

Yellow-breasted Chat

Ontario Government Response Statement



Photo: Brian E. Small

Protecting and Recovering Species at Risk in Ontario

Species at risk recovery is a key part of protecting Ontario's biodiversity. *The Endangered Species Act, 2007* (ESA) is the Government of Ontario's legislative commitment to protecting and recovering species at risk and their habitats.

Under the ESA, the Government of Ontario must ensure that a recovery strategy is prepared for each species that is listed as endangered or threatened. A recovery strategy provides science-based advice to government on what is required to achieve recovery of a species.

Generally, within nine months after a recovery strategy is prepared, the ESA requires the government to publish a statement summarizing the government's intended actions and priorities in response to the recovery strategy. The response statement is the government's policy response to the scientific advice provided in the recovery strategy. In addition to the strategy, the government response statement considered (where available) input from Indigenous communities and organizations, stakeholders, other jurisdictions, and members of the public. It reflects the best available local and scientific knowledge, including Traditional Ecological Knowledge where it has been shared by communities and Knowledge Holders, as appropriate, and may be adapted if new information becomes available. In implementing and considering the actions in the response statement, the ESA allows the government to determine what is feasible, taking into account social, cultural and economic factors.

The Recovery Strategy for the Yellow-breasted Chat (*Icteria virens*) in Ontario was completed on April 28, 2020.

Yellow-breasted Chat is a large songbird with a bright yellow chest and an olive-green back. They are often found in early-successional shrublands with open canopies. Although this species was once believed to be a wood-warbler, it is now thought to be the only member of the family Icteriidae.

Protecting and Recovering Yellow-breasted Chat

Yellow-breasted Chat is listed as an endangered species under the ESA, which protects both the animal and its habitat. The ESA prohibits harm or harassment of the species and damage or destruction of its habitat without authorization. Such authorization would require that conditions established by the Ontario government be met.

Three designatable units for the species are described in the 2011 federal species status report by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC), including the *virens* subspecies - Eastern population in Ontario (herein referred to as Yellow-breasted Chat); the *auricollis* subspecies - Southern Mountain population in British Columbia; and the *auricollis* subspecies - Prairie population in Alberta and Saskatchewan.

The global range of the Yellow-breasted Chat is restricted to North and Central America, with the most common observations occurring between Panama and southern Canada. This species typically overwinters in Mexico and Central America, migrating north to spend the summers from the eastern Great Plains and central Texas eastward and north to southwestern Ontario. Records suggest that at the time of European settlement, this species was likely not common at the current northern edge of its range. Logging activities and the abandonment of farmland in the 1900s allowed this species to expand into new areas with early successional habitat throughout its range. However, since that time, there has been some range contraction as many of the shrubland habitats were left to succeed into forests.

In Canada, the subspecies' breeding distribution is restricted to a small area of southwestern Ontario, although there are historical records suggesting they once may have bred in some areas of Québec. Occasional occurrences in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick have also been reported; however, these are believed to be unpaired males. In Ontario, Yellow-breasted Chat has primarily been found along the north shore of Lake Erie, particularly on Pelee Island and in Point Pelee National Park, although records suggest that there have never been large numbers present in these areas. These two locations are considered to contain the only remaining core breeding populations in Canada, and historical records suggest that although breeding populations have been occasionally documented elsewhere in the province, the species' nesting range has become restricted to these areas.

Yellow-breasted Chat is a migratory species, arriving in Ontario in early May to lay a single brood of eggs. The species only remains in the area until early to mid-August, at which point they begin their migration southward.

Yellow-breasted Chat is typically found in open-canopy habitats dominated by shrubs or early-successional forests. Areas in the early stages of re-growth, such as clear-cuts, abandoned agricultural fields, and forest edges and openings, are preferred by this species as they offer optimal foraging and nesting habitats. Yellow-breasted Chat commonly nests in the branches of densely clustered shrubs, most often in areas where there is a mix of woody and herbaceous vegetation.

The preference of Yellow-breasted Chat for early-successional shrublands means a reliance on regular disturbances in habitat areas to keep conditions suitable. Historically, intermittent fires, insect infestations and major storm events helped ensure the regular creation of open areas that would naturally transition into the shrubland this species prefers. Following European settlement in North America, Yellow-breasted Chat has been documented using early shrubby re-growth which is a product of activities such as forestry practices, right-of-way maintenance, and low-intensity agricultural practices.

The most significant threat to Yellow-breasted Chat is the suppression of natural disturbances in the areas where they are found, and the resulting decrease in suitable habitat. Although all of the areas where Yellow-breasted Chat are known to currently nest in Ontario are located within protected or conservation lands, it is rare for cleared areas to be maintained as early-successional habitat as they are often allowed to grow into mature forest. The prevention and suppression of wildfires to protect human life and property minimizes the creation of cleared forest areas, and the maintenance or creation of shrubland habitat is not often a conservation priority for rehabilitation projects.

