

A Small Game and Furbearer

Management Framework for Ontario



Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Native small game and furbearer species are a significant part of Ontario's wildlife heritage and are an important component of our biodiversity. These species have long held cultural significance for Indigenous peoples and continue to be important to the people of Ontario today. Indigenous peoples have established and asserted Aboriginal and treaty rights to harvest these species throughout the province.

Small game hunting is a recreational activity that can appeal to both new and experienced hunters alike, and can benefit the tourism industry and local economies. Trapping is an important traditional and commercial activity that also helps manage human-wildlife conflicts (e.g., reducing the damage to infrastructure that may be caused by Beaver (*Castor canadensis*)). Both hunters and trappers have historically made significant contributions to wildlife conservation and management and they continue to do so today. Small game and furbearer species are managed sustainably for the benefit of all Ontarians.

The purpose of this policy framework is to guide small game and furbearer species management decisions in Ontario. It provides an overarching goal, guiding principles and broad management direction in the form of objectives and strategies.



Red Fox (*Vulpes vulpes*)

2.0 CONTEXT AND SCOPE

The policy context for this framework stems from the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry's (MNRF) strategic direction documents including *Horizons 2020* (2015), *Ontario's Biodiversity Strategy* (2011) and *Taking a Broader Landscape Approach* (2013). This direction includes sustaining healthy ecosystems by strengthening natural resource management, using Ontario's biological assets sustainably, protecting the biodiversity of Ontario and managing wildlife at appropriate spatial and temporal scales.

The legislative basis for this framework is provided by several statutes including the *Fish and Wildlife Conservation Act, 1997* (FWCA), the *Endangered Species Act, 2007* (ESA), the *Crown Forest Sustainability Act, 1994* (CFSA), the *Environmental Assessment Act, 1990*, the *Provincial Parks and Conservation Reserves Act, 2006*, and the *Planning Act, 1990* through the *Provincial Policy Statement (2014)* (PPS). The FWCA regulates the harvest of these species while land use and forest management policy and legislation such as the CFSA influence habitat management.

Small game and furbearers have been combined in this policy as a group of small to medium-sized harvested wildlife species which are generally managed through long seasons with daily bag and possession limits for small game, and harvest quotas for some furbearers. Furthermore there is some overlap among hunted and trapped species. A trapping licence is generally required to harvest furbearers, but some furbearer species, e.g., Red Fox (*Vulpes vulpes*) and Raccoon (*Procyon lotor*), may also be harvested under the authority of a small game hunting licence.

The FWCA and its regulations describe harvested wildlife species in schedules as furbearing mammals, game mammals, game birds, game reptiles, and game amphibians. In this document, small game and furbearers are defined as those scheduled species which may be harvested under the authority of a small game hunting licence, a trapping licence and in the case of a game reptile and amphibian, under a fishing licence. Black Bear (*Ursus americanus*) may be harvested with a trapping licence but is considered a big game species and is therefore not covered by this document. Small game also includes several unscheduled species which may be harvested under the authority of a small game hunting licence.

Although hunters in Ontario require a small game licence in addition to a migratory game bird hunting permit to hunt migratory game birds such as ducks and geese, these species are managed federally under the authority of the *Migratory Birds Convention Act, 1994* and as such are not a focus of this framework.

The policy documents that guide management related to Wolves (*Canis spp.*) and Coyotes (*Canis latrans*) as well as Wild Turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo*) are separate from this small game and furbearer management framework. Primary management direction for Wolves and Wild Turkey is provided by the *Strategy for Wolf Conservation in Ontario* (2005) and by the *Wild Turkey Management Plan for Ontario* (2007) respectively. Small game and furbearer species designated as Threatened or Endangered receive primary protection under the ESA with complementary conservation actions under the FWCA as appropriate.

This policy framework uses the terms **native**, **non-native** and **naturalized** in reference to certain species. These terms, in the context of this document, are defined as follows:

- **Native** species are those species that are naturally occurring in Ontario or a region of Ontario or have naturally occurred, or that have migrated into the province and have established self-sustaining populations without having been transported by human actions.
- **Non-native** species are those species introduced into Ontario by human action outside their natural, past or present, distribution.
- **Naturalized** species are non-native species which have at some point established self-sustaining populations, though are not necessarily self-sustaining at the present time.

