



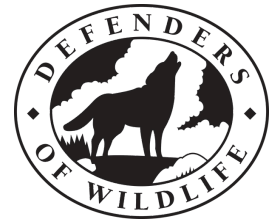
FY2024^{*} Accomplishments Report



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Introduction



This year Defenders of Wildlife (Defenders) celebrated many exciting achievements and significant progress in our work protecting and restoring native species and the wild places they need to survive and thrive. As the nation's premier wildlife conservation organization, Defenders is leading efforts to preserve, protect and restore imperiled species, balanced and healthy ecosystems and our planet's irreplaceable biodiversity. We made incredible progress advancing conservation science and innovative solutions, advocating for species and habitat protections, supporting restoration efforts, building a broader and more diverse conservation community, promoting human-wildlife coexistence initiatives and safeguarding our bedrock environmental laws. With the growing threat of climate change and other major drivers of the biodiversity crisis, Defenders' mission is more challenging, and more urgent, than ever before. Through collaborative, species-focused efforts in the field, in the courts and on Capitol Hill, our dedicated team of experts, advocates, scientists, lawyers, and more continue the unrelenting fight to protect imperiled species, ecosystems and, ultimately, our planet.




Marking an exciting new chapter for our organization, Defenders [welcomed](#) Andrew Bowman as the new President and CEO. He brings more than 25 years of experience in conservation, including his role as legal counsel at Defenders early in his career and going on to lead the Land Trust Alliance, an organization Defenders works closely with to protect wild spaces and habitat on private land. With Andrew's unwavering dedication to wildlife, and his unique perspective and talents, Defenders remains focused on our priorities defending wildlife and preserving biodiversity, while we also look forward to seizing new opportunities under his leadership to advance our important mission.

Together, we are making a lasting difference for the wildlife and wild places that need us. With your support, we achieved many significant victories over the past year and are pleased to share some of these below. *Thank you* for making our important work possible.

Protecting and Restoring Imperiled Species



- ✦ Defenders launched our Biodiversity Law Center (BLC) to build on and more fully integrate our esteemed legal team within the specialized conservation programs across the organization to strengthen our efforts against the biodiversity crisis. Through this extraordinary approach, Defenders is leveraging our scientific, policy and legal expertise to design proactive, science-based legal strategies that maximize our impact on preserving biodiversity and create long-lasting conservation outcomes for wildlife.
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- © Diana LeVasseur
- ✦ The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) responded to several of our listing petitions and determined that there is substantial evidence that the [pinyon jay](#), [pygmy rabbit](#) and Hickory Nut Gorge green [salamander](#) may warrant listing under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Additionally, after years of litigation and advocacy from Defenders and partners, FWS [finally listed](#) the dunes sagebrush lizard as endangered under the ESA. Found only in the Permian Basin, the site of a major oil field in West Texas and southeastern New Mexico, this small lizard has been denied much-needed federal protection for decades due to political pressure from the oil and gas industry.
 - ✦ In a monumental conservation achievement, Defenders helped bring the gray wolf back to the Centennial State. Colorado [translocated](#) ten young Oregon wolves to the western part of the state in December 2023 in the first phase of fulfilling a historic, voter-mandated gray wolf state restoration plan. Up to forty more wolves are planned for reintroduction over the next two to four years. Defenders played a key role in the effort to pass the 2020 ballot measure mandating wolf reintroduction, served on the state's Stakeholder Advisory Group to help shape the reintroduction and management, and has provided both advocacy for science-based wolf management and on-the-ground support to state agencies and livestock producers in deploying nonlethal conflict minimization measures.
 - ✦ Defenders' talented legal team sprang into action to defend Colorado's gray wolf reintroduction plan and ensure that paws were on the ground by the December 31, 2023 deadline. Just days prior to the planned release of wolves, two livestock industry groups filed a federal lawsuit as a last-ditch attempt to [delay the wolf reintroduction](#). Defenders was the first of several wildlife advocacy organizations to swiftly intervene in the case and provide a robust defense of the wolf reintroduction program. Following a lengthy hearing that included arguments from Defenders' lawyers, the judge denied the petitioners' request for injunctive

relief and the state agency was allowed to proceed with the reintroduction. Defenders' legal team continues to defend the reintroduction program from a second lawsuit brought by a different group.



Defenders' Kaitie Schneider assisting with the installation of fladry on a cattle ranch in Colorado.

- ✦ Over the past several years, we have been [on-the-ground](#) in Colorado building relationships with local communities to foster support for wolf restoration and promote ways to coexist with wolves on the landscape. We actively work with Colorado Parks and Wildlife, ranchers and other partners to demonstrate and deploy conflict minimization tools and techniques. We also organized a wolf coexistence panel discussion at Colorado State University, bringing experts and stakeholders together to collaborate and develop a shared vision going forward. In addition, we organize and participate in outreach and educational events focused on the importance of wolf coexistence. This May, we helped organize a 3-day “Ranching with Wolves” workshop for producers to learn about low-stress livestock handling from fellow livestock producers sharing their experiences living and working alongside wolves. Additionally, we initiated a range riding pilot project with a sheep producer in Routt County to establish early successes and increase capacity for range riding in the state.
- ✦ Defenders also works closely with a wide variety of partners in the Northern Rockies, California, Oregon, Washington, Arizona and New Mexico to advocate for non-lethal coexistence policies and strategies that protect gray and Mexican gray wolf populations and improve tolerance for wolves. We continue to pioneer, disseminate, and incentivize the use of highly effective tools and tactics, like scare devices, range riders, livestock guardian dogs and special fencing, that minimize wolf-livestock conflicts, counter the pervasive misunderstanding of wolves, challenge institutional lethal control methods and allow wolf populations to recover and thrive. We also lead coexistence efforts in the Southeast to build support for Red Wolf¹ recovery.
- ✦ Thanks to Defenders' collaborative work promoting coexistence and science-based management decisions, there are now [more than 250](#) Mexican gray wolves roaming Arizona and New Mexico – marking the 8th consecutive year of population growth and the highest count since reintroduction began in 1998. For the 5th year, we supported a program with the Mexican Wolf Interagency Field Team that employs [wolf technician](#) positions for graduate students, who are trained to assist state and federal wildlife managers with [wolf monitoring](#), increasing security around dens, cross-fostering captive-born pups into wild-born litters and implementing conflict reduction strategies. In the spring of 2024, this team set a record by successfully fostering 27 captive-bred Mexican gray wolf pups into wild packs.

