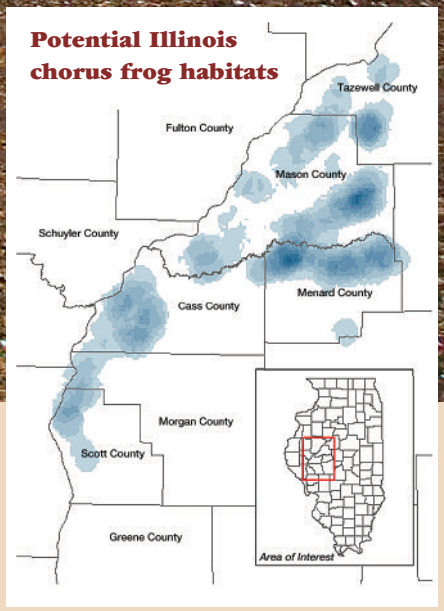
Creating Local Links to the Illinois Wildlife Action Plan.

Conservation Opportunity Areas in Illinois:

(Photo by Michael Jeffords.)

New populations of the state-threatened Illinois chorus frog were located in Menard County as a result of a Conservation Opportunity Area partnership.



(Background photo and graphic by Andrew Hullin.)

Story By David Myers, Matt Whiles and Joel Cross

Most of their life is spent burrowed deep within loose, sandy soils, aestivating, or sleeping, to escape dry conditions. But once spring rains bring the return of water to the seasonal wetlands, they awaken and surface, prepared to start a new generation.

Such is the life of the Illinois chorus frog (*Pseudacris streckeri illinoensis*), a 2-inch frog found only in isolated areas in Illinois, Missouri and Arkansas, and a subspecies of Strecker's chorus frog (*Pseudacris streckeri*).

The Illinois chorus frog is listed as threatened in the Prairie State because of its distinct habitat requirements. Soils having the required characteristics for this frog's life cycle are rare in Illinois, and one area where large patches of these soils exist is in Mason County, near the confluence of the Sangamon and Illinois Rivers. In this heavily agricultural area, it is not uncommon to find ephemeral wetlands that are farmed during the growing season, but may have the required habitat components to support the Illinois chorus frog during its short time at the surface in early spring.

The developers of the Illinois Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Plan and Strategy (see side bar), often called the Illinois Wildlife Action Plan, recognized the uniqueness of Mason County's landscape components, and as such it was proposed as a Conservation Opportunity Area.

Conservation Opportunity Areas are identified as locations with significant existing or potential wildlife habitat resources, where partners are willing to plan, implement and evaluate conservation actions, where financial and human resources are available, and where conservation is motivated by an agreed-upon conservation philosophy and set of objectives.