For the purpose of this small game and furbearer management framework naturalized species are limited to: Ring-necked Pheasant (*Phasianus colchicus*), Gray Partridge (*Perdix perdix*), European Hare (*Lepus europaeus*) and Fox Squirrel (*Sciurus niger*). Fox Squirrel may be or may become a native species, having moved or moving into Ontario and establishing without human intervention.

3.0 SMALL GAME AND FURBEARER MANAGEMENT GOAL

The goal for small game and furbearer management in Ontario is to ensure sustainable populations of these species in an ecosystem context, for the continuous ecological, cultural, economic and social benefits for the people of Ontario.



Snowshoe Hare (*Lepus americanus*)

4.0 GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The following principles will guide small game and furbearer management in Ontario and are reflected in the objectives and strategies in section 5.0.

- 1) Intrinsic Value:** Sustainable populations of native small game and furbearer species have an essential role within natural ecosystems.
- 2) Aboriginal and Treaty Rights:** Small game and furbearer species will be managed in a manner that recognizes, and is informed by, Aboriginal and treaty rights, as well as the interests of Indigenous communities in Ontario.
- 3) Importance of Hunting and Trapping:** Small game and furbearer management will reflect the importance of small game hunting and furbearer trapping as valued cultural, traditional, recreational, and economic activities in Ontario. Hunters and trappers have contributed significantly to the conservation of these species and their habitats.
- 4) Native Species Emphasis:** Native small game and furbearer species will be the emphasis of this framework and MNRF actions. Naturalized small game species will also continue to be managed.
- 5) Science and Knowledge Management:** Small game and furbearer management will be supported by the best available information, including science, local and traditional ecological knowledge (e.g., inventory, monitoring, research, and expert knowledge).
- 6) Adaptive Management:** An adaptive management approach will be applied to ensure that policy guidance is continually evaluated and improved based on new information. This framework will be considered for review periodically to ensure guidance remains current and meaningful.

5.0 MANAGEMENT OBJECTIVES AND STRATEGIES

Small game and furbearer management objectives include:

- 1) **Sustainable populations**
- 2) **Ecological integrity**
- 3) **Habitat provision**
- 4) **Socio-economic benefits**
- 5) **Communication and education**

Each of these objectives is supported by several strategies to direct small game and furbearer management in Ontario.

Objective 1: Sustainable populations;

sustainable populations of native small game and furbearer species are maintained.

Managing for sustainable populations of small game and furbearers involves the application of a variety of management tools which are informed by species biology and social considerations such as optimizing opportunities, and are implemented at appropriate spatial and temporal scales. For most species, these tools include hunting and trapping season timing and length, daily bag and possession limits or seasonal quotas, licence or seal requirements, and firearm or gear type restrictions.

In some cases, restrictive seasons, limits, or other management tools have not been applied for some hunted unscheduled species and some furbearer species, often as a result of historic social and economic concerns or where no restrictions were thought necessary. A responsible management approach suggests that the native species within this group may be reconsidered in light of their population status and ecological role.

- 7) **Biologically-Based Management:** Small game and furbearer biology, ecological importance, as well as climate change and changes to land use and habitat will help inform management decisions for these species.
- 8) **Landscape and Ecologically Relevant Scales:** Small game and furbearer species will be managed at appropriate spatial and temporal scales taking into consideration ecological and social factors.
- 9) **Habitat Management:** Habitat management is an integral component of ecologically-based population management for small game and furbearer species. Population and habitat management will be integrated through existing policies and land and resource management planning processes.
- 10) **Risk-based Approach:** Environmental factors or human activities which have a greater likelihood of significant negative outcomes on small game and furbearers will be priorities for science, monitoring, management, and policy response.

Naturalized species have had a long tradition as important small game for many Ontario hunters. Some of these species continue to occur locally as viable populations while at least one of these species, the Ring-necked Pheasant, may no longer be self-sustaining. While naturalized species are not components of Ontario's native biodiversity, this framework identifies the need to consider approaches for their future management.