Defenders also contributes to numerous range rider projects designed to reduce wolf-livestock conflicts and partners with the Indian Nations Conservation Alliance (INCA) to support nonlethal coexistence strategies on Tribal lands. This year we continued to support INCA's Tribal Youth program, a unique initiative to engage tribal youth directly in wolf recovery activities, and we co-sponsored a workshop with INCA on low-stress livestock handling

¹ Red Wolf is capitalized to honor the cultural significance and importance of this animal to the Cherokee Nation.

techniques (an effective strategy to reduce wolf-livestock conflict) that were incorporated in the community's Rodeo Queen contest. We also supported a summer internship program in partnership with the White Mountain Apache Tribe, which employed young tribal members to assist with wolf monitoring and management to reduce conflicts with livestock. As an encouraging indicator of Defenders' impact on conflict mitigation, the number of depredations of livestock by wolves in New Mexico decreased by 53% from 2020 to 2023.

- ◆ In Montana, Defenders partners with ranchers, local communities as well as federal, state and tribal agencies, to implement tools and strategies that effectively minimize conflict between livestock and predators, including wolves and bears. Among other successful projects this year to reduce predator-livestock conflict, we assisted commercial cattle operators with the installation of more than 10 miles of turbo-fladry across western Montana and contributed



funding to several ranching coalitions to support and expand range riding programs. We are also involved in the Montana Conflict Reduction Consortium to provide a space for sharing and collaboration among diverse stakeholders, to discuss wildlife coexistence needs and to advocate for additional resources to support coexistence efforts.

- ◆ Defenders advocated for science-based wolf management in Idaho and Montana, both of which have unfortunately radically shifted their wolf management strategies toward policies aimed at significantly reducing the overall wolf population. For example, we engaged state agency staff and local communities to oppose Montana's updated wolf management plan, which calls for a roughly 60% reduction in the state's wolf population. We pushed for a stronger focus on science-based management, effective nonlethal

conflict mitigation strategies and eliminating unethical hunting and trapping regulations. Thanks to our advocacy, the state wildlife commission decided to reduce the number of wolves that are allowed to be killed in areas bordering Yellowstone National Park.

- ◆ Defenders helped to [defeat](#) a dangerous and unscientific proposal to remove state protections for gray wolves in Washington before they met the recovery benchmarks set by the state. In July 2024, the Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission voted in favor of maintaining state endangered status for the gray wolf, keeping in place key protections throughout the state. To secure this victory, we participated in meetings, engaged with decision makers, alerted our members and supporters, wrote letters and [produced](#) a variety of materials that were shared through print, digital and social media.
- ◆ As a dedicated partner in Red Wolf conservation, this year we were invited to participate in a Conservation Conflict Workshop for Red Wolves to help chart a collaborative path forward for Red Wolf recovery. With decades of experience leading human-wildlife coexistence efforts, Defenders continues to promote non-lethal conflict mitigation tools and strategies to build social acceptance for Red Wolves and advance recovery goals for this species. For example, we provide community members in the Red Wolf Recovery Area free coexistence toolkits, which include motion sensor lights, cameras and air horns that discourage wolves from

entering private property. We also launched a new, comprehensive [coexistence website](#) to help residents access our support and resources and learn how to share the landscape with wildlife in the southeast. In addition, we are also working with Dare County to design and install specialized fencing around a landfill to prevent it from attracting Red Wolves, black bears and other wildlife from the nearby Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge.

- ✦ To support long-term recovery of Red Wolves, which requires efforts to establish additional populations, Defenders is supporting a scientific research project to develop a model to identify which additional areas of suitable habitat have the social and policy landscapes most conducive to Red Wolf recovery. The results of this study will be used to facilitate the planning process for future reintroduction programs in other areas of this species' historic range.
- ✦ Defenders wrapped up the 14th year of our electric fence incentive program, having completed nearly 700 projects helping landowners avoid conflicts with grizzly bears and other predators by securing attractants such as livestock, chicken coops, beehives, gardens and garbage. In 2025, we hope to further expand the program in Idaho and Washington.
- ✦ Defenders advocated for FWS to support grizzly bear recovery in the Bitterroot ecosystem. This includes submitting comments on the scoping phase of this planning process to restore grizzly bears to their historic range in the Bitterroot Ecosystem. We will continue advocacy as this process develops. Twenty years in the making, this recovery plan is a critical step in fulfilling the agency's obligation under the ESA to recover this imperiled species.
- ✦ Defenders and our partners achieved a major milestone in our long-running effort to promote grizzly bear coexistence strategies and improve grizzly bear habitat connectivity. The City of Missoula approved precedent-setting new regulations expanding its "bear smart" conflict reduction zone and requiring bear-resistance trash containers – an enormous [accomplishment](#) that will make a significant difference for both bears and people. Located between the Northern Continental Divide grizzly bear population and the Bitterroot ecosystem, the Missoula area provides essential connectivity for grizzly bears as they continue to expand their range. We hope this exciting initiative in Missoula will become an example for more communities in and near bear habitat.
- ✦ As a member of the Bitterroot Bear Resource Committee, we are helping to minimize human-bear conflicts in the Bitterroot Valley of Montana. Along with local residents and businesses and county, state and federal partners, the Committee supports the purchase and placement of bear-resistant garbage containers, as well as outreach and education efforts to help the community practice and implement "bear smart" tools and strategies.



Defenders' Russ Talmo constructing a bear-resistant electric fence to secure a resident's chicken coop.

- ✦ Also in Montana, we continue to collaborate with Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks and the Bitterroot Bear Resource Committee to support bear spray handout and other bear safety programs throughout the state. We also helped provide funding to support a “bear ranger” for a community north of Yellowstone National Park. This position assists with outreach and education in the community regarding “bear smart” strategies to safely live and recreate in bear habitat. In addition, we are supporting projects to secure large waste sites north of Yellowstone National Park, preventing them from attracting bears.



