

Flying In to Protect Wildlife

CONSERVATIONISTS ADVOCATE FOR WILDLIFE SPECIES AND HABITAT ON CAPITOL HILL

By Kate Bissell and Jen Grauer



Courtesy of Kate Bissell

Kate Bissell is a policy intern with The Wildlife Society.

In February, members of Teaming with Wildlife (TWW)—a national coalition of more than 6,400 conservation groups, organizations, and state agencies—converged at the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. to inform Congress on the importance of wildlife funding. They were there as part of the annual Fly-In, a two-day event attended by representatives from state fish and wildlife agencies, hunters, birders, outdoor recreationists, and nature-based businesses working to support wildlife conservation and recreation opportunities.



Courtesy of Jen Grauer

Jen Grauer is a former policy intern with The Wildlife Society.

Greg Hoch, prairie habitat ecologist with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources and Chair of the Minnesota TWS Prairie Farmland Committee, was part of this year's event. He strongly felt that wildlife managers and biologists need to speak up and be heard by those on Capitol Hill. "Scientists and politicians often have very different personalities and ways of communicating," Hoch says. "We need to help them understand wildlife issues. We also need to learn to be more effective communicators and learn how to speak their language." Hoch joined the approximately 100 TWW attendees this year who traveled to the Capitol to urge Congress to set aside \$58.7 million in the fiscal year 2015 budget for the State and Tribal Wildlife Grants Program—a unique initiative to conserve non-game species.

Early Beginnings

In the mid-1990s the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (AFWA) launched the TWW coalition in response to the increasing numbers of species that were being listed under the federal Endangered Species Act. The coalition—comprised of conservation and scientific organizations such as The Wildlife Society (TWS) and the National Wildlife Federation (NWF)—saw the need to increase conservation measures and prevent listing. As a result, members focused on ensuring state wildlife agencies and partners receive the funding they need to keep common species common and to implement projects under state wildlife action plans. Their efforts paid off: In 2001, Congress created the State and Tribal Wildlife Grants Program (State Wildlife Grants)—the nation's only program devoted to preventing endangered species listings through active management and conservation. It's also the only conservation grant program that includes measurable standards for program effectiveness and allows states flexibility in conserving relevant species. Since its launch, State Wildlife Grants has provided more than \$890 million for state and tribal governments to safeguard fish and wildlife and has led to the protection of more than 12,000 at-risk species.

In order to receive funding as part of the program, states must design state wildlife action plans that are supported by the best available science. These plans

outline vital natural areas and determine species at greatest risk, shaping management to suit the needs of each state. One of TWW's primary tasks during the Fly-In and throughout the budget process involves working with state wildlife agencies and their partners to obtain enough funds through congressional appropriations to fully implement their state wildlife action plans.

At the 2014 Teaming with Wildlife Fly-In event, Congressman Jeff Fortenberry (R-NE) receives a Congressional Champions of Wildlife and their Habitats Award for championing legislation that supports efforts to prevent fish and wildlife from becoming endangered.



Credit: Mary Pfaffko/AFWA



Addressing Congress

This year, members of the TWW coalition represented more than 26 states and received support from 22 sponsor organizations including TWS, AFWA, NWF, and the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership. On the first day of the Fly-In, government affairs staff from AFWA and NWF briefed participants on TWW's message and ways to effectively deliver that message to Congress, such as personalizing success stories and relaying information pertinent to members' districts. For Brian Jennings, President of the Maryland/Delaware Chapter of TWS and Fly-In participant, learning about the budget and appropriations process from experts such as Rick Healy, staffer to the House Interior and Environment Appropriations Subcommittee, was especially useful in understanding how money gets appropriated for State Wildlife Grants. In addition, organizers instructed participants meeting with Congressional staff to urge them to make requests for specific programs as well as sign "Dear Colleague" letters that indicate member support.

On Day 2 of the Fly-In, participants—grouped by state—met with their senators and representatives to deliver details of previous State Wildlife Grants funding levels, economic impacts, state-specific projects, and reasons for continued commitment. Jennings addressed Congressional members from Maryland and Delaware on the importance of the State Wildlife Grants program. "We were able to show ... how the small amount of money [requested for State Wildlife Grants] does a lot to help fund state efforts in the conservation of our wildlife species," says Jennings, who represents many wildlife managers in the region who receive money through the program. "They do amazing things with a small amount of money," he says, including, "updating the state wildlife action plans, conducting amphibian and reptile surveys to document species abundance and location, researching red knots, and updating the breeding bird atlas, to name a few."

Hoch also met with Congressional staffers from his home state of Minnesota to encourage maximum funding for State Wildlife Grants. Minnesota has received \$16.5 million in State Wildlife Grants over the past 13 years, which has been used by more than 60 projects designed to conserve species within the state, including the improvement of river turtle habitat and the collection of baseline data on bat fatalities at commercial wind facilities. Hoch works with a group of researchers to implement monitoring of the Minnesota Prairie Conservation Plan, which coordinates conservation efforts among 10 federal and state agencies and NGOs

across western Minnesota. Further, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources and its federal, university, and NGO partners have used State Wildlife Grants to monitor plant communities of the western Minnesota prairie and implement a grasshopper sparrow monitoring project designed to provide an index of productivity for Minnesota's grassland birds. These prairie projects are crucial in light of the fact that only 1 percent of the original tallgrass prairie that once covered the western third of Minnesota remains.

In addition to holding meetings, TWW hosted a reception after the second day of the Fly-In, honoring participants and members of Congress for their continued support of State Wildlife Grants and wildlife programs. This year, the Member of Congress Awards went to Betty McCollom (D-MN), Jeff Fortenberry (R-NE), Mary Landrieu (D-LA), and James Risch (R-ID). The Virginia Conservation Network received the TWW Wildlife Coalition Member Achievement Award, and the State Wildlife Action Plan Partnership Award went to the Pennsylvania Game Commission and the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Research Institute.

Funding for Conservation

Since its launch, TWW has worked hard to keep state conservation funding on the minds of Congressional representatives as Congress and the President develop the federal budget. State Wildlife Grants reached its peak funding in 2010 with \$90 million and was able to recover from the federal sequester only slightly in 2014 at a level of \$58.7 million. Each TWW participant plays a critical role in educating Congress about the importance of State Wildlife Grants and ensuring adequate funding is secured. Fly-Ins continue each year as the main venue for coalition members to meet, network during receptions, and advocate for wildlife funding. Both Hoch and Jennings had memorable experiences on Capitol Hill and hope to be able to return next year. After his efforts in advocating on behalf of State Wildlife Grants and experiencing the frenzy of life in Washington, Hoch says, "I'm exhausted, need to go home, spend some quality canine time, watch some birds, take some long walks, and not talk to anyone for a little while." But he hopes to be back next year on behalf of the plants and birds of the Minnesota prairie. ■



Credit: Randy Schindler

Greg Hoch, an ecologist with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (accompanied by his dog Boomer), surveys for forb and grass diversity in a restored western Minnesota prairie. "One of the best things the Fly-In did for me was to stimulate some thinking and conversations within the agency for more efficient and effective ways to do research and monitoring in the prairie," Hoch says.