled for summer/fall 2024 to refine and finalize plan goals, objectives, and strategies
- Public review of the plan envisioned by late summer or fall 2024

### **Winter Wildlife Festival**

- Festival will be held in Virginia Beach from January 27<sup>th</sup> – February 4<sup>th</sup>
- DWR is a sponsor of the festival, and Carolyn Rubinfeld (DWR Watchable Wildlife Biologist) serves on the festival steering committee
- DWR staff will maintain 2 tables in the exhibit hall showcasing a DWR Diamondback Terrapin citizen science project and the Virginia Birding and Wildlife Trail
- DWR will also be leading a number of festival activities including
  - Birding skillbuilder workshops and field tours

- History of the Richmond Falcon Cam session
- Birds & History of Fort Monroe

### **Elk Hunt 2024**

- DWR staffs have been planning for the Department's 3<sup>rd</sup> elk hunt in Elk Management Zone
- Elk hunt lottery and Elk Conservation License program details remain unchanged from previous years
  - Lottery will be open from February 1<sup>st</sup> – March 30<sup>th</sup>
  - Wildlife conservation organizations interested in applying for the Elk Conservation License Program must do so by April 1<sup>st</sup>

### **Waterfowl Survey Updates**

- December tundra swan productivity surveys
  - Tundra swans were harder to find this year compared to last year which is typical of a mild winter
  - Still able to meet our quota of surveying 1,100 Tundra Swans.
  - Preliminary juvenile production numbers appear to be higher than average this year.
- Mid-winter waterfowl surveys
  - High winds have prevented surveying on most of the days during the survey period.
  - Duck numbers are well below average at this point - expected with mild weather we've been experiencing
  - Recent and expected weather conditions (i.e., upcoming winter storm and colder temperatures to the north) should improve duck numbers
  - The Mid-Winter Survey is an important metric for Tundra Swans and Atlantic Brant as the number of swans and brant counted throughout the flyway dictate the federal framework for hunting these species in the following year.

### **Wildlife Conflict Helpline**

- The Wildlife Conflict Helpline is a collaborative effort between DWR and USDA Wildlife Services to provide consistent, professional, expert assistance, in a timely manner, to callers experiencing all types of human-wildlife conflicts
- The Helpline **saves time** that DWR, Cooperative Extension, local animal control, and other personnel spend responding to calls about human-wildlife conflicts, thereby increasing available time for targeted response, field activities working with constituents and partners, and other responsibilities.
- The Helpline has been operational since 2013, maintaining full functionality during the COVID pandemic
- 19,369 calls were handled by the Helpline between October 1, 2022 – September 30, 2023
- Bears (2,628 calls) and deer (2,466 calls) were the two (2) most common species involved in conflict issues reported to the Helpline
- Other species commonly reported to the Helpline include red fox, raccoon, and birds.

- While calls to the Helpline come from all portions of Virginia, calls most frequently come from:
  - Chesterfield – 1,589 calls
  - Fairfax – 1,048 calls
  - Henrico – 957 calls
- With the exception of the beginning of the pandemic, calls to the Helpline have increased annually and would be expected to approach or exceed 20,000 calls during the current year.

### **Nongame & Endangered Species Program Updates**

**Allegheny Woodrat Translocation/Captive Breeding:** The Allegheny woodrat has declined precipitously in the Northeast and Midwest with several states showing very low numbers and populations leading to state listings. Allegheny woodrats are extirpated from New York, New Jersey, and Ohio each have only one remaining population, and Indiana has three remaining populations. Virginia and West Virginia are considered the stronghold for this species even though some sites appear to be no longer inhabited. An ad hoc working group comprised of representatives from all states throughout the range of the species have been meeting to address the declines and management and conservation efforts for this species. As part of this effort, DWR has captured “nuisance” woodrats, woodrats that are causing property damage to private landowners, and translocated those individuals to the Ohio DNR to improve the genetic makeup of their remaining population. In addition to supplementing wild populations, DWR will supply nuisance individuals to zoos in Ohio and Maryland where captive breeding populations are being established.

**Statewide Freshwater Mussel Conservation Plan:** In 2022, the Virginia General Assembly provided the agency with \$400,000 over the FY23/FY24 biennium to fund two freshwater mussel biologist positions to develop a statewide freshwater mussel conservation plan. The biologists were hired at the beginning of calendar year 2023 and have been learning about the rich diversity of mussels we have in the state. A DWR team met last week to review the draft outline of the plan and to initiate a stakeholder engagement process that will ensure ample opportunity of agencies, organizations, and others to contribute to and provide input about proposed conservation strategies. We anticipate hosting the first meeting of this group in mid-March and completing the plan by the end of the calendar year.