- ✦ Following persistent advocacy by Defenders and our partners, the Biden administration finalized a [plan](#) to reintroduce grizzly bears to their historic range in the North Cascades Ecosystem. Defenders submitted detailed comments on the draft plan and gathered hundreds of comments from the public in support of the proposed reintroduction.
- ✦ Meanwhile, Defenders continues our coexistence and outreach activities to prepare Washington communities for

grizzly bear reintroduction and provide effective tools and strategies to share the landscape with grizzly bears. This year, members of our Alaska, Northwest and Rockies and Plains teams convened in the Methow Valley, which is located within the North Cascades Ecosystem Grizzly Bear Recovery Zone, to host a bear spray training and electric fence building demonstration for local partners and community members. In addition, Defenders joined the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife and local partners for a “Grizzly Bear Camp,” where we helped educate young campers about bear biology and how to stay safe in bear country. We also continue to support bear coexistence initiatives in Leavenworth, where Defenders helped establish Washington’s first “bear smart” community.

- ✦ Defenders’ Alaska team made incredible progress expanding our grassroots, community-based outreach and education coexistence initiatives to build social acceptance for sharing the landscape with brown bears. This past year we continued to build relationships with communities and expand our outreach efforts on the Kenai Peninsula and in southeast Alaska to educate the public on the importance of utilizing [coexistence strategies](#) to safely share the landscape with brown bears. Defenders supported the installation of 14 electric fencing projects in 2024, for a total of over 70 projects since 2020, through our [Electric Fence Subsidy Program](#), and partnered with Alaska Department of Fish and Game to host numerous in-person bear safety and electric fence [workshops](#). We also finalized an important partnership with the Central Council of Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska to further expand our bear coexistence program in southeast Alaska.
- ✦ Defenders and partners secured a major court victory for polar bears and walrus in Alaska involving our 2021 lawsuit challenging the FWS’s inadequate analysis of polar bear incidental take. The U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit ruled in our favor and [found](#) the FWS violated the Marine Mammal Protection Act in its decision to allow oil and gas companies to

harass hundreds of imperiled Southern Beaufort Sea polar bears and Pacific walruses along the state's North Slope. We will continue to hold FWS accountable to its obligations to ensure the survival and recovery of these irreplaceable icons of the Arctic landscape.

- ✦ As a result of our successful 2020 lawsuit, the Biden administration [finalized](#) new rules that reinstate protections for predators on national preserves in Alaska, including one that prohibits bear baiting.
- ✦ In response to a petition from Defenders and partners, the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission [voted](#) unanimously to list the [southern resident orca](#) under the state ESA. While they are protected under the federal ESA and Washington state's ESA, the southern resident orca depends on Oregon's coastal waters and is threatened by dwindling salmon runs, pollution and vessel traffic. Securing this commitment from Oregon will aid recovery efforts for this critically endangered marine mammal.
- ✦ Defenders submitted a petition to FWS to list the [Mohave ground squirrel](#) under the federal ESA and to designate its critical habitat. The species occurs in a limited portion of California's western Mojave Desert and is no longer present in 40% of its historical range due to habitat loss and fragmentation caused by urban development, agriculture, off-highway vehicle use and military base expansion.
- ✦ The California Fish and Game Commission [responded](#) to a 2020 petition from Defenders and partners with a unanimous vote in favor of uplisting the Mojave desert tortoise as endangered under the California ESA. This change in listing status is a necessary response to this species' continued decline due to threats from habitat loss, off-highway vehicle use, military base expansions and livestock grazing.
- ✦ Defenders submitted comments to the U.S. Army on the proposed translocation of desert tortoises from the Western Training Area at Fort Irwin to lands owned by the U.S. Army outside the installation boundary. The Army accepted our recommendations to 1) limit all vehicle speeds to a maximum of 15 mph during the spring and fall seasons when desert tortoises are active, 2) enforce closure of the Army's lands to all public entry by motorized vehicles and 3) work with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to effectively prohibit motorized vehicle use within the desert tortoise translocation areas outside the installation.
- ✦ The California Department of Fish and Wildlife responded to a petition from Defenders and partners to list five imperiled populations of the [western burrowing owl](#) under the state's ESA with a finding that protections may be warranted, as well as a [unanimous vote](#) in favor of providing interim state protections while the agency conducts a full status review. Burrowing owls have suffered significant habitat loss due to human development, conversion of grasslands to agricultural lands,



development of large-scale wind and solar energy infrastructure and the persecution of ground-dwelling squirrels and other mammals whose underground burrows the owls use for nesting and roosting.

- ✦ Working with a coalition of experts, Defenders finalized a conceptual plan for reintroducing the southern sea otter to areas of its historic range, including Oregon and northern California. Designed as a conceptual blueprint for FWS, the plan provides a comprehensive analysis of the mechanisms, logistics and socioeconomics involved in restoring this species. We also recommend ways to engage with communities and organizations along the coastline, including fisheries representatives and Tribal Nations, and to identify potential impacts and cultural value of sea otter reintroduction.
- ✦ Defenders continued to help build conservation and cultural herds on tribal lands with the [transfer](#) of 116 Yellowstone bison to the Fort Peck Indian Reservation in Montana in February of 2024. This marked the largest transfer under the Bison Conservation Transfer Program, a Defenders- Yellowstone bison from slaughter and restore bison to tribal lands. Since 2019, we have helped transfer over 400 bison from Yellowstone to Tribes across the country. In addition, this year we provided support for the transport of three bison families from Fort Peck to Tribes in South Dakota and Wyoming.
- ✦ Once again, Defenders assisted with the annual black-footed ferret surveys at Conata Basin in South Dakota and at Fort Belknap and Crow Indian Reservations in Montana. As a member of the FWS Black-footed Ferret Recovery Implementation Team, Defenders works with federal and tribal agencies, private landowners and other partners to maintain and expand recovery sites for this critically endangered species. Home to more than 150 ferrets and 22,000 acres of active prairie dog colonies, Conata Basin is the largest and most successful recovery site. Along with population surveys, we also vaccinate ferrets and prairie dogs against sylvatic plague and treat prairie dog burrows to prevent the spread of this deadly, flea-transmitted disease.



- ✦ As a leading member of the Prairie Dog Coalition, Defenders is helping to protect and restore prairie dog populations and support black-footed ferret recovery. In addition to being ferrets' primary prey, the prairie dog is a keystone species and ecosystem engineer that is critical to the health and biodiversity of the grassland ecosystem. Prairie dogs support dozens of other species, including the burrowing owl, Ferruginous hawk, mountain plover, swift fox,

golden-mantled ground squirrel and American badger. We work with private landowners, especially those adjacent to ferret recovery sites, to promote and implement non-lethal coexistence strategies to minimize conflict and protect prairie dogs from lethal control tactics. For example, we trap and translocate prairie dogs from ranching lands (where they would have been poisoned) and install vegetation buffers that discourage prairie dogs from dispersing onto ranch properties.

