

Updating MN list of endangered, threatened, special concern species

When European explorers first visited Minnesota in the 17th and 18th centuries, they found a land rich in habitats, teeming with a diversity of plants, animals, fish and birds.

Today, Minnesota still has a rich natural heritage, but some of the species seen by those early explorers no longer exist in the state, or they survive only in small, fragmented populations. In an effort to prevent further such losses, the state Legislature passed Minnesota's endangered and threatened species law in 1971, with subsequent revisions in 1974 and 1981.

The law directs the DNR to work at preserving Minnesota's biodiversity by making a list of those species of flora and fauna most at risk of disappearing from the state's landscape, and taking steps to protect them. The law also prohibits the taking or possession of threatened and endangered species except in certain situations.

The state's first list of endangered, threatened and special concern species was approved in 1984. Last revised in 1996, it currently includes 437 species of plants and animals. Based on a wealth of new information gathered over the past 16 years, the DNR now is proposing to update the list, removing some species, adding some and changing the status of others. Changes were proposed in 2007, then revised based on feedback from a variety of stakeholders. In all, 302 changes are proposed.

These changes are not expected to present any significant impediment to economic development. If a proposed project cannot avoid a protected species, the state can consider issuing a "taking permit" that is combined with mitigation, such as funding for research or acquisition of other sites to protect the species. Over the past decade, DNR has received 23 applications for development-related taking permits and has issued all but one.

The preservation of rare species represents an acknowledgement of the intricate relationships among different organisms and our limited understanding of how they all interact in a healthy functioning ecosys-



The snapping turtle is a widely distributed and familiar species that was placed on the list as a species of special concern in 1984 due to issues with poorly regulated commercial harvest. Recent changes in turtle harvest regulations have eliminated concerns about overharvest, and the DNR proposes to remove this species from the list.

tem. Allowing some species to disappear, ecologists say, is like removing parts of a complex machine because we don't understand what role all the pieces play – what's left may not work as intended. Some species also may have as yet undiscovered medicinal or other benefits, such as the Pacific yew tree, which was not recognized as having cancer fighting qualities until a few decades ago.

The special protections afforded endangered and threatened species can help their populations recover to the point where they can be delisted. The ultimate goal of putting a species on the list is to get it back off again.

Questions & Answers: *Updating Minnesota's Endangered, Threatened & Special Concern Species List*

Q: What is the Minnesota list of endangered, threatened and special concern species?

A: The list, authorized by law and established by means of a formal rulemaking process, identifies those native species most at risk of disappearing from Minnesota's natural landscapes.

Q: Why do we have such a list?

A: Species are put on the endangered, threatened and special concern list to help protect them from becoming extinct within the state. The ultimate goal of putting a species on the list is to get it back off again.

Q: What's meant by the terms "endangered," "threatened" and "special concern"?

A: The terms indicate different levels of risk for a species' disappearance from the state. An endangered species is one that is at great risk of extinction within the state. A threatened species is one that is likely to soon become endangered. Special concern species are considered vulnerable but not at immediate risk. Endangered and threatened species are afforded special protection; special concern species are not.

Q: What impacts result from a species being on this list?

A: State law prohibits the taking or possession of a threatened or endangered species, unless a permit has been issued by the Minnesota DNR. Applications for permits are considered on a case-by-case basis.

Q: Why is the list being updated now?

A: State law requires the DNR to periodically update the list of threatened, endangered and special concern species. The last time this was done was in 1996. Much new information has become available over the past 16 years, and the list needs to be updated to reflect what is known about current conditions.

Q: What changes are being proposed?

A: The DNR proposes to remove 29 species from the list, add 181 species and change the status of 92 species.

Q: How does DNR decide what changes should be made to the list?

A: Changes are based on information gathered from biological surveys. The DNR has prepared a 336-page document detailing this information for each species.

Q: Why is it important to preserve rare species?

A: The natural world is a complex system of which we have limited knowledge and understanding. We don't know which parts can be removed without causing problems; and we don't know which species of plants or animals may demonstrate as yet undiscovered benefits. Given our limited knowledge, it makes sense to try to preserve the state's diversity of species.

Q: How does the list updating process work?

A: Five public hearings will be held before an administrative law judge to solicit testimony on proposed changes. Written comments also can be submitted. Comments will be considered by the judge, and may result in modifications to the proposed rules. Within 30 days of the end of the comment period, the judge will issue a detailed report on the need for and the reasonableness of the new list. The new list becomes official only after DNR accepts the judge's report and publishes the new list in the State Register.

Q: Where can I get more information?

A: Information on proposed changes to the list and how to comment can be found on the DNR website at: www.dnr.state.mn.us/ets/rulesrevision.html.



Ron Winch

The bald eagle is a true endangered species success story. Listed as threatened in 1984, the state's eagle population has rebounded from a low of 115 nests in 1973 to a current estimate of more than 1,300. The DNR is now proposing to remove the eagle from special concern status.



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