**Tiger Salamander breeding site restoration project:** The eastern tiger salamander is a state endangered species that has two distinct lineages in Virginia. The Blue Ridge Mountain lineage is believed to be a surviving relic of the last ice age, while the Coastal Plain population is believed to be a recolonization from a northward range expansion from the Carolinas following the last glacial episode that ended about 11,000 years ago. The Coastal Plain population has only three known breeding sites, one of which is in Westmoreland County. This site was only recently discovered in 2016 at an old mill pond site that according to locals had been abandoned for more than 50 years ago. Unfortunately, just a few years after the discovery was made by a DWR biologist, the small earthen dam had finally eroded to a point that it no longer retained water. Coordinating with the landowner, DWR staff were granted permission to restore the dam breach in time for the breeding season that began in mid-December. During significant winter rain

events, tiger salamanders migrate up to 1/2 a mile to seasonally flooded ancestral wetlands. With the past couple of years possibly having no successful reproduction, it was imperative that repairs were made quickly as to not miss another breeding season. In late December, DWR biologists documented successful use of the restored pond site by this species, following a strong nor-eastern just before Christmas. We have a lot of work ahead to improve the lot of this species but are hopeful for good successes at this Westmoreland site.

After comments and questions, The Chair thanked Ms. Gwynn for her Wildlife and Nongame Program Division report and update.

**Fish Division Update:** The Chair called on Mr. Mike Bednarski for his division update.

We recently received the report from our angler survey, a service of the Human Dimensions Section that is within Aquatics. These are our scientists who study people. Some facts about Virginia anglers, based off of our responses:

2,347 responses out of 26,000 surveys sent - this is typical rate.

431 comments, which will be integrated into the reg cycle.

Average angler fishes 25 days a year at 5 different sites.

Most effort goes to small impoundments - 25.3%.

WMAs were utilized by 29% of anglers.

Shore fishing was most popular method, done by 49% of anglers.

Largemouth bass, smallmouth bass, and panfish were the three most popular species, pursued by 71%, 56%, and 44% of anglers respectively.

Most important factors for selecting a site were cleanliness, fish being present, and manageable crowds/parking.

Big limits to going fishing were work and family obligations, as well as a lack of facilities.

We do well at sharing regulations, and relatively poorly at obtaining access from private landowners.

Mr. Sadler arrived at 11:30 am.

**Boating Division Update:** The Chair called on Ms. Stacey Brown for a boating update

Ms. Brown Reported:

- Pleased to have been selected as the Director of the Boating Division.
- Boating Section closed out 2023 with only 60 boating incidents (39 injuries and 8 fatalities) this is significant reduction in numbers from previous years. Would like to attribute this reduction the mandatory boating safety education requirement.
- Will be developing an annual report on the 2023 boating incidents that break down when and where the boat incidents occurred and the types of incidents and causative factors.
- In calendar year 2023 over 24,000 students completed a boating safety education course. This included 122 instructor-lead classroom courses. Several Middle and High school agricultural teachers provided the boating safety course as part their curriculum.
- In 2023 Customer Service section handled over 100,000 calls and over 100,000 transactions.

After comments and questions, the Chair thanked Ms. Brown for her update and report.

**Director's Report:** The Chair called on Executive Director Ryan Brown for his report.

The Director reported:

- Congratulated Stacey Brown on being selected as the new Boating Director
- Congratulated Amy Martin on being promoted to Wildlife Services, Non-Game Manager

Director Brown announced at the Sportsman Caucus in Delaware, the Department received the Wildlife Agency of the Year Award - (for the whole country).

## **Bears**

- Preliminary harvest shows 2,892 bears taken
- 59% was male; 41% was female
- Represents 4<sup>th</sup> highest bear harvest in Virginia
- Harvest is nearly 30% higher than last year, but stable with average harvest from the past 5 years

## **Deer**

- Preliminary harvest of 206,713 deer
- Approximate 12% increase from last year when 184,968 deer taken
- Increased harvest levels were season across all seasons and weapons types as weather conditions were favorable for hunters to be afield throughout much of the hunting season
- Youth/Apprentice weekend harvest was 2,890

## Wild Turkey

- Preliminary harvest of 1,340 wild turkeys (*doesn't include mid-January season*)
- Adult male harvest – 511; Juvenile male harvest – 185; birds with no beard - 644
- Mid-January season harvest typically around ~150 turkeys
- Total harvest for 2023-2024 likely to be down from 1,62 birds last fall
- Main factor appears to be turkey production (i.e., young birds recruited into the population) which was below average in 2023
- As noted above, we will have final harvest numbers in February

The Chair thanked the Director for his report.

**Chair's Report:** The Chair thanked everyone for attending the Wildlife and Boat Committee meeting and for the updates and presentations and can appreciate all the work that goes into putting them together. The Chair thanked Mike Bednarski for always offering opportunities to the Board members and inviting them to participate in DWR events with him and his staff.

Mr. Leon Boyd asked for information on the Roadkill Bill at the General Assembly and Director Brown and Mr. Cale Godfrey, Deputy Director of Wildlife discussed the bill with him and let him know where in the process it was at this time.

The Chair asked if anyone had any further comments or questions, hearing none, he announced that the next meeting will be Wednesday, March 20, 2024, and adjourned the meeting at 12:00 noon.

Respectfully submitted,

Frances Boswell

/s/