- ✦ After nearly two decades and six court victories, Defenders successfully secured long-overdue federal protections for the [North American wolverine](#) under the ESA. With its habitat badly fragmented and degraded by human development, this species is quickly losing its remaining habitat to climate change. These elusive carnivores depend on areas with deep snow to build dens and raise their young, and, like other snow-dependent species, are facing an increasingly uncertain future as rising temperatures melt away their habitat. Defenders is also spearheading a collaborative effort to restore the wolverine to their historic range in Colorado's high elevation mountains, which could increase their population in the Lower 48 by over 30%. We played an important role in the [passage](#) of state legislation authorizing a wolverine reintroduction program. As state and federal planning begins for wolverine reintroduction to Colorado, Defenders is leading outreach and education efforts to increase knowledge and tolerance of this elusive scavenger.



- ✦ Defenders' Southwest team partnered with Santa Fe County and the Rocky Mountain Youth Corps over the last four years on experimental forest management in New Mexico's Ortiz Mountains that used carefully planned, less aggressive management to reduce wildfire risk and help wildlife. With wildfires becoming more frequent and severe under a changing climate, western U.S. forests are being targeted by aggressive management practices that threaten habitat for wildlife, including numerous imperiled warbler species that depend on ponderosa pine and mixed-conifer forests in the Southwest. Based on bird monitoring, our successful study revealed a significant increase in the density of Grace's warbler and a stable population of Virginia's warbler at the project site – while still achieving fire hazard reduction goals. We hosted six field trips to the project site in the Ortiz Mountains for forestry and fire professionals, including staff from the Santa Fe National Forest, New Mexico State Forestry and Forest Stewards Guild to observe our demonstration of how wildfire fuel reduction can be accomplished while also conserving forest habitat for wildlife.



Grace's Warbler

- ✦ To further our Southwest Warbler Campaign, Defenders initiated and is leading the [Southwest Warbler Working Group](#), which is part of the larger Partners in Flight bird conservation group. This new working group aims to strengthen collaboration among diverse and global partners to fill research gaps and advance conservation efforts for six imperiled southwest warbler species. To recruit group members from Mexico, where the targeted warblers live in the winter, we created a Spanish-language flyer that was notably displayed at a major ornithological conference in Mexico.

- ✦ Defenders' rapid response helped to stop a proposed border security road which would have crossed part of the Lower Rio Grande Valley National Wildlife Refuge and destroyed a large portion of the world's only remaining populations of two endangered plant species. Among other advocacy actions, we sent letters to the Secretaries of Homeland Security and the Interior, who subsequently decided to abandon plans for the proposed road.
- ✦ Defenders is committed to monitoring and raising public awareness of the damaging impacts of SpaceX's Starship facility in Boca Chica, Texas. With reckless disregard for sensitive species on one of the most pristine stretches of the Texas coast, as well as the access rights of local communities to public beach areas, SpaceX continues to expand launch activities without proper accountability. We regularly sound the alarm on the need for robust scientific assessments and stronger protections for the area's rich biodiversity and numerous endangered and sensitive species, including ocelots, jaguarundi, sea turtles and millions of migratory birds. For example, we released a short film "[Small Cats Versus Big Rockets](#)" across our social media channels to share important information about the damaging impacts of this experimental rocket testing facility on wildlife and members of the local community. Our experts and concerns are also regularly featured in high-profile media outlets such as [Texas Public Radio](#).
- ✦ As part of our ongoing effort to mitigate the impacts of light pollution on migratory birds across Texas, Defenders once again helped lead the state-wide Lights Out, Texas! campaign. Lights Out Texas! is a campaign of education, awareness and action that focuses on turning out nonessential lights at night during the spring and fall migrations to help protect the billions of migratory birds that fly over Texas annually. To inform and improve local conservation initiatives, we also continued to co-lead a bird collision survey in downtown Austin to collect evidence of avian impacts. In addition, Defenders is partnering with Audubon Texas to develop a Lights Out, Texas! curriculum for Austin Independent School District to educate local youth and inspire meaningful action. Our new Lights Out, Texas! [storymap](#) serves as an effective means to further [educate the public](#) and inspire actions across the state to protect migratory birds.
- ✦ For nearly two decades, Defenders has been helping rural residents of Florida responsibly share the landscape with critically endangered Florida panthers. Rapid human development and encroachment on wildlife habitat in this state pose many serious challenges to this species' recovery and increases opportunities for conflicts between people and panthers. Defenders provides funding and installation support through our predator-resistant enclosure program to protect pets and small livestock and prevent conflicts with panthers – having helped more than 70 families through this program so far. As we continue to expand this highly effective program, we are building acceptance for this iconic predator as it struggles to recover. Throughout the year, we also participate in numerous community outreach events, like the Naples Yard and Garden Show, Save the Florida Panther



Day, the Florida Panther Festival and others where we exhibit enclosures and share information about living responsibly with panthers and other predators.

- ✦ To help expand social acceptance for sharing the landscape with Florida panthers, Defenders is also helping to find permanent solutions to help ranchers offset costs associated with panther livestock depredation. We provided input and recommendations to state and federal agencies to improve landowner incentive and compensation programs, such as new and innovative programs established by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission to compensate ranchers for livestock loss and to provide Payment for Ecosystem Services programs as an additional incentive tool to help prevent the loss of Florida's working lands to development.
- ✦ In recognition of our leading role in Florida panther conservation and recovery efforts, Defenders was invited to give a presentation at the Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge where state and federal wildlife and transportation officials and non-government partners gathered to celebrate the release of the Florida Department of Transportation's new Florida Panther Conservation Plan. The first of its kind, this plan outlines actions the transportation agency will take with partners to assist the recovery of this endangered species. As a member of the Transportation Sub-Team of the Florida Panther Recovery Implementation Team, Defenders helped to shape this collaborative plan to improve habitat connectivity and reduce roadway mortality for the Florida panther.



- ✦ Defenders is leading efforts to ensure that state and federal agencies take bold and timely actions to improve water quality and restore and expand manatee habitat to support the long-term recovery of this species. To address the critical need for water quality improvements, Defenders helped advocate for state and federal funding to address nutrient pollution in the Indian River Lagoon that continues to impact the seagrass beds manatees rely on as their primary food

source. In a positive sign, there is evidence of partial recovery of seagrass beds in key manatee foraging sites, as well as declining numbers of manatee deaths and rescues due to starvation. Defenders and partners also filed a lawsuit against the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) for failing to protect manatees and sea turtles from water pollution that destroys seagrass food sources. Another key priority for Defenders is leading advocacy and education around restoring the natural flow of the dammed Ocklawaha River, which will open up warm-water habitat that manatees need to survive during cold weather.

