

Endangered Species

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Endangered and Threatened Species in Rhode Island



Green sea turtle.

Credit: Keenan Adams / USFWS

The [green sea turtle](#) (*Chelonia mydas*) has a heart-shaped shell, small head and single-clawed flippers. Generally found in fairly shallow waters inside reefs bays and inlets, except when migrating, green sea turtles eat sea grasses and marine algae. They can reach up to 400 pounds and reach 43 inches in length. Juvenile green sea turtles are omnivorous and are found in southern tropical waters. A major factor contributing to their decline worldwide is commercial harvest for eggs and meat. [More on this turtle.](#)



Hawksbill sea turtle.

Credit: Caroline S. Rogers / NOAA

The [hawksbill sea turtle](#) (*Eretmochelys imbricate*) can grow up to three feet in length and weigh up to 300 pounds. This marine turtle is extremely rare in Northeast waters. It frequents rocky areas, coral reefs and shallow coastal areas, feeding primarily on sponges. The population of the endangered hawksbill sea turtle declined primarily due to illegal exploitation of its shell. Other threats include loss of nesting habitat from coastal development and nest predation. [More on this turtle.](#)



Kemp's ridley sea turtle.

Credit: Jereme Phillips / USFWS

One of the smallest sea turtles, the [Kemp's ridley](#) (*Lepidochelys kempii*) turtle has an oval shaped shell and is usually olive-gray in color. Feeding primarily on crabs in shallow waters, this endangered turtle is found in the Gulf of Mexico or the northwestern Atlantic Ocean where it feeds and grows until reaching maturity. This sea turtle visits northeastern U.S. coastal waters in the summer to feed. Kemp's ridleys mature at eight to 15 years and can reach up to 30 in length and 80 to 100 pounds. They are the rarest of all sea turtles, and threats include direct harvest of adults and eggs and incidental capture in commercial fishing operations. [More on this turtle.](#)



Leatherback sea turtle.

USFWS

The [leatherback sea turtle](#) (*Dermochelys coriacea*) is the largest, deepest diving, most migratory and wide ranging turtle of all sea turtles. Adults can reach four to eight feet in length and weigh 500 to 2,000 pounds. Leatherbacks are named after their leathery shells, which comprise a mosaic of small bones covered by firm, rubbery skin with seven longitudinal ridges or keels. These endangered turtles migrate to deep ocean waters to feed on jellyfish and squid. Adult females require sandy nesting beaches with proximity to deep water and generally rough seas. The crash of the leatherback population resulted from the harvest of eggs and meat, loss of nesting habitat, disorientation of hatchlings by beachfront lighting, and marine pollution and debris. [More on this turtle.](#)

Loggerhead sea turtle.

USFWS

[Loggerhead sea turtles](#) (*Caretta caretta*) are the most common sea turtle along the coast of Maryland, Virginia, and Delaware. Loggerheads are listed as threatened. Adults can reach up to 40 inches in length



and 400 pounds, although it's mostly juveniles averaging 28 inches that are found in Northeast coastal waters while foraging on blue crab, horseshoe crab, whelk, fishes, and sea grasses. When turtles reach maturity at about 20 to 30 years, females will typically head to warm temperate or tropical beaches to nest. [More on this turtle.](#)

Birds



Piping plover.

USFWS

The [piping plover](#) (*Charadrius melodus*) is a small, stocky, sandy-colored bird resembling a sandpiper. Piping plovers are found along the entire Atlantic coast in open, sandy habitat on outer beaches, where they feed and nest. Its current decline is attributed to increased development and recreational use of beaches. The most recent surveys place the Atlantic population at less than 2,000 pairs. In a [recent survey in the Bahamas](#), biologists counted more than 1,000 individual piping plovers, distinguishing the Bahamas as hosting the second-highest wintering population in the world. [More on the piping plover.](#)



Red knot.