Sound wildlife management to sustain populations is also based upon a knowledge and understanding of species productivity, population status, and harvest rates. Monitoring and supporting science activities are therefore important for maintaining small game and furbearer populations. Science and monitoring priorities to address population sustainability and other information needs will be determined through a risk-based approach.

Strategy 1.1: Apply appropriate seasons, limits, quotas, and other management tools to maintain sustainable populations of native small game and furbearer species and to manage naturalized species.

1.1.1: Consider species biology including inherent productivity, ecology, distribution and abundance, population and habitat trends, harvest rates, climate change, and social, economic and cultural factors when setting seasons, limits, and quotas or applying other management tools for small game and furbearer species.

1.1.2: Apply small game and furbearer management direction at appropriate spatial and temporal scales, be broadly consistent and where feasible, accommodate the varied social and economic fabric of Ontario.

Strategy 1.2: Collect critical information on small game and furbearer species to support management actions to ensure sustainable native species populations.

1.2.1: Conduct research on small game and furbearer species to address critical population management knowledge gaps, wildlife health, the utility of habitat monitoring as an indicator or complementary method for population monitoring and support the development of decision support tools such as furbearer quota setting methods.

1.2.2: Monitor populations, disease and harvest of small game and furbearer species to inform harvest planning and allocation and ensure sustainability. Explore opportunities to develop citizen science approaches for monitoring small game and furbearer populations and harvest.

1.2.3: Consider and incorporate local and traditional ecological knowledge in relation to small game and furbearer population management, wherever possible.

Strategy 1.3: Consider approaches for managing naturalized game species and native unscheduled species.

1.3.1: Explore management options for naturalized game species.

1.3.2: Explore management approaches for native unscheduled species to ensure sustainable populations.

Strategy 1.4: Work with Indigenous organizations to appropriately consider Aboriginal and treaty harvesting rights and interests in managing sustainable small game and furbearer populations.

1.4.1: Develop an understanding of historical and current harvest levels, and the future needs of Indigenous communities.

Objective 2: Ecological integrity; the integrity of ecosystems supporting Ontario's small game and furbearer wildlife communities is maintained.

Ecological integrity is a way to describe ecosystem health and includes the necessary processes, patterns, and biological composition to maintain biodiversity. While Ontario's ecosystems range from very natural to highly altered it is important to maintain functioning ecosystems to the extent possible. The more complete ecosystems are the more resilient they are to a suite of stressors, including climate change.

Functioning ecosystems are important to the well-being of the people of Ontario and small game and furbearer species are integral components of those environments. Understanding the interrelationships among species and their environments and the ecological effects of resource management decisions are important considerations in maintaining ecological integrity. Appropriately managing the release, introduction, or capture and translocation of small game and furbearers is also important to the maintenance of Ontario's wildlife communities. For example, ensuring that management actions do not contribute to the establishment of a species that could become invasive.

Strategy 2.1: Collect information in support of understanding small game and furbearer ecology.

2.1.1: Focus research and monitoring on critical knowledge gaps regarding predator-prey and other small game and furbearer ecological relationships, connectivity, climate change, land cover and land use change, and the ecological effects of releasing, introducing or capturing and the translocation of small game and furbearer species.

Strategy 2.2: Apply knowledge of small game and furbearer species' ecology to their management.

2.2.1: Review and revise management approaches for seasons, limits, quotas, and releases, introductions or captures and translocations in response to new information.

Strategy 2.3: Ensure management actions are consistent with Ontario's strategic approach to managing biodiversity, invasive species and human-wildlife conflicts when considering the release, introduction or capture and translocation of game birds, other small game wildlife or furbearers for hunting or other purposes within, into or out of Ontario.

2.3.1: Continue to limit releases of small game or furbearer species to support immediate hunting opportunities, trialing and training of dogs, and for existing train and trial areas to only those species defined as appropriate for these purposes, locations and times where adverse ecological effects are expected to be minimal and where there are no conflicts with other management or social objectives.

2.3.2: Limit other releases, introductions or capture and translocations of small game or furbearer species to support only approved restoration or recovery programs.

