

Animal Species of Conservation Concern Identification Process for the Flathead National Forest's Draft Revised Forest Plan and Draft Environmental Impact Statement

[The 2012 Planning Rule](#) (36 CFR 219) defines a species of conservation concern (SCC) as "a species, other than a federally recognized threatened, endangered, proposed or candidate species, that is known to occur in the plan area and for which the regional forester has determined that the best available scientific information indicates substantial concern about the species' capability to persist over the long-term in the plan area" (36 CFR 219.9). The Regional Forester identifies SCC as part of the planning process. Direction for identifying SCC are in the [Forest Service handbook \(FSH\) for land management planning](#) (i.e., the planning directives) at FSH 1909.12, chapter 10, section 12.52 and at chapter 20, section 21.22a.

This document outlines the Northern Region's three-step approach in identifying animal SCC for the Flathead National Forest's draft Revised Forest Plan and draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). This includes terrestrial and aquatic vertebrates and invertebrates (plants are documented separately). This approach is consistent with the [2012 Planning Rule](#) and agency guidance contained in the planning directives. The best available scientific information, including external expert knowledge and information received from the general public, was considered during the development of this list.

Step 1. During the assessment phase, the Flathead planning team biologists identified which of the animal species documented to occur within the planning area met the categories described in items 1A-I below. This step resulted in the list of species to consider for potential SCC status.

The Flathead revision planning team obtained, from the Montana Natural Heritage Program (NHP), spatial records of all species documented to occur on National Forest System (NFS) lands within the plan area. The biologists then queried those records for species that met at least one category in Step 1 A-I below. Records occurring within one-half mile of the plan area were also examined in order to help prevent excluding potentially valid but imprecise locational records.

The Montana NHP database was used because it is the most comprehensive, reliable, and up-to-date source of documented species occurrences on NFS lands in Montana. The Montana NHP, which is part of the international NatureServe network, manages statewide occurrence records and other information for species and habitats of conservation interest. The Forest Service, other agencies, and the public all contribute observation records to Montana NHP's statewide data repository.

The categories of species to consider originated from the [proposed planning directives](#) at FSH 1909.12, chapter 10, section 12.52, which were in place when the potential SCC list was developed. (Note: the final planning directives implemented categories that are very similar to what is described in 1A-1J; see more information at Step 3). A species meeting any one category was further considered for PSCC status regardless of whether it met another category. The categories were:

- A) NatureServe global (G) or infraspecific taxon (T) ranks of 1 or 2¹

¹ Statuses obtained from Montana NHP. See <http://mntnhp.org/SpeciesOfConcern/?AorP=a> for definitions and more information.

- B) Delisted (removed) from the Endangered Species Act list within the last five years, or delisted and still monitored by the regulatory agency²
- C) State of Montana Threatened or endangered designations¹
- D) Positive “90-day findings” made by the US Fish and Wildlife Service in response to federal listing petitions²
- E) Montana NHP state (S) ranks of 1 or 2.¹ These ranks, while assigned by Montana NHP, are also reflected in the Montana Species of Concern list by Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks and Montana NHP. Higher numerical ranks (e.g., S3, S4, S5) were not included in category E because they indicate relatively secure conservation status at the statewide level; concern at the plan level would be identified in Step 1 category I. This approach is consistent with FSH 1909.12 chapter 10, section 12.52d(3)(a).¹
- F) NatureServe G3 ranks¹ (invertebrates not included). Species with higher ranks (e.g., G4, G5) were not automatically considered because they are reasonably secure at the global level, and if there was concern at the plan level, they would be identified in Step 1 category I. This approach is consistent with FSH 1909.12 chapter 10, section 12.52d(3)(a).
- G) NatureServe G3 ranks¹ (invertebrates not included). Species with higher ranks (e.g., G4, G5) were not automatically considered because they are reasonably secure at the global level, and if there was concern at the plan level, they would be identified in Step 1 category J. This approach is consistent with FSH 1909.12 chapter 10, section 12.52d(3)(a).
- H) Regional Forester’s sensitive species for the Flathead NF and adjoining NFs (i.e., Helena-Lewis and Clark, Lolo, and Kootenai).³
- I) Local conservation concern due to significant threats to populations or habitats, declining trends in populations or habitat, restricted ranges or habitats, or low population numbers. Additions of these species were typically identified through public comments and from conversations with local biologists from the Forest Service, Montana Fish Wildlife & Parks, Glacier National Park, Montana NHP, US Geological Survey, Tribes, and local groups or individuals with scientific expertise.

Step 2: During the assessment phase, the Flathead planning team, in consultation with others, identified which of the animal species that emerged from Step 1 met the criteria in items 2A, B, and C below. This step resulted in the “potential SCC” animal list.