Additional threats that may affect Yellow-breasted Chat include the presence of invasive species and problematic native species. Little research has been completed to examine predation rates by domestic cats or the introduced Eastern Fox Squirrel (*Sciurus niger*), but both are common on Pelee Island and may consume Yellow-breasted Chat or their eggs. Additionally, the establishment of invasive shrubs, such as European Buckthorn (*Rhamnus cathartica*) may decrease habitat quality and available food sources by out-competing native shrubs. The Brown-headed Cowbird (*Molothrus ater*) is a native species that lays its eggs in the nests of other birds, including Yellow-breasted Chat, occasionally removing the eggs already inside. The host bird then raises the hatched Brown-headed Cowbirds which compete for space and food with any of the host bird's young that survive. Studies have shown this is very common with Yellow-breasted Chat nests although it is unknown how significant a threat this poses to the species' survival. Predation by other native species, such as Eastern Chipmunks (*Tamias striatus*), Blue Jays (*Cyanocitta cristata*), American Crows (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*), and Raccoons (*Procyon lotor*), may also pose a threat to the species' survival.

The alteration of suitable shrubland habitat for housing developments or the conversion of these areas to active agriculture has historically posed a threat to this species. However, due to the limited distribution of Yellow-breasted Chat and the fact that the vast majority of identified habitat appears to be located on lands managed by Parks Canada, a conservation authority, and non-profit land conservancies, this threat is currently minimal. Climate change may also threaten the survival of this species through habitat shifts and changes in growing conditions, but it is unknown how significant the effects may be.

Maintaining a persistent population of Yellow-breasted Chat in Ontario will require continued appropriate maintenance of the habitat areas the species uses for breeding and foraging. It is important to acknowledge that range retraction in the U.S and declines in adjacent states may mean that despite best efforts in Ontario to create and maintain habitat, it may not be possible to establish large numbers of the species in Ontario or they may actually decline despite best efforts. Developing appropriate management techniques that also account for other species in the area and ongoing land uses will be a key component of successful recovery efforts. Monitoring and research is also needed to track habitat use by Yellow-breasted Chat and improve understanding of ongoing threats.

Government's Recovery Goal

The government's goal for the recovery of Yellow-breasted Chat is to support the persistence of this species in Ontario by minimizing threats and improving habitat conditions.

Actions

Protecting and recovering species at risk is a shared responsibility. No single agency or organization has the knowledge, authority or financial resources to protect and recover all of Ontario's species at risk. Successful recovery requires inter-governmental co-operation and the involvement of many individuals, organizations and communities. In developing the government response statement, the government considered what actions are feasible for the government to lead directly and what actions are feasible for the government to support its conservation partners to undertake.

Government-led Actions

To help protect and recover Yellow-breasted Chat, the government will directly undertake the following actions:

- Continue to protect Yellow-breasted Chat and its habitat through the ESA.
- Undertake communications and outreach to increase public awareness of species at risk in Ontario.

- Educate other agencies and authorities involved in planning and environmental assessment processes on the protection requirements under the ESA.
- Encourage the submission of Yellow-breasted Chat data to the Ontario's central repository (Natural Heritage Information Centre, NHIC) through the NHIC (Rare species of Ontario) project in iNaturalist or directly through the NHIC.
- Continue to support conservation, agency, municipal and industry partners, and Indigenous communities and organizations to undertake activities to protect and recover Yellow-breasted Chat. Support will be provided where appropriate through funding, agreements, permits (including conditions) and/or advisory services.
- Continue to implement the *Ontario Invasive Species Strategic Plan (2012)* to address the invasive species (e.g. European Buckthorn) that threaten Yellow-breasted Chat.
- Conduct a review of progress toward the protection and recovery of Yellow-breasted Chat within five years of the publication of this document.

Government-supported Actions

The government endorses the following actions as being necessary for the protection and recovery of Yellow-breasted Chat. Actions identified as "high" may be given priority consideration for funding under the Species at Risk Stewardship Program. Where reasonable, the government will also consider the priority assigned to these actions when reviewing and issuing authorizations under the ESA. Other organizations are encouraged to consider these priorities when developing projects or mitigation plans related to species at risk.

Focus Area: Management and Habitat Protection

Objective: Maintain or improve the quality of habitat available for Yellow-breasted Chat, and where feasible and appropriate, undertake habitat restoration activities.

The specific habitat requirements of Yellow-breasted Chat rely on the maintenance of sufficiently sized patches of land at a particular stage of succession. The suppression of fire and lack of natural disturbances and forest clearings in the area of distribution of this species in Ontario requires that alternative methods of creating or maintaining early-successional shrubland be implemented to promote the recovery of this species. A collaborative approach is needed to effectively implement broadscale measures to manage existing areas occupied by the species, to plan for the long-term continued provision of habitat, to restore sites where appropriate, and to effectively manage threats. Encouraging an adaptive approach and the use of best management practices by those involved will help support the recovery of the species.