Credit: Gregory Breese / USFWS

The [red knot](#) (*Calidris canutus rufa*) is truly a master of long-distance aviation. On wingspans of 20 inches, red knots fly more than 9,300 miles twice a year, making this shorebird one of the longest-distance migrants in the animal kingdom. It depends on the fuel supplied by billions of horseshoe crab eggs at major North Atlantic staging areas, notably the Delaware Bay and Cape May peninsula. The increased harvest of horseshoe crabs for bait in the 1990s may be a major factor in the decline in red knots. Another necessary condition for red knots' survival is the continued existence of Arctic habitat for breeding. Red knots could be particularly affected by global climate change, which may have the greatest impact at the latitudes where this species breeds and winters. [More on the red knot.](#)



Roseate terns

Credit: Alcides Morales / USFWS

[Roseate terns](#) (*Sterna dougallii dougallii*) are graceful birds that inhabit coastal areas along the entire Atlantic Flyway and can be found nesting with common terns (*Sterna hirundo hirundo*) in sand, shell, or gravel. *S. d. dougallii* is the North American race of roseate terns (*S. dougallii*), which can be found in many other areas of the world. Threats to roseate tern populations in the U.S. include changes in vegetation on breeding areas, competition with gulls for suitable nesting areas, and predation. Increased human presence has contributed to higher predator abundance. Predators often find tern nests after being attracted to garbage left behind by careless beach users. Biologists estimate that the roseate tern population has fallen by 75 percent since the 1930s. [More on the roseate tern.](#)

Fish



Shortnose sturgeon.

Credit: USFWS

The [shortnose sturgeon](#) (*Acipenser brevirostrum*) is the smallest of the three sturgeon species that occur in eastern North America. These bony fish can grow just over 4.5 feet and are found in a variety of river and estuary habitats. One partially landlocked population is known in the Holyoke Pool on the Connecticut River in Massachusetts. Dams, pollution, discharges and dredging have resulted in less habitat or reduced the quality of habitat.

Mammals

For information about whales off the coast, [click here.](#)



New England cottontail

Credit: Anne Schnell / USFWS

[New England cottontail](#) (*Sylvilagus transitionalis*) population numbers are declining. As recently as 1960, New England cottontails were found east of the Hudson River in New York, across all of Connecticut, Rhode Island and Massachusetts, north to southern Vermont and New Hampshire, and into southern Maine. Today, this rabbit's range has shrunk by about 86 percent. Its numbers are so greatly diminished that it can no longer be found in Vermont and has been reduced to only five small populations throughout its historic range. **[More about this rabbit](#)**.

Mussels and other invertebrates



American burying beetle.

Credit: Angela Boyer / USFWS

The **[American burying beetle](#)** (*Nicrophorus americanus*) is a species of carrion beetle, also commonly known as burying beetles, and is one of nature's most efficient and fascinating recyclers. When adults and larvae feed on the carrion they first bury underground, valuable nutrients are returned to the soil. Unfortunately, these beetles are nearing extinction. Theories for their decline include habitat loss and fragmentation, as well as a decline in available, adequately sized carrion. Because of drastically declining numbers and a severely reduced range, in July 1989, it was added to the federal endangered species list. **[More about this beetle](#)**.

Plants



Sandplain gerardia.

Credit: Don Sias / TNC

[Sandplain gerardia](#) (*Agalinis acuta*) is considered a specialist plant that prefers dry, sandy and exposed mineral soil and native grasslands. With its pink or purple flowers that appear from mid-August to mid-October, sandplain gerardia responds well to disturbances like mowing or fire, which help to create open habitat. Loss of habitat due to development and a lack of grazing animals and natural fires threaten the sandplain gerardia. **[More on this plant](#)**.



Small whorled pogonia.

Credit: USFWS

The **[small-whorled pogonia](#)** (*Isotria medeoloides*) is a rare orchid that grows in older hardwood forests of beech, birch, maple, oak and hickory with an open understory. In New York, this species was recently rediscovered in 2010 at a state park in the Hudson Valley. The primary threat to the small-whorled pogonia is the past and continuing loss of habitat due to urban development, logging, and other land disturbances. In New York, threats include deer herbivory and invasive species. And as is the case with all rare orchids, the small-whorled pogonia is vulnerable to collection for commercial and personal use. **[More on this plant](#)**.

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