2.3.3: Support the development of an approach to the capture and translocation of small game and furbearer species for recovery or other purposes within and out of Ontario.

Strategy 2.4: Support the recovery of small game and furbearer species designated as Ontario species at risk.

2.4.1: Align small game and furbearer policies and management activities to support protection and recovery of species at risk.

Objective 3: Habitat provision; habitat to support small game and furbearer species is provided.

Habitat to sustain Ontario's small game and furbearer populations is managed through a variety of mechanisms depending on the region of the province. Additionally the FWCA protects the habitat of some species, e.g., furbearer dens.

On Crown lands in central and northern Ontario where commercial forestry occurs, habitat management in forested ecosystems is primarily conducted through the forest management planning process (i.e., preparation of forest management plans under the *Crown Forest Sustainability Act, 1994*, and following direction in forest management guides to protect and maintain habitat for wildlife). A coarse and fine filter approach is applied in forest management at landscape, stand and site scales. Generally, outcomes of coarse filter direction will result in a range of forest types, age classes, and patterns across landscapes which provide

small game and furbearer habitat. Fine filter direction will provide for and protect special habitat features such as cavity trees, downed woody material and occupied grouse nests, as well as furbearer den sites.

In the Far North of Ontario, community based land use plans will determine what areas are available for sustainable economic development and what areas will be protected. The *Far North Act, 2010* sets out very clear objectives for land use planning including a significant role for First Nations in the planning and in protecting at least half of the Far North in an interconnected network of protected areas. The objectives of the Act also include the maintenance of biological diversity and ecological processes and functions while enabling sustainable economic development that benefits the First Nations. A Far North Land Use Strategy (currently underway) advances these objectives by providing overarching principles to guide planning on a variety of topics such as designing protected areas, climate change and biological diversity, as well as specific guidance on accounting for the needs of species at risk and other valued species. Protected areas identified through land use planning can help conserve important habitats for a range of species including small game and furbearers, while sustaining healthy fish and wildlife populations and enhancing the region's resilience to climate change.

Ontario government policy affords a level of consideration of natural heritage features and areas on private and municipal lands under the authority of the *Planning Act, 1990* and the *Provincial Policy Statement (2014)*. The *Natural Heritage Reference Manual (2010)* and the *Significant Wildlife Habitat Technical Guide (2000)* are examples of the guidance material, including recommended technical criteria, that MNRF has developed to assist with implementation of the PPS direction for significant wildlife habitat on private and municipal lands. Local stewardship

projects and incentive programs (e.g., Land Stewardship and Habitat Restoration Program, Species at Risk Stewardship Fund, Conservation Land Tax Incentive Program and Managed Forest Tax Incentive Program) and private land forestry practices involving wildlife habitat should consider small game and furbearer habitat management. The contributions of private land owners and particularly the agricultural community in the provision and improvement of wildlife habitat, especially in southern Ontario, are recognized.

Ontario's provincial parks and conservation reserves are a significant contributor to wildlife habitat. Any habitat management within provincial parks and conservation reserves are governed by management direction for the specific protected area and the principles of the *Provincial Parks and Conservation Reserves Act, 2006*.

Strategy 3.1: Collect information to address small game and furbearer species habitat knowledge gaps.

- 3.1.1:** Focus research on critical habitat management and habitat requirement knowledge gaps, e.g., habitat requirements to maintain local viable populations.
- 3.1.2:** Monitor availability of landscape-level small game and furbearer habitats and land cover.
- 3.1.3:** Develop small game and furbearer habitat best management practices for use by land owners and other stakeholders.

Strategy 3.2: Manage small game and furbearer species habitat consistent with the objective of maintaining sustainable populations.

- 3.2.1:** Integrate the sustainable management of small game and furbearer species habitat into ongoing land-use and resource management planning processes.
- 3.2.2:** Integrate small game and furbearer species habitat needs into updates of the forest management guides and the *Significant Wildlife Habitat Technical Guide (2000)*.
- 3.2.3:** Explore with stakeholders and the agricultural community means of improving small game and furbearer habitat, and wildlife habitat in general, at landscape scales across southern Ontario.
- 3.2.4:** Encourage use of best management practices by landowners and stakeholders interested in providing or improving habitat for small game and furbearers.
- 3.2.5:** Support and promote stewardship and community-based programs which contribute to habitat provision and restoration through partnerships, education, and landowner incentive programs.

