

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

January 21, 2026
10:00 am

Present: Mr. Jon Cooper, **Chair**, Mr. James Edmunds, **Vice Chair**, Ms. Laura Walters, Mr. Will Wampler (alternate), Mr. Lynwood Broaddus (alternate); **Board Members** in attendance: Ms. Marlee Dance, Mr. Parker Slaybaugh, Mr. George Terwilliger, Mr. Michael Formica, Mr. Woody Woodall, **Executive Director:** Mr. Ryan Brown; **Deputy Directors:** Ms. Becky Gwynn and Mr. Darin Moore; **Director's Working Group:** Dr. Mike Bednarski, Ms. Stacey Brown, Mr. George Braxton, Mr. Michael Lipford, Ms. Shelby Crouch, Mr. Bob Smet, Mr. Paul Kugelman, Ms. Rebecca Lane (virtual)

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

Approval of the October 22, 2025, Committee Meeting Minutes:

The Chair called for a motion to approve the October 22, 2025, Wildlife and Boat Committee minutes. Mr. Edmunds made a motion to approve the minutes of the October 22, 2025, committee meeting. Ms. Walters seconded the motion. Ayes: Cooper, Edmunds, Walters, Wampler, Broaddus

Deputy Director Becky Gwynn handled the Public Comments.

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

- Gary Kimberlin spoke regarding dog hunting (virtual)
- Jessica Sickinger spoke regarding dog hunting (virtual)
- Justin Updyke spoke regarding Drones for Deer Herd Analysis (person)

Migratory Bird Regulations & Bag Limit Proposal: Mr. Cooper called on Mr. Ben Lewis for a presentation.

Mr. Lewis gave a presentation on the Migratory Bird Regulations & Bag Limit Proposals.

After comments and questions, The Chair thanked Mr. Lewis for his presentation of the Migratory Bird Regulations and Bag Limit Proposal.

The Chair called for a motion, Mr. Edmunds made a motion, I move that the Wildlife and Boat Committee approve the preliminary 2026-2027 Migratory Game Bird Season and Bag Limit recommendations as presented by staff, for consideration by the full Board at the January 22, 2026, meeting. It was second by Mr. Cooper. Ayes: Cooper, Edmunds, Wampler, Walters, Broaddus.

Smallmouth Bass Management Plan: Mr. Cooper called on Dr. Mike Bednarski for a presentation.

Dr. Bednarski presented the Smallmouth Bass Management Plan.

After comments and questions, the Chair thanked Dr. Bednarski for his presentation on the Smallmouth Bass Management Plan.

The Chair called for a Final motion, Mr. Edmunds made a motion, Mr. Chair, I move that the Wildlife and Boat Committee of the Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources recommend the Smallmouth Bass Management Plan for endorsement by the Full Board. It was seconded by Mr. Cooper. Ayes: Cooper, Edmunds, Walters, Broaddus, Wampler

EPA Grant Update: Mr. Cooper called on Mr. David Norris for an Update.

Mr. Norris presented an Update on the EPA Grant.

After comments and questions, the Chair thanked Mr. Norris for his Update.

Annual Reports to USCG: The Chair called on Ms. Stacey Brown for a presentation.

Ms. Brown presented the Annual Report of the USCG.

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

Virginia's Second Breeding Bird Atlas: A Citizen Science Informed Conservation Tool:

The Chair called on Ms. Amy Martin for presentation.

Ms. Martin gave an update on Virginia's Second Breeding Bird Atlas.

After comments and questions, the Chair thanked Ms. Martin for her presentation.

Wildlife Division Report: The Chair called on Mr. Michael Lipford for a Wildlife Division Report.

Mr. Lipford reported:

Staff from the wildlife health, deer, & elk teams have been working on revisions to DWR's 5-year chronic wasting disease management plan. A draft of the revised plan has been shared with DWR's internal CWD Committee for review. That committee will meet in early February to discuss revisions and feedback. Our intention is to provide an overview of this new CWD plan during the March Wildlife and Boat Committee meeting.

At the March Board meeting we will also provide CWD testing results. We are still finalizing CWD samples including those from statewide taxidermists. Thus far we have no confirmed positives that would change our current management practices for the disease.