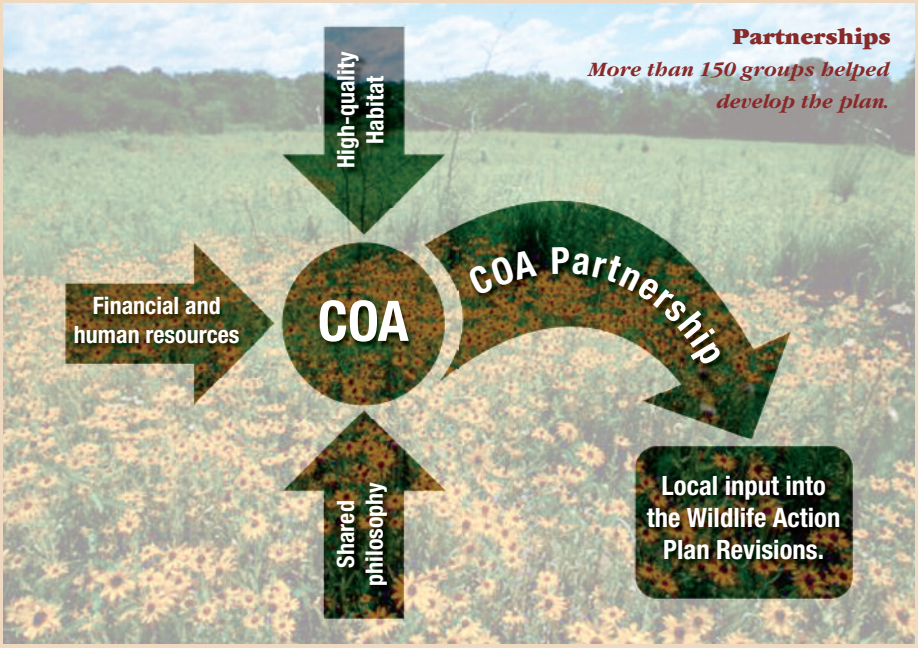
alligator snapping turtle

(Photos by Adele Hodde.)

The focus of the Illinois Wildlife Action Plan is to identify wildlife and habitat goals and the people and resources that will help reach those goals.

Although this is a fairly complicated sounding definition, it can be easily broken down to reveal why COAs and the partnerships in them have the potential to be so important to the conservation of fish and wildlife in Illinois.

First, COAs have existing or potential wildlife habitat resources. Centering efforts in areas where threatened and endangered species or other important wildlife resources already exist is the best way to preserve them—and hopefully increase their numbers.



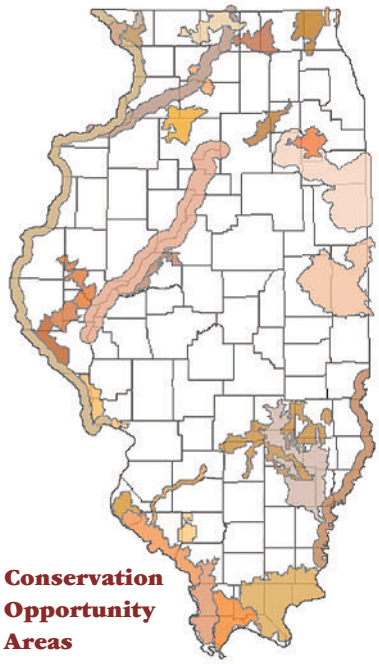
Next, it is important that COAs have financial and human resources available. Obviously, fish and wildlife can exist just fine in the complete absence of people, but will areas where target wildlife species now exist in a human-modified world remain healthy without our intervention? Will target species' numbers increase without management? In many cases, the answer is no, and having people already interested in fish and wildlife conservation in an area is one of the major first steps in successful management.

Finally, an agreed-upon philosophy among partners within COAs is essential to getting the maximum benefit out of funding and time dedicated to conservation. Ideally, this philosophy takes the form of a statement of goals or a similar document signed by the partners. The statement of goals can be as

More on Illinois' 32 COAs can be found at www.dnr.state.il.us/orc/wildliferesources/theplan.

simple as a list of the fish, wildlife and habitat issues that are the focus of the partners' efforts, or as complex as a management plan laying out specific habitat improvement measures and timelines. It is within these documents that the local land managers have an opportunity to let their needs be known at the state level. Without this window into the minds of local land managers, it is difficult for the DNR and its conservation partners to assess the status of resources within the COAs and to fully address local needs.

Local partnerships are the foundation that statewide management is built on, and COA partnerships and planning will be the basis for specific revisions and updates to the Wildlife Action Plan in the coming years. This past year, DNR and Southern Illinois University Carbondale partnered with the help of a State Wildlife Grant and funding from



(Graphic by Andrew Hullin.)

Conservation Opportunity Areas

The Nature Conservancy to work with the 32 COAs to help develop partnerships for each of them, with the ultimate goal of eventually generating more local input to the Wildlife Action Plan. The State Wildlife Grant Program distributes funds from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for conservation planning and implementation activities around the state. The COA partnership project is now well under way and is bringing together the people and resources associated with each COA to help them move forward with focused conservation efforts.

Partners in the Mason County Sands COA have been conducting chorus frog surveys in recent years, which also were in part funded through an Illinois State Wildlife grant. Through interactions with the COA project, Geographic Information Systems habitat models were developed that predicted some areas in Menard County

To learn more about the Illinois Wildlife Action Plan visit www.dnr.state.il.us/ORC/WildlifeResources/theplan/ or www.wildlifeactionplans.org/illinois.html.