- ✦ In a huge victory, FWS [proposed](#) a revised plan to designate nearly 2 million acres as critical habitat for the Florida manatee – one of the largest designations in the history of the ESA. This court-ordered update came in response to a 2022 lawsuit brought by Defenders and partners against FWS for failing to revise the manatee's decades-old critical habitat designation. The proposed rule takes a meaningful step in addressing the significant threats manatees face from the loss, degradation and lack of access to their warm-water habitat and seagrass food sources.

- ✦ Defenders proudly played a role in helping to save the critically endangered Florida grasshopper sparrow from the brink of extinction and celebrated a major recovery milestone in 2024 when the 1,000th captive-bred bird was released into the wild. The conversion and loss of its dry open prairie habitat to agricultural fields caused this species' population to plummet to less than 100 birds, making it the most endangered bird in the continental U.S. Defenders has been supporting this species' recovery for more than a decade, pushing federal and state agencies to take bold action and initiate a captive breeding program, which has helped double the wild population since releases began in 2019. We also spearheaded a "Conserve Wildlife" license plate that has generated more than \$460,000 to help fund the captive breeding and reintroduction program, with over \$9.5 million in total to support wildlife conservation in Florida since 2000.
- ✦ Once again, Defenders' Southeast team, along with our [summer intern](#), joined the North Carolina Wildlife Resource Commission and others to [survey for hellbenders](#) in streams around the French Broad drainage in western North Carolina. These annual surveys contribute to hellbender conservation efforts by helping us understand where populations are growing and declining and where to provide habitat protections, while also aiding efforts to acquire funding for hellbender conservation.
- ✦ In the spring of 2024, Defenders partnered with the U.S. Forest Service and others, including local volunteers, to launch a two-year cerulean warbler and avian diversity [survey project](#) within the Pisgah National Forest in North Carolina. Like all national forests of western North Carolina, this mature and old growth forest is a biodiversity hotspot and provides a stronghold for declining populations of cerulean warblers. Using the latest technology to detect and record the presence of various bird species, the data we collect will help guide forest management activities to avoid impacts and support the conservation of vulnerable wildlife like cerulean warblers. In the summer we worked with some of the same partners to launch a similar survey project for bats.
- ✦ Defenders completed the first year of a three-year collaborative project to update outreach materials for the imperiled southern population of [bog turtles](#) in North Carolina and Virginia. These materials will be used to educate the public about this tiny turtle and the growing threats it is facing, to connect landowners with resources and funding to protect and restore bog turtle habitat and to provide wildlife law enforcement officers with information and training to prevent poaching of these animals for the illegal pet trade.
- ✦ Defenders and partners are ratcheting up the pressure on the administration to protect the critically endangered North Atlantic right whales from vessel collisions, which killed at least three of these majestic animals in early 2024. In response to our petitions and litigation, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Fisheries issued a proposal in 2022 to expand the vessel speed rule on the East Coast, which could reduce vessel strike deaths in U.S. waters by up to 90% - but has not yet finalized the regulations. We filed emergency petitions in 2022 and 2023, and [now seek](#) a court-ordered deadline for a final rule. NOAA Fisheries' unreasonable delay in finalizing the long-overdue [vessel speed rule](#) is tragically pushing this species closer toward extinction.

Protecting and Expanding Habitat for Wildlife



- ✦ In recognition of our accomplishments and unwavering dedication to the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge, the Okefenokee Protection Alliance, of which Defenders is a founding member, was named [Refuge Advocate of the Year](#) in 2024 by the National Wildlife Refuge Association. Our advocacy and outreach [efforts](#) were instrumental in collecting the nearly 200,000 public comments submitted in support of protecting this world-class refuge and its irreplaceable wetland ecosystem from a devastating proposal by Twin Pines Minerals to mine for titanium next to the refuge. In addition, with support from the [Okefenokee Protection Alliance](#), FWS asserted its [reserved water rights](#) to the Georgia Environmental Protection Division in defense of the refuge.
- ✦ Defenders and our partners settled a lawsuit against the U.S. Forest Service after the agency agreed to remove an ecologically important area of the Nantahala National Forest from a commercial logging proposal – protecting important habitat for wildlife. We filed a second case, which is still pending, challenging the Forest Service and FWS for violations of the ESA in consulting on the effects of a new management plan for the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests on four critically endangered bat species.
- ✦ In response to a [lawsuit](#) by Defenders and our partners, FWS [agreed](#) to halt its plan in 2024 to allow the experimental use of an algaecide (identified by the EPA as toxic to birds) in a 40,000-acre lake within the Mattamuskeet National Wildlife Refuge in eastern North Carolina – preventing likely harm to the more than 250 bird species that rely on this iconic sanctuary.
- ✦ As part of our ongoing effort to safeguard Cape Romain National Wildlife Refuge for the red knot and other sensitive species, Defenders [successfully](#) advocated for the dismissal of the state of South Carolina's lawsuit against FWS regarding its decision to prohibit the harvesting of horseshoe crabs on the refuge. Prompted by our 2020 lawsuit, FWS was required to complete a compatibility analysis that revealed horseshoe crab harvesting as incompatible with the purposes of the refuge due to its negative effects on red knots and other wildlife. After the state of South Carolina challenged FWS's resulting [decision to halt](#) the harvest, Defenders intervened on behalf of FWS and successfully argued for a dismissal. Not only is this a milestone victory for this refuge and the sensitive species that rely on its priceless habitat, but this decisive court ruling affirms FWS's authority to manage wildlife refuges *for wildlife* – setting a critical precedent that impacts the entire refuge system and the hundreds of imperiled species that depend on its lands and waters for survival.