Avian influenza continues to affect black vulture populations in sporadic locations throughout the state. Additionally, over the past month there has been some low-level AI-related mortality in geese in eastern and northern parts of the state.

On the morning of December 27th, 150-200 grackles were found dead on or near the Hwy 17/360 bridge over Hoskins Creek in Tappahannock. A subset of birds was sent to the National Wildlife Health Center and results only found blunt force trauma. Influenza testing was negative. It appears that something spooked a large flock or roost of mostly grackles, leading to accidental collisions with the bridge.

DEER

10-year Deer Management Plan Revision is

- underway internally and external stakeholder participation will begin this in April/May. Tentative timeline is to complete the plan later next year (2027).
- DWR Deer Technical Committee held its first meeting on the new Deer Plan in December and began developing lists of deer management issues and potential Stakeholder Advisory Committee members.
- I am still hoping to fund a cultural carrying capacity survey that was cut from last year's budget. This helps update deer population objectives. May have to use results from last survey done in 2014.

Southeast Deer Study Group

- DWR is hosting the 49th annual meeting of the Southeast Deer Study Group at the Hotel Roanoke in Roanoke, VA February 22-24. This is the 4th meeting we've hosted, included the first one at Fort Pickett in 1977. This meeting brings together ~ 300 deer biologists,

researchers, and managers from across the southeast to share research and ideas and to discuss current challenges to deer management.

I'll report **Preliminary Big Game harvest information from last hunting season** (official harvest Press Release will be done in February – still have ongoing late seasons for deer and turkey)

For Deer

- 227,302 total deer reported through January 3rd, including special September seasons
- This is Up about 10% from last year and 14% above the 10-year average
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- Most deer killed in a year since 2013
- Most bucks since 2009
- Highest percent female since 2014 -- % female up: 45.5% this year vs 44.6% last year
- Harvest did increase WBR where we extended seasons*, but harvest was ahead of last year's pace all season long, so we cannot attribute harvest results to those extended seasons alone.
- Unsure at this point why harvest was up this year. Harvest typically declines in good mast years.

BEAR Preliminary harvest data...

- ~ 2350 bear reported, which is down ~ 15% from last year (expected due to season reductions in mange counties), but we might have expected an even larger drop during a good mast year)
- In mange counties, total harvest dropped an average of 33% from previous year and 39% from previous 3-year average
- In those counties, female harvest dropped an average of 37% from previous year and 43% from previous 3-year average; our target reduction was 60-65% female harvest reduction in these areas- moving in right direction
- Some harvest pressure may have shifted to peripheral counties; e.g., Fluvanna was up 60% from the previous year and Roanoke Co. was up 68%. Other periphery counties did not show significant increases (e.g., Craig, Giles). Hunt earlier
- Harvest increases were seen in Southside, especially in the 4 counties where season was expanded: Charlotte, Halifax, Prince Edward, and Mecklenburg. The total harvest increased 17% from previous year and 43% from previous 3-year average. Just changed the seasons in these four

Mange* (reported on this at the Mange Plan at October meeting)

- Total reports during 2025: 346, up from 274 reports in 2024
- # of Counties with Mange Reports: 42 (43% of VA counties)

- Bear program provided kits to bear hunters in different parts of the state and would like to thank them for their assistance gathering samples. (SE and SW baseline)

TURKEY

Very Preliminary harvest

- Fall season is still ongoing (ends January 24) but has been trending down again this year across the state. Estimate 1000 this year, ~ 1400 in 2024.
- This continued decline in fall harvest over the years can largely be attributed to declining participation in the fall seasons and hunters choosing to save tags for spring seasons.
- However, poor reproduction this past season could have been a contributing factor. Except for the Coalfield counties in SW VA, we experienced very low turkey recruitment during 2025 judging from brood surveys.

Fall turkey season work group

- Staff are assembling a fall turkey hunting workgroup to evaluate current season structure in time to make recommendations for the regulatory review process next fall. Per the turkey plan, the main purpose is to develop a simplified fall season structure that diversifies opportunity by hunters in the fall. The initial meeting will likely be scheduled for mid-February.

After comments and questions, the Chair thanked Mr. Lipford for his report.

Fish Division Report: The Chair called on Dr. Mike Bednarski for a Fish Division Update.