Want to get involved? COA Partnerships are now forming. Contact members of local conservation groups and ask if they are involved. Spread the word!

The Illinois Wildlife Action Plan

The Illinois Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Plan and Strategy, or Illinois Wildlife Action Plan, is much more than just another resource-specific management plan, but rather defines a strategic vision and specific actions for statewide long-term conservation success. The Wildlife Action Plan was put together through an unprecedented effort that involved more than 150 agencies and organizations with vested interests in the fish and wildlife of Illinois. Biologists and sportsmen, educators, bird-watchers and others worked together to help design a document that reflects the diversity of their interests, and the diverse natural resources found in our state. The Wildlife Action Plan goes beyond the listing of species and recommending courses of action. It acknowledges that it is not simple opportunistic habitat creation or restoration, but focused and specific long-term management strategies that are the way to keep important natural landscapes and the wildlife living on them healthy and flourishing. As such, the Wildlife Action Plan introduces seven campaigns—streams; forest; farmland and prairie; wetlands; invasive species; land and water stewardship; Green cities—seeking to address the most widespread and urgent issues affecting fish, wildlife and habitat. The campaigns outline priority conservation actions, and performance measures to track the effectiveness of the actions. It is recognized that many of the proposed actions already are being implemented on the ground by various organizations, agencies and citizens.

The Wildlife Action Plan recognizes that wildlife is not static. As fish and wildlife populations grow and decline, as invasive species become established or climate changes alter their ranges, managers have to adapt. It is not only feasible, but probable that less than a decade from now there will be many fish and wildlife management priorities in Illinois that have not yet even been considered.

Truthfully, writing a new management plan for every issue that pops up is a recipe for failure. It forces managers into a reactive rather than proactive strategy, and produces many plans that may be superfluous. This type of redundant planning makes conservation efforts that are usually operating on a limited budget even more difficult.

The Wildlife Action Plan is designed to be adaptable to changing management priorities through periodic revisions. Revisions can be as simple as updating databases to reflect current wildlife survey data, or as in-depth as amending the state threatened and endangered species lists.

One revision approach explicitly called for in the Wildlife Action Plan is integrating local-scale conservation priorities into regional management efforts. No one document can reflect the management needs of every corner of the state. The expertise of the people doing the actual work of conservation—people on the ground every day—is essential to maintaining a perennially useful management plan. Because the developers of the Wildlife Action Plan recognized this fact, county park managers, soil and water commissions, private wildlife refuge managers and others have ways to "plug in" to the plan and its revision process. One of the avenues for reflecting local concerns is through association with one of 32 Illinois Conservation Opportunity Areas.

massasauga rattlesnake

(Photo by Scott Ballard.)

Most of the species in greatest need of conservation, such as the massasauga, do not require species-specific conservation actions, but stewardship geared towards habitats.

(south of Mason County) would meet the habitat requirements of the Illinois chorus frog. These models were largely correct, and frog populations were found in areas where they were previously not known.

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

—Margaret Meade

This is just one example of the potential that COA partnerships hold. Multiple skill sets are brought to the table (in this case ecologists, resource managers and a GIS specialist) and with them, new ways of looking at information that often yields exciting results. Successes in conservation at the local level, like the successes in the Mason County Sands and other COAs around the state, are an excellent way to attract more conservation funding. Demonstrating that partnerships are working lets investors (whether state or federal government or private) know that their resources are going toward a project that has a good chance for success. The focused purpose of the COA partnerships makes each of the partners bigger in the eyes of the conservation funding process, where valid and important projects may be otherwise lost in the mix, simply because of the relatively small scale. Furthermore, COA partnerships put local concerns "on the map" and poised for input when the Illinois Wildlife Action Plan revision process gets under way.

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Threatened and endangered species, including the greater prairie-chicken, are in critical need, but many more species are rare, localized or declining, and worthy of attention.

greater prairie-chicken

(Photo by Adele Hodde.)