- ✦ Defenders and partners [successfully challenged](#) the EPA for illegally transferring permitting authority under Section 404 of the Clean Water Act to the State of Florida. In doing so, EPA unlawfully allowed the state to assume authority over waters without complying with the ESA and exposed these waters to projects that threaten to destroy habitat for many imperiled species, including the Florida manatee. Concurrently, we challenged FWS for its accompanying “Biological Opinion” and “Incidental Take Statement” that unlawfully abandoned key ESA protections for listed species. Our court victory is important for protecting wetlands and wildlife both in Florida and across the U.S., as it sets a precedent that will deter other states from seeking similar authority without fully complying with ESA standards.
- ✦ Defenders [partnered](#) with FernLeaf Community Charter School in North Carolina to design and implement a “Shade Your Stream” habitat restoration project along Cane Creek. With Defenders’ support, the school received funding from the Tennessee River Basin Network, of which Defenders is a member. [This project](#) benefits wildlife and habitats, including the imperiled Eastern hellbender salamander, while also providing unique [hands-on learning](#) experiences, promoting environmental awareness and inspiring the next generation of environmental advocates.
- ✦ Following more than a decade of advocacy from Defenders and numerous partners, FWS officially [established](#) the Everglades to Gulf Conservation Area in Southwest Florida as the newest addition to the National Wildlife Refuge System. Defenders played an important role in generating broad support for this land designation, which will conserve and connect important habitat for more than 100 state and federally listed species, including the Florida manatee, Florida bonneted bat, wood stork, crested caracara, Florida scrub jay, Florida grasshopper sparrow, eastern indigo snake and the world’s only breeding population of the endangered Florida panther.
- ✦ As the coordinator of the Northwest Florida Sentinel Landscape (NWFSL), Defenders successfully advocated for the state acquisition of nearly 24,000 acres to protect vital wildlife habitat, including iconic longleaf pine forests in Northwest Florida this year. Federal, state, local and private partners conserved these lands through 14 transactions spending over \$45.7 million. Designated in 2022 with support from Defenders, the NWFSL is helping to protect critical wildlife habitat on roughly 7.7 million acres of the Florida Panhandle – focusing on connecting private, state and federal lands (including six military installations) within the Florida Wildlife Corridor. With Defenders’ support, NWFSL partners are pursuing funding opportunities to support environmental restoration and nature-based climate resilience projects.
- ✦ Defenders joined numerous allies, diverse partners and elected officials to block destructive plans to allow commercial development in state parks, including hotels, pickle ball courts, golf courses and other operations that are not compatible with the wildlife and habitat conservation goals of Florida’s award-winning state park system. While we are pleased that the Governor heeded the public’s strong opposition, we will remain vigilant and engaged with our partners to protect Florida’s wildlife and wild places from damaging proposals like this in the future.
- ✦ Defenders’ Southeast team plays a leading role in the [Safe Passage](#) Coalition with a mission to improve habitat connectivity and reduce wildlife–vehicle collisions on I-40 in the Pigeon River

Gorge in North Carolina and Tennessee. As a result of our coalition's work, one wildlife crossing project reconnecting the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and the Pisgah National Forest has already been completed, one is nearing completion and two more are under construction. We are proud of our role in making this stretch of highway safer for wildlife and people, [enhancing connectivity](#) for wildlife and helping to preserve the rich biodiversity of the Southern Appalachian landscape.

- ✦ In response to our advocacy, FWS withdrew a flawed compatibility analysis that improperly sanctioned new roads, highway maintenance activities and new rights-of-way in Sand Lake National Wildlife Refuge in South Dakota. A designated Wetland of International Importance, this refuge is critical to hundreds of migratory bird species and other wildlife.
- ✦ As part of our [ongoing effort](#) to protect Ash Meadows National Wildlife Refuge from mining threats, Defenders worked with a coalition of Nevada-based partners to build support for a mineral withdrawal of BLM lands surrounding the refuge, thereby preventing harmful extractive activities. [Mining activities](#) could drain the refuge's iconic springs and jeopardize the survival of numerous threatened and endangered species, including the Ash Meadows Amargosa pupfish, least Bell's vireo and southwestern willow flycatcher. Thanks to our outreach, Senator Catherine Cortez Masto (D-Nev.) highlighted this refuge in several Senate hearings and wrote a [letter](#) calling on the Department of Interior to enact the mineral withdrawal. In response to pressure from the Senator and our continued advocacy, BLM committed to initiate the withdrawal process—a critical step toward safeguarding the imperiled species that rely on the Refuge's vulnerable groundwater-fed springs.
- ✦ Defenders and partners [celebrated](#) a victory in our litigation challenging the previous administration's approval of a right-of-way for a four-lane highway through Red Cliffs National Conservation Area in southwestern Utah. This scenic red rock landscape is home to sensitive wildlife habitat for imperiled species, including designated critical habitat for the threatened Mojave desert tortoise.
- ✦ Together with our partners in the Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement (CARE), Defenders organized and hosted the first post-pandemic Refuge Expo on Capitol Hill. This event helped to raise awareness about the value of the National Wildlife Refuge System and revitalize the Congressional Wildlife Refuge Caucus.
- ✦ In a significant victory for Defenders' advocacy efforts, BLM finalized a new Conservation and Landscape Health Rule elevating conservation to the same level of attention given to extractive activities in BLM planning and operations. Defenders' [detailed comments](#) on the proposed rule provided specific recommendations to ensure long-term ecosystem health and to strengthen wildlife conservation on public lands. The final rule represents a significant cultural shift for BLM and will provide stronger strategies to conserve habitat across our public lands.
- ✦ Defenders [celebrated](#) the administration's establishment of a National Interagency Seed and Restoration Center, an initiative for which we advocated for many years to assure a sustainable supply of native seeds for restoring federal lands and native ecosystems for wildlife.
- ✦ Defenders developed a recorded [demonstration](#) of our Wildlife and Land Trusts (WALT) tool to show how easy it is to use. WALT was developed as a one-stop-shop for land trusts to navigate federal conservation programs and access more resources to conserve wildlife and habitats.

As stewards of 61 million acres of private lands, land trusts are positioned to be leaders in conserving wildlife on private lands.

- ✦ As part of our strategy to enhance old-growth forest conservation and restoration, Defenders [engaged](#) with leaders of the U.S. Forest Service and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and provided robust comments on the draft environmental impact statement for the proposed National Old-Growth Amendment, a novel initiative to amend all national forest land management plans. The necessary improvements we highlighted will help managing agencies better steward our national forests and grasslands for wildlife and communities in response to a changing climate.