Objective 4: Socio-economic benefits; sustainable hunting, trapping, and non-consumptive recreational opportunities and associated socio-economic benefits are provided.

Sustainable small game and furbearer populations and the ecosystems on which they rely can provide a wide variety of cultural, traditional, recreational, and economic opportunities associated with small game hunting, furbearer trapping, and the non-consumptive enjoyment of these species. It is similarly recognized

that some small game and furbearers may come into conflict with humans, requiring appropriate responses. To the extent possible, this framework aims to optimize these opportunities and to minimize human-wildlife conflicts. The ability to provide these social and economic benefits and to minimize conflicts also depends on sound knowledge. The collection and application of appropriate information is therefore an important component of this objective.

Strategy 4.1: Undertake research and information collection to understand the social and economic benefits derived from small game and furbearer activities.

4.1.1: Focus research and information collection on knowledge gaps regarding the social and economic benefits and conflicts associated with small game and furbearers.

Strategy 4.2: Provide for an optimal range of cultural, traditional, recreational and economic benefits associated with sustainable populations of small game and furbearer species.

4.2.1: Provide and promote a variety of small game hunting opportunities.

4.2.2: Promote the intrinsic and non-consumptive value of small game and furbearer species and encourage associated recreational activities.

4.2.3: Respect landowner property by encouraging hunters, trappers and all those enjoying wildlife to seek permission to access private lands.

Strategy 4.3: Provide for socio-economic benefits from sustainable furbearer harvest.

4.3.1: Realize social and economic benefits from wild furbearer commercial harvest by encouraging this activity.

4.3.2: Continue to support and encourage partnerships with Indigenous communities and organizations regarding furbearer trapping activities.

4.3.3: Continue to promote safe and humane trapping practices through education, awareness, regulatory requirements and continual improvement.

4.3.4: Continue to encourage best management practices for commercial furbearer harvest activities; e.g., best handling and preparation practices.

Strategy 4.4: Manage and prevent human-wildlife conflict by understanding sources of conflict and responding appropriately.

4.4.1: Follow guidance in the *Strategy for Preventing and Managing Human-Wildlife Conflict in Ontario* (2008) to prevent and manage human-wildlife conflicts.

4.4.2: Encourage small game hunting and furbearer trapping where socially and ecologically appropriate as a means of reducing human-wildlife conflicts.

4.4.3: Explore opportunities for collaborative responses to addressing human-wildlife conflicts that engage communities and reflect the broad range of values attributed to wildlife.

Objective 5: Communication and education;

public appreciation and knowledge of Ontario's small game and furbearer resources, their habitat needs, and policies guiding their management are promoted.

Well informed Ontarians are important to the effective management of small game and furbearer populations and their habitats. Ready access to relevant information is therefore essential and can be provided in a variety of forms.

Strategy 5.1: Expand public knowledge and promote the value of small game and furbearer management and their intrinsic value.

5.1.1: Prepare, promote, and update appropriate small game and furbearer communication materials on a regular basis.

5.1.2: Work with Indigenous communities and organizations to develop targeted initiatives and materials, as well as to include Indigenous perspectives in small game and furbearer communication materials as appropriate.

Strategy 5.2: Modernize outreach and engagement activities.

5.2.1: Regularly communicate current and new small game and furbearer management direction.

5.2.2: Explore opportunities to employ web-based applications and social media to provide information on small game and furbearer management.

The Small Game and Furbearer Management Framework for Ontario is intended to inform decision-making related to the management of these species. To be successful, implementation of this framework will involve a dynamic partnership of government, stakeholders, Indigenous organizations and communities, and individuals with an interest in small game and furbearer management. This will require active participation to achieve the desired outcomes including sustainable populations, effective habitat management and of course taking time to enjoy and appreciate these important Ontario wildlife species.

This framework will be reviewed periodically including an evaluation of policy implementation and effectiveness in achieving the goal and objectives.



Marten (*Martes americana*)

