



Narwhal and Salish Sucker highlight successes and setbacks for Canadian species



The Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) considered the conservation status of 12 species this spring. This included the Narwhal, unicorn of the sea, which the committee assessed as Not at Risk, the humble Salish Sucker, a fish that lives in beaver ponds and is threatened by pollution and drought, the Blanchard's Cricket Frog which hasn't been seen in Canada since the 1970s, and the Kirtland's Warbler and Gray-headed Chickadee, two rare, Endangered birds. Image credit: Caitlin Willier

(Moncton, May 15, 2024) The Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) assessed the conservation status of 12 wildlife species this past week. This list included reassessment of majestic species like the Narwhal and the humble Salish Sucker, a fish that likes beaver ponds. Assessments highlighted good news for some species and continued imperilment and even extirpation for others.

Narwhal, or qilalugaq tuugaalik, famous for the large tusks that protrude from their heads, have long thrived alongside the Inuit in the Arctic.

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“Narwhal are recognized as a cultural cornerstone by Inuit, the Narwhal holds profound significance,” said Jason Akearok, Executive Director of the Nunavut Wildlife Management Board.



Narwhal © John Ford

Narwhal are confronted with many threats, including the accelerating loss of the sea ice they depend on and increasing boat traffic. So far, these whales are proving adaptable, and populations remain stable. Importantly, partnerships to co-manage Narwhal are strong, where the Nunavut Wildlife Management Board, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans Canada, and many others closely monitor and manage populations.

Added Mr. Akearok, “In alignment with their cultural relevance, the Nunavut Wildlife Management Board commits to a thorough examination of scientific insights and Inuit Qaujimagatugangit [knowledge] from COSEWIC, evaluating their assessment of the Narwhal as ‘Not at Risk.’”

The Salish Sucker is a tenacious freshwater fish that has persisted in the West for millennia. Despite living through the last ice age in a tiny ice-free patch in Washington, climate change and pollution threaten its future.

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The fish is currently listed as Threatened, but given catastrophic current and projected declines brought on by degrading water quality and climate-change induced drought, COSEWIC assessed this fish as Endangered.

“Ambitious stream and wetland restoration projects initially made us optimistic that the situation was improving for this fish. However, with continuing habitat degradation, there really seems to be no light at the end of the tunnel,” said Margaret Docker, Co-chair of the Freshwater Fishes Species Specialist Subcommittee.



Salish Sucker © Mike Pearson

Kirtland's Warbler is one of the rarest birds in Canada, with only 40-50 individuals breeding in Ontario. A small songbird with a lemon yellow belly, Kirtland's Warbler is picky about its home, requiring young (5- to 20-year-old) stands of Red and Jack Pine, the fire adapted trees made famous by Group of Seven paintings. Although restoration of pine forest is ongoing, fire suppression and worsening climate change pose serious threats to this bird, and COSEWIC assessed it as Endangered. Rapid climate change may also be threatening another small songbird. In far northwestern Canada the Gray-headed Chickadee is disappearing in mysterious circumstances. It was also assessed as Endangered.

The tiny Blanchard's Cricket Frog has not been documented in Canada since 1977, despite much searching by both professionals and amateurs. With a distinctive call that gives it its name, the frog is hard to miss. Given that intense surveys over the past decades have come up empty, COSEWIC assessed the species as Extirpated from Canada.

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The committee considered seven additional species – four plants, a bird, one snail and one fly – and all were assessed to be at some level of risk.

“There is good news and bad news for Canadian wildlife,” said David Lee, chair of the committee. “Some species are doing better than predicted, some are struggling, and some are sadly gone. Ongoing efforts are needed to ensure those we steward have a future.”

Next meeting

COSEWIC’s next scheduled wildlife species assessment meeting will be held in November 2024.

About COSEWIC

COSEWIC assesses the status of wild species, subspecies, varieties, or other important units of biological diversity, considered to be at risk in Canada. To do so, COSEWIC uses scientific, Aboriginal traditional and community knowledge provided by experts from governments, academia and other organizations. Summaries of assessments are currently available to the public on the [COSEWIC](#) website and will be submitted to the Federal Minister of the Environment and Climate Change in fall 2024 for listing consideration under the *Species at Risk Act* (SARA). At that time, the status reports and status appraisal summaries will be publicly available on the [Species at Risk Public Registry](#).

At its most recent meeting, COSEWIC assessed 12 wildlife species in various COSEWIC risk categories, including 5 Endangered, 2 Threatened, and 3 Special Concern, and 1 Extirpated (i.e. no longer found in the wild in Canada). In addition to these wildlife species that are in COSEWIC risk categories, COSEWIC assessed 1 as Not at Risk.

COSEWIC comprises members from each provincial and territorial government wildlife agency, four federal entities (Canadian Wildlife Service, Parks Canada Agency, Fisheries and Oceans Canada, and the Canadian Museum of Nature), four Non-government Science Members, Co-chairs of the Species Specialist and the Aboriginal Traditional Knowledge Subcommittees, and two early career scientists.

Definition of COSEWIC terms and status categories:

Wildlife Species: A species, subspecies, variety, or geographically or genetically distinct population of animal, plant or other organism, other than a bacterium or virus, that is wild by nature and is either native to Canada or has extended its range into Canada without human intervention and has been present in Canada for at least 50 years.

Extinct (X): A wildlife species that no longer exists.

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Extirpated (XT): A wildlife species that no longer exists in the wild in Canada, but exists elsewhere.

Endangered (E): A wildlife species facing imminent extirpation or extinction.

Threatened (T): A wildlife species that is likely to become Endangered if nothing is done to reverse the factors leading to its extirpation or extinction.

Special Concern (SC): A wildlife species that may become Threatened or Endangered because of a combination of biological characteristics and identified threats.

Not at Risk (NAR): A wildlife species that has been evaluated and found to be not at risk of extinction given the current circumstances.

Data Deficient (DD): A category that applies when the available information is insufficient (a) to resolve a wildlife species' eligibility for assessment or (b) to permit an assessment of the wildlife species' risk of extinction.

Species at Risk: A wildlife species that has been assessed as Extirpated, Endangered, Threatened or Special Concern.

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<p>For inquiries on birds (Gray-headed Chickadee, Kirtland's Warbler, Long-billed Curlew):</p> <p>Dr. Louise Blight Procellaria Research & Consulting and University of Victoria Telephone: 778-677-8495 louiseblight@cosewic.net</p>	<p>For inquiries on freshwater fishes (Salish Sucker):</p> <p>Dr. Margaret F. Docker University of Manitoba Telephone: 204-474-8831 margaret.docker@umanitoba.ca</p>
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