- ✦ Defenders is committed to strengthening greater sage-grouse conservation through management of declining sagebrush habitat, of which the BLM is the largest land manager across the West. In 2024, Defenders submitted extensive comments on the BLM's greater sage-grouse resource management plan amendments and draft EIS, which will largely decide the management of 70 million acres of BLM-administered lands across ten states. Despite an 80% population decline since 1965, and a 40% decline since 2002, ESA listing of this species is currently precluded by a [rider](#) in the federal appropriations package. In addition to the birds' intrinsic value, conserving sage-grouse habitat also helps the more than 350 other species of animals and plants associated with the [Sagebrush Sea](#) that are also in decline.



Greater sage-grouse

- ✦ In a big win for communities, tribes, and wildlife, the Biden administration rejected the proposed Ambler mining road in Alaska. Initially approved by the previous administration, this mining road would bulldoze over more than 2,000 rivers and streams across 211 miles of Alaska's roadless Brooks Range – causing irreparable harm to the sensitive Arctic landscape. BLM found that road construction and use would significantly impact access to subsistence resources for over 30 Indigenous communities in the project area. Defenders engaged with a number of these communities regarding the project and its impacts.
- ✦ In another huge victory for communities, tribes and wildlife in Alaska, the Biden administration finalized its decision to maintain protections for 28 million acres of federal lands, known as “D-1” lands, that are protected under section 17(d)(1) of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971. The previous administration attempted to lift these protections, which have been in place for more than fifty years, and allow mining, oil and gas development, and privatization of these lands. In addition to providing critically important habitat for caribou, moose, wolves, bears, salmon, migratory birds and many other vulnerable species, these lands provide subsistence hunting and fishing resources for more than 70 Tribal communities. Defenders worked with tribes and other partners across the state to successfully advocate for maintaining protections for these public lands.



Caribou in the NPR-A

✦ Following several years of advocacy by Defenders and partners, BLM [finalized](#) regulations strengthening protections for over 13 million acres of “Special Areas” in the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska. Identified for exceptional wildlife and cultural values, including critical habitat for polar bears and other species, these designated areas are largely off-limit to oil and gas development. BLM later issued a Request for Information to solicit public comment on whether to expand or designate new “Special Areas,” and we responded by proposing significant additions.

✦ Defenders continued our robust advocacy for “smart from the start” energy planning and development that is sited and designed to avoid negative impacts on wildlife and their habitat. Over the past year we provided expert feedback on more than two dozen different proposed renewable energy projects in California urging regulators to identify and mitigate the potential and cumulative impacts on sensitive species and habitat connectivity. For example, Defenders’ California team evaluated and commented on the proposed Valley Clean Infrastructure Plan, which will provide a programmatic blueprint for the development of solar energy generating and storage facilities on approximately 130,000 acres in Fresno County with a generating capacity of up to 20,000 MW.

✦ The California Court of Appeals ruled in our favor in a case brought by industry lobbying groups, in which we intervened to defend Ventura County’s land use ordinances that were designed to protect wildlife corridors connecting key habitat areas, including Los Padres National Forest, Santa Monica Mountains and Simi Hills. The first of their kind in California, the ordinances approved in 2019 provide incentives for landowners to help maintain and improve wildlife habitat connectivity.

✦ Defenders’ California team led numerous advocacy efforts to address the state’s unsustainable water management and secure a reliable, clean water supply for aquatic ecosystems, wildlife refuges and vulnerable species. For example, we continued our engagement in opposition to the proposed Sites Reservoir, which would divert water from the Sacramento River and has not been responsibly designed to avoid causing an ecological disaster for Chinook salmon, Delta smelt, longfin smelt and many other native species that are struggling to survive. Additionally, we worked with a coalition of partners to successfully advocate for improvements to the Bureau of Reclamation’s final Sacramento River Temperature Management Plan that will better protect salmon from poor water temperature conditions below Shasta Dam.

✦ Defenders officially launched our Pinyon Jay Private Lands Conservation [Program](#) with outreach presentations to more than 100 [landowners](#) to help improve the health of piñon pine trees and increase the production of piñon seeds, which are the primary food source for imperiled pinyon jays. We also created a phone application for landowners to track their tree care progress. Defenders



also donated pinyon jay [signs](#) along the Santa Fe County River Greenway trail and on the city's Dale Ball Trail at Sierra del Norte to inform trail users about this imperiled species and how to protect piñon pines, the jay's preferred habitat and food source.

- ✦ Defenders and partners initiated a nearly 30-mile beaver coexistence and river restoration [project](#) in two major tributaries of the Rio Grande River to facilitate beaver recolonization of historic habitat and increase water flow for both wildlife and people in northern New Mexico. We engage in community outreach efforts to promote [beaver coexistence](#) and encourage water conservation actions that will recharge aquifers, increase biodiversity and improve water availability for wildlife and New Mexican communities, including traditional Hispanic acequia




farming villages and the Santa Clara Pueblo. For example, we hosted an “Aquatic Connectivity” workshop at the Santa Clara Native American Pueblo for state and federal agencies, Tribal representatives and other partners to discuss strategies to improve aquatic ecosystems, including beaver restoration and coexistence. We also partnered with geographic mapping specialists at Utah State University to inventory the entire state of New Mexico for beaver presence and activity –

providing critical information for prioritizing rivers and watersheds for future restoration and beaver coexistence projects.

Restoring and Advancing Legislative Protections and Funding for Wildlife



- ✦ Defenders fought tirelessly to oppose more than [110 devastating proposals](#) introduced so far this Congress to rewrite the ESA, slash funding for conservation and single out some of our most vulnerable species to legislate their extinction. These include provisions that *would have* blocked ESA protections for the gray wolf, lesser prairie-chicken, northern long-eared bat, dunes sagebrush lizard and numerous mussel species; delisted the Yellowstone-area grizzly bear population; stopped the North Cascades grizzly bear reintroduction plan; and prevented stronger regulations to protect critically endangered whales. For example, Defenders was successful in advocating for the [removal](#) of all 15 new anti-wildlife riders from the final FY 2024 federal spending package.
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- © Cavan Images / Alamy Stock Photo
- ✦ Defenders was invited to be the featured witness [testifying](#) before the House Natural Resources Committee against H.R. 9533, the “ESA Amendments Act of 2024.” Introduced by Committee Chair Rep. Bruce Westerman (R-Ark.) [under the guise](#) of improving the ESA, this dangerous bill would significantly rewrite key portions of the ESA to prioritize politics over science and inappropriately shift responsibility for key implementation decisions from the federal government to the states, many of which do not have sufficient resources or legal mechanisms in place to take the lead in conserving listed species. Additionally, the bill would place new administrative burdens on already overwhelmed agencies, would lengthen and complicate the process for listing and recovering threatened and endangered species and preclude judicial review of listing decisions.
 - ✦ Defenders once again led efforts that [defeated](#) an amendment to the FY 2024 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) that would have exempted defense related activity from the ESA. By carving a huge loophole in the ESA for military activities, this amendment would expose endangered and threatened species to unrestricted harm and possible extinction. In addition, Defenders successfully advocated for the removal of language from the FY 2024 NDAA to exempt the Department of Defense from having to comply with both the ESA and the Marine Mammal Protection Act in allowing weapons testing in the Gulf of Mexico. Without proper consultation and mitigation actions required by these key statutes, such activities would be risking the incidental death of critically endangered Rice’s whales. This exemption language included in the House version of the FY 2025 NDAA and Defenders is working aggressively to ensure it is removed.