Dr. Bednarski reported:

DWR's is seeking public input on potential changes to existing fishing, boating and nongame regulations during the regulatory scoping period. The scoping period began on January 15th and will run through February 14th. Constituents can submit electronic comments through DWR's website. This is the first step in the regulatory process which happens every other year. Comments will be presented to the Wildlife and Boat Committee on March 18th and draft regulations will be presented on May 20th. These regulations would be adopted in August and go into effect on January 1st, 2027.

After comments and questions, the Chair thanked Dr. Bednarski for his report.

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

Ms. Brown reported:

I already shared some facts and figures during my earlier presentation, but here are some more as we tally up our impact during last year – 2025. Our customer service section handled over 90,000 calls and transactions with the agency’s constituents. In addition, we responded to over 14,000 emails. We had over 23,000 constituents take a boating safety course in 2025. Finally – we recorded 75 boating incidents with 10 fatalities. When I first started working for the agency, just as we were beginning to phase-in the boating education requirement, our average number of annual boating fatalities was around 20. Since the phase-in of the boating education requirement was completed in 2016, the average number of annual boating fatalities has dropped to 16.

As Mike Bednarski mentioned, we are gearing up for the public scoping period regarding boating regulations. Staff is working to identify items that need to be addressed in regulation in addition to any issues brought up through the public scoping period.

The only other item I wanted to mention during this report is a status of our waterway management program, and in particular regulatory markers. I mentioned back in August that we hired Travis Park who had recently retired from serving over 20 years in the Coast Guard. Travis has been hard at work on updating the procedures for the inspection of regulatory buoys as well as ensuring the data we have on the regulatory buoys is accurate. This work is taking us closer to our goal of providing accurate maps to the public of no wake zones and other regulatory markers by the end of 2026.

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

Non-game Program Update: The Chair called on Ms. Amy Martin for a Non-game Program Update.

Ms. Martin reported:

- **Bat Hibernacula Counts** – We started winter hibernacula counts the week of January 5th by surveying 10 caves in Highland and Bath counties. DWR and our partner states

within the range of these rare, threatened, and endangered species conduct these surveys every other year. The data, which provide winter population trend information are shared with the USFWS to inform species status assessments that in turn inform species listing and delisting. This year Rick's survey crew included staff from DWR's Environmental Services Program, our Furbearer Biologist, biologists from Radford University, DCR's Natural Heritage Program, and the US Forest Service. While data analysis is yet to be performed, it appears as though species numbers are stable or slightly declining. We plan to survey a total of 42 caves during this survey season.

- **Purple sandpiper surveys** - We started boat and land surveys on the lower Eastern Shore and around Hampton Roads for Purple Sandpiper. This species overwinters along rocky shorelines from Atlantic Canada to the southeast US. The goal of these surveys is to generate population and trend estimates across the flyway and learn whether the local declines are driven by flyway-scale declines or if birds are redistributing along the flyway in response to some environmental condition. Each survey site is visited once a month, Jan-Mar. During our January surveys, we found 13 Purple Sandpipers in Cape Charles harbor, and 8 on the riprap at the HRBT islands.
- **Bald and Golden Eagle trapping** – Golden eagles are migrating through Virginia as they head south from Canada and our Bald Eagles are settling into nesting season. DWR staff are trapping eagles and fitting them with transmitters so we can study their migration patterns and habitat use in Virginia, drawing blood from the eagles for disease monitoring and health assessments, and keeping an eye on productivity levels. These data not only help us determine how healthy our eagle populations are, where they are located and what habitats they use, they also inform activities such as Bird Air Strike Hazard mitigation at our airfields and airports and how things like wind energy may impact their populations.

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

Director's Report: The Chair called on Mr. Ryan Brown for a Director's report.

The Director reported:

- CWD measures we take are common with other states
- Grant money is available and DWR looks very closely at these Grants to see which are better suited for our Agency

Chair's Report: The Chair thanked all staff for their tremendous work that we continue to see. The Chair asked if there were any additional business or comments, hearing none, he announced the next meeting to be Wednesday, March 18, 2026, and adjourned the meeting at 12:10 pm.

Respectfully Submitted,
Frances Boswell
/s/