Animal Species of Conservation Concern Identification Process for the Flathead National Forest's Revised Forest Plan and Final 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 typically 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 multi-step approach in identifying animal SCC for the Flathead National Forest's Revised Forest Plan and final 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-H 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-H below. The 2014 Assessment of the Flathead National Forest more broadly included some species that occurred near the plan area, but the final evaluation followed the criteria in the final directives and only assessed species within the plan area boundary.

The Montana NHP database was used because it was 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 observational data, 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 definitions of "occurrence" and "observation," as used in the animal and plant evaluations, are from the Montana Natural Heritage Program. An occurrence is a documented location of a specimen collection or species/population observation, and an observation is a visual, specimen, genetic, or other documentation of a species at an occurrence with an assigned spatial precision during a given time period.

The categories of species considered or included as potential SCC originated from the proposed planning directives at FSH 1909.12, chapter 10, section 12.52[1], 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-1H; see more information at Step 3). A species meeting any one category was further considered for potential SCC status regardless of whether it met another category.

The categories that must be included per the proposed directives were:

A) NatureServe global (G) or infraspecific taxon (T) ranks of 1 or 2.[2]

B) Delisted (removed) from the Endangered Species Act list within the last 5 years, or delisted and still monitored by the regulatory agency.[3]

C) Positive "90-day findings" made by the US Fish and Wildlife Service in response to federal listing petitions.[3] (Note: this category was changed from "must be included" to "should be considered" in the final directives)

Other categories considered were:

D) Montana NHP state (S) ranks of 1 or 2.[2] These ranks, while assigned by Montana NHP, are also reflected in the Montana Species of Concern list by Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks (MFWP) and Montana NHP. Higher numerical ranks (e.g., S3, S4, S5) were not included because they indicate relatively secure conservation status at the statewide level; if there was a concern at the plan level, the species would be identified in Step 1 category H.

E) NatureServe G3 ranks[2] (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, the species would be identified in Step 1 category H.

F) State of Montana or Tribal threatened or endangered designations.

G) Regional Forester's sensitive species for the Flathead NF and adjoining NFs (i.e., Helena-Lewis and Clark, Lolo, and Kootenai).

H) 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, MFWP, 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.

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[1] For plan amendments and revisions initiated prior to the issuance of the final or amended directive, the Responsible Official should use the amended directive in any new step or phase of the planning process, but is not required to revise past steps or phases within the process. Thus, there were slight differences in how potential SCC were identified using the proposed directives compared to the subsequent SCC identification which is fully consistent with the final directives.

[2] Status obtained from Montana NHP. See http://mtnhp.org/SpeciesOfConcern/?AorP=a for definitions and more information.

[3] Status obtained from US Fish and Wildlife Service.

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 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. A species is "known to occur" if, at the time of plan development, the best available scientific information indicates that it is established or becoming established on NFS lands in the plan area.

   ii. A species with individual occurrences in a plan area that are merely "accidental" or "transient," or are well outside the species' existing range at the time of plan development, is not established or becoming established in the plan area. If the range of a species is changing so that what is becoming its "normal" range includes the plan area, an individual occurrence should not be considered transient or accidental.

   iii. Observation records were automatically excluded if the point location was too imprecise to determine whether the observation actually occurred in the plan area, such as those recorded with latilong or quarter latilong precision (which in Montana, represent approximately 3,200 and 800 square miles, respectively). These types of records most commonly originate from historical documentation that provided only broad reference to locations. However, it is important to note that exclusion of these records would only result in dropping a species from further consideration if more precise records for the species did not also occur within the planning area.

   iv. Species were removed from the dataset if they were designated by the state NHP as SX, SH, SNR, SU, or SNA.[4]

   v. 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). However, public comments during the DEIS phase prompted us to re-examine in Step 4 the appropriateness of this timeframe in distinguishing what is currently established in the plan area.

   vi. 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 and Step 4 below.

B) The best available scientific information must indicate substantial concern about

[4] SX=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.

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 threats, particularly when they were greater than expected under natural variation. Such threats could be caused by stressors on or off the plan area, to populations or the ecological conditions they depend upon (habitat).

Other factors considered during this evaluation included abundance, geographic distribution, reproductive potential, dispersal capabilities, and other relevant 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 in the plan area.

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 a potential SCC. Rationale for not identifying species as potential 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 was 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 that would preclude meaningful comparison.

Step 3. During the planning phase, Regional Office and Flathead biologists identified the animal SCC list by applying the final planning directives to 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 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-H 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 and C of Step 1 above to be included as potential SCC, and removed the requirement for species to have a plan occurrence record within the past 15 years. With this change, species that were eliminated previously were reconsidered 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 the continued national learning and public engagement as the Forests Service implemented the 2012 planning rule. 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.

Additionally, we followed clarification in a June 6, 2016 Memorandum by the Deputy Chief of the National Forest System to regional foresters, which states that if a species is determined to be at risk across its range, but is determined to be secure within the plan area, it cannot be an SCC.

Step 4. In response to public comments to the SCC list issued 5/26/2016, objections received to the SCC list issued 11/28/2017, and to new scientific information, Regional Office staff iteratively reviewed the species selection process and criteria requirements, available information, and the rationale for identifying the SCC. This step resulted in the animal SCC list for the Flathead National Forest's revised Forest Plan.

Process clarifications and changes to the animal selection process resulting from this iterative step:

A. We applied NatureServe timelines to species observation records in the plan area to differentiate which animal species have sufficient information to determine they are *currently* known to occur in the plan area from those only known to *historically* occur in the plan area. We accepted NatureServe timelines[5] as best available scientific information to establish when past observations are not enough evidence to conclude that the species is known to occur in the plan area at this time. NatureServe describes their guidelines for ranking species as historical occurrences at http://explorer.natureserve.org/eorankguide.htm. Montana Natural Heritage Program describes their historic ranking information at http://fieldguide.mt.gov/statusCodes.aspx#msrc:rank.

B. We clarify that, for the purposes of the planning process, the individuals of a species of conservation concern that exist in the plan area will be considered to be members of one population of that species. Further, to be considered viable (persistent) in the long term, a population must have sufficient distribution to be resilient and adaptable to stressors and likely future environments (preamble to the 2012 Planning Rule, 77 FR at 21217, April 9, 2012). A population need not be present or secure throughout the entire plan area in order to be viable.

C. We clarify that threats must be both relevant and significant to indicate substantial concern. To be relevant, they must pertain to spatial and temporal scales appropriate to the plan area. To be significant, they must be of a magnitude that would potentially affect long-term persistence in the plan area. This characterization would normally include those threats known to exist in the plan area, as well as those occurring

[5] Per NatureServe, being ranked as historical means that recent field information verifying the continued existence is lacking.

outside of the plan area if they affect populations or habitats inside the plan area. It typically would not include threats that might occur under a theoretical context (e.g., speculative), or occur in a location or time that would not affect individuals using the plan area.

The iterations of this step resulted in additional species being considered for SCC status that were not previously considered, removal of species previously identified as SCC, and updates to the rationale document explaining why species were or were not identified as SCC. See the most current species evaluation documentation for more information.

Summary: As a result of processes described in this document, the following animal SCC have been identified for the Flathead National Forest's revised Forest Plan. The species have not changed from what the regional forester identified in her letter dated 11/28/2017. See the species evaluation documentation for a full description of the information considered to make this determination.

Common Name	Scientific Name
Black swift	*Cypseloides niger*
Clark's nutcracker	*Nucifraga columbiana*
Flammulated owl	*Psiloscops flammeolus*