This step was completed by using the best available scientific information, including expertise from internal and external individuals, to determine which species identified in Step 1 met the criteria in items in Step 2 A, B, and C below. The criteria originated from the proposed planning directives at FSH 1909.12, chapter 10, section 12.52c, which were in place when the potential SCC list was developed. External expertise originated from Montana Fish Wildlife & Parks, Montana NHP, Glacier National Park, US Geological Survey, Tribes, research entities, and local

² Statuses obtained from US Fish and Wildlife Service.

³ See <http://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/r1/plants-animals/?cid=stelprdb5130525>. Please note neither the proposed or final planning directives required consideration of this category; however, it was applied to compensate for the absence of SCC on adjoining units, which have not yet been designated.

⁴SX=Presumed extinct or extirpated in Montana; SH=Historical; SNR=Not yet ranked; SU=Unrankable; SNA=No applicable rank. See <http://mtnhp.org/SpeciesOfConcern/?AorP=a> for detailed descriptions.

groups or individuals. The planning team also solicited public involvement in identifying potential SCC through a series of public meetings and public fieldtrips.

The criteria for identifying potential SCC were:

- A) The species must be native to, and known to occur in the plan area.
 - i. Species were removed from the dataset if they were designated by Montana NHP as SX, SH, SNR, SU, or SNA⁴.
 - i. Vertebrate species were removed from the dataset if there were fewer than 3 recorded observations in the plan area since 1918 (the MNHP data period).
 - ii. Invertebrate species were removed from the dataset if there had been no recorded observations in the plan area within the last 15 years. However, these species were re-evaluated for sufficient information in Step 3 below.

- B) The best available scientific information must indicate substantial concern about the species' capability to persist over the long term in the plan area.
 - i. In general, substantial concern was best demonstrated by a decreasing population (abundance or distribution), decreasing habitat, or significant threat to the species in the plan area. Other factors considered during this evaluation included abundance, geographic distribution, reproductive potential, dispersal capabilities, and other demographic and life history characteristics of the species that could influence long-term persistence in the plan area. This approach was based on best available scientific information in conjunction with professional expertise of Regional Office biologists.
 - ii. Rarity alone typically was not considered a substantial concern unless accompanied by one of the three general conditions listed in Step 2 (B)(i) above or having other prominent circumstances leading to concern for long-term persistence.

- C) If there was insufficient scientific information available to conclude that there was a substantial concern about a species' capability to persist in the plan area over the long-term, or if the species was secure in the plan area, that species was not identified as an SCC. Rationale for not identifying species as SCC included:
 - i. If the species was secure and its continued long-term persistence in the plan area was not at risk based on knowledge of its abundance, distribution, lack of threats to persistence, trends in habitat, or responses to management.
 - ii. Insufficient scientific information available to conclude that there was a substantial concern about the species' capability to persist in the plan area over the long term. Lack of sufficient scientific information included having limited inventory data resulting from low survey effort, lack of effective detection methods, or, in the case of purported population declines, lack of reasonably consistent monitoring methods among trend monitoring periods.

Step 3. During the planning phase, Regional Office and Flathead biologists identified the animal SCC list by applying the final planning directives to the species identified in Steps 1 and 2 above, and adjusting where necessary. This step resulted in the animal SCC list for the Flathead National Forest's draft Revised Forest Plan and draft EIS.

This step was completed by using the best available scientific information (including expertise from internal and external individuals) and the final planning directives at FSH 1909.12, chapter 10, section 12.52 and chapter 20, section 21.22a. External expertise originated from many of the same organizations listed in Step 2.

The final planning directives adopted nearly identical categories and selection criteria as what were presented in the proposed directives and in Steps 1 A-J and 2 A-C above. Differences were minor, but did result in a few adjustments to the resulting species list and/or underlying documentation. For example, the final directives removed the requirement for all species in category B of Step 1 above to be included as SCC. With this change, these species were considered for SCC status using the criteria in Step 2.

Most changes between the potential SCC list generated in Step 2 and the SCC list generated in Step 3 resulted from having more time to complete Step 3. This allowed more thorough understanding of the final directives and more thorough evaluations of the best available scientific information regarding the species' statuses and threats to persistence within the plan area.

As a result of process above, the following animal SCC have been identified for the Flathead National Forest's draft Revised Forest Plan and draft EIS:

Common Name	Scientific Name
Black swift	<i>Cypseloides niger</i>
Clark's nutcracker	<i>Nucifraga columbiana</i>
Flammulated owl	<i>Otus flammeolus</i>
Fisher	<i>Pekania pennanti</i>
Harlequin duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>
Townsend's big-eared bat	<i>Corynorhinus townsendii</i>
West slope cutthroat trout	<i>Oncorhynchus clarki lewisi</i>