Actions:

1. **(High)** Work collaboratively with landowners, land managers, and researchers to develop, implement and evaluate management plans and best management practices to maintain or improve the quality of Yellow-breasted Chat habitat and viability of populations at existing sites. This action should be informed by the results of Action 5 below. Plans may include:
 - ecosystem-scale management practices for shrubland communities that balance the needs of multiple species at risk;
 - identifying opportunities to stagger habitat creation at a landscape scale to ensure a consistent supply of habitat at the appropriate successional stage each year; and
 - strategies to remove, manage and/or monitor the presence and impacts of invasive plants (e.g., European Buckthorn), and native or non-native predators (e.g., domestic cats, raccoons) in areas with or adjacent to populations.
2. Where suitable candidate sites exist near recent Yellow-breasted Chat breeding locations, and where there are willing partners, undertake on-the-ground efforts to restore, maintain or enhance Yellow-breasted Chat habitat in collaboration with organizations, agencies and interested Indigenous communities and organizations.
3. As opportunities arise, work with local landowners and community partners to support the securement of habitat and potential habitat of Yellow-breasted Chat through existing land securement and stewardship programs.

Focus Area: Research and Monitoring

Objective: Improve understanding of Yellow-breasted Chat population trends and abundance, habitat needs, threats to the species, and methods for managing identified threats.

In order to ensure proper management of Yellow-breasted Chat and their habitat, it is necessary to gain a more thorough understanding of factors influencing the species in Ontario. Monitoring and research are needed to better understand any changes in the population over time, how this species is utilizing existing habitat areas, and what steps can be taken to improve or increase the availability of nesting and foraging habitat. Additional work is required to ensure that potential actions identified to benefit Yellow-breasted Chat do not negatively affect other species at risk in the area, and that they account for proper management of identified threats.

Actions:

4. **(High)** Monitor Yellow-breasted Chat reproductive success and population trends in Ontario to improve understanding of productivity in the province, track changes in species' distribution over time, and compare findings to other jurisdictions. Actions may include:
 - conducting comprehensive surveys (call-broadcast surveys and vegetation assessments) at locations where the species is observed during the breeding season; and
 - working with partners to compile and share data obtained from monitoring efforts within the province and in other areas of the species' range.
5. **(High)** Conduct research to evaluate the effectiveness and applicability of potential habitat management techniques, including:
 - determining optimal vegetation management practices to create or maintain shrublands;
 - determining the effect on abundance and productivity of the Yellow-breasted Chat; and
 - studying potential impacts of shrubland maintenance on other species at risk.
6. Undertake research to determine the minimum viable population size and minimum habitat area required to maintain a sustainable Yellow-breasted Chat population in Ontario.
7. Improve knowledge on habitat use, condition, and availability to inform habitat protection, management, and enhancement. This may include:
 - improved characterization of suitable Yellow-breasted Chat breeding habitat;
 - data collection on the availability of suitable unoccupied areas or areas appropriate for habitat restoration in the species' breeding range; and
 - supporting efforts to identify, describe, and characterize wintering and migration areas.
8. Investigate potential threats to the species and methods for mitigating impacts including:
 - evaluating impacts to the species from establishment of invasive plants in habitat areas;
 - examining potential direct and indirect impacts to the species as a result of climate change;
 - assessing predation rates from domestic cats and other predators;
 - evaluating impacts of Brown-headed Cowbird parasitism; and

- identifying and/or developing suitable best management practices (e.g., invasive plant removal, predator management) for areas of occupied and potential habitat.

Focus Area: Outreach and Awareness

Objective: Increase public awareness of and participation in efforts to minimize threats to Yellow-breasted Chat.

Although Yellow-breasted Chat is currently found in Ontario on lands that are predominantly protected or managed long-term as natural areas, most nearby areas of potential habitat are located on private lands. Therefore, the education and involvement of the public is a key factor in supporting recovery of the species, particularly to encourage best management practices on existing shrublands and control of invasive species where needed. Ensuring landowners are aware of the presence of the species and potential threats will require collaboration between agencies with an emphasis on sharing the best available information.

Actions:

9. Develop and distribute materials or programs that educate landowners, land managers, and land users on topics relating to:
 - the value of shrubland habitat and activities that can be undertaken to maintain it;
 - the impacts of domestic cats and invasive species on Yellow-breasted Chat and actions that can be implemented to reduce these threats to the species; and,
 - general awareness about Yellow-breasted Chat and its habitat including how to identify the species, its habitat requirements and protection afforded under the ESA.

Implementing Actions

Financial support for the implementation of actions may be available through the Species at Risk Stewardship Program. Conservation partners are encouraged to discuss project proposals related to the actions in this response statement with Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks staff. The Ontario government can also advise if any authorizations under the ESA or other legislation may be required to undertake the project.

Implementation of the actions may be subject to changing priorities across the multitude of species at risk, available resources and the capacity of partners to undertake recovery activities. Where appropriate, the implementation of actions for multiple species will be co-ordinated across government response statements.

Reviewing Progress

The ESA requires the Ontario government to conduct a review of progress towards protecting and recovering a species no later than the time specified in the species' government response statement, or not later than five years after the government response statement is published. The review will help identify if adjustments are needed to achieve the protection and recovery of Yellow-breasted Chat.

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank all those who participated in the development of the Recovery Strategy and Government Response Statement for the Yellow-breasted Chat (*Icteria virens*) in Ontario for their dedication to protecting and recovering species at risk.

For additional information:

Visit the species at risk website at ontario.ca/speciesatrisk

Contact the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks

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