- ✦ Defenders successfully advocated for the ESA, securing [revised](#) regulations from the Biden administration that took a big step in the right direction by reversing some of the previous administration’s destructive changes. Prompted by legal action brought by Defenders and partners, some of the final revisions issued in 2024, like those restoring automatic protections to threatened species, are huge successes, while others fall short and risk significant harm to imperiled species. Defenders is working tirelessly to correct *all provisions* of the regulations that implement this critical statute – our strongest and most effective tool to protect species from extinction and halt the biodiversity crisis.
- ✦ Defenders diligently worked to build support for the Biden administration to establish a National Biodiversity Strategy (NBS) to ensure a broad-based and coordinated federal approach to address the rapid loss of biodiversity. With support from our CCI and government relations team, Senator Merkley (D-Ore.) introduced a resolution in December 2023 calling for an NBS.
- ✦ Defenders is leading efforts to advance key wildlife and habitat conservation goals in the Farm Bill, which Congress is currently working on reauthorizing as it will expire on September 30, 2024. The reauthorization process provides us a unique opportunity to champion policy improvements aimed at strengthening conservation efforts on private and Forest Service lands and ensuring equity in access to Farm Bill programs. This summer, Representatives Julie Brownley (D-Calif.) and Salud Carbajal (D-Calif.) [introduced](#) the Saving Our Interconnected Lives (SOIL) Act – a bill Defenders helped draft that would enact two of our Farm Bill policy recommendations. We continue to use our extensive [Farm Bill hub](#) of materials to educate elected leaders, agency staff and the public, and to galvanize support for our important policy recommendations. In fact, we carried out an ad campaign on Google to direct our target congressional audience to our Farm Bill hub. Overall, our efforts resulted in several positive editorials from landowners in news outlets around the country in support of a Farm Bill that works for wildlife, in addition to one from our former president and CEO, Jamie Rappaport Clark.
- ✦ As part of our relentless work promoting coexistence with wolves and bears, we aim to transform wildlife policy within USDA’s Wildlife Services program that, not long ago, exclusively promoted lethal removal of predators for conflict prevention. Thanks to our relentless advocacy efforts and leadership in coexistence, Defenders was instrumental in securing \$4.5 million for the Nonlethal Initiative in both the FY2023 and FY2024 federal spending packages, an increase of more than 325% since Defenders helped secure the agency’s first dedicated coexistence funding in FY2020. With this additional funding, the agency is expanding non-lethal management of wildlife conflicts in Idaho, Montana, Oregon, Colorado and other western states.
- ✦ Defenders’ California team successfully advocated for wildlife conservation in the FY 2024 state budget. We worked with partners to defeat a proposal to revert \$45 million from the Habitat Conservation Fund. We also secured \$600,000 for the California Wolf-Livestock Compensation Program, which provides funding to ranchers for livestock losses caused by wolf depredation and for the purchase and implementation of proactive nonlethal conflict reduction strategies to further wolf-livestock coexistence.

- ✦ Our California team also heavily engaged in the state legislative session to support wildlife and sustainable water management. We helped develop and advocate for wildlife refuge funding to be included in Proposition 4, which is on the ballot in November for California voters, as well as a bill signed by the Governor in September 2024 that will help increase water rights enforcement fees. In addition, we actively opposed and defeated harmful water-related bills, including one that would have potentially diverted even more water from the sensitive Bay-Delta Estuary.
- ✦ Defenders and partners successfully advocated for the Texas legislature to support the creation of the Centennial Parks Conservation Fund, which dedicates up to one billion dollars for the expansion of state park lands for the benefit of both Texan communities and wildlife. In November 2023, Texas voters overwhelmingly approved the creation of this Fund to acquire and develop new state parks.

Innovating for Conservation



- ◆ In collaboration with our government relations, communications and field teams, Defenders' Center for Conservation Innovation (CCI) hosted the first three of five planned regional symposiums on the [biodiversity crisis](#). Based on CCI's comprehensive [report](#) examining biodiversity loss in the U.S., this initiative is designed to give increased visibility to the biodiversity crisis, generate awareness about its leading drivers and inspire action on a local level. With a focus on Florida, California and Rhode Island, we brought together local experts, conservation practitioners and decision makers discuss how the biodiversity crisis is impacting wildlife in these states and to highlight the various conservation actions underway to protect the incredible biodiversity in these states.



North Atlantic right whales

- ◆ In honor of the ESA's 50th anniversary in December 2023, CCI developed a [report](#) outlining the Act's history and successes, as well as its current challenges and promising future for the next 50 years and beyond. In the report, we share Defenders' ambitious vision for a strong ESA to address the biodiversity crisis and protect our nation's imperiled species. Defenders' Vice President of Conservation Research and Innovation and Director of our CCI, Dr. Lindsay Rosa, appeared on [C-SPAN](#) in December 2023 to discuss the critical importance of a strong ESA in protecting our nation's biodiversity. Additionally, Defenders' Senior Attorney Jane Davenport was a special guest on C-SPAN's [Washington Journal](#) in honor of Earth Day 2024. She discussed the importance of the ESA, our work to protect imperiled species like the North Atlantic right whale and the urgent need for stronger actions to address the devastating biodiversity crisis.
- ◆ CCI initiated a collaborative project with partner organizations to help conservationists and decision makers select and use maps to identify important locations for taking action to address the interconnected crises of biodiversity loss, climate change, and inequitable access to nature and its benefits. The first in a series of analyses conducted by the group was published in [BioScience](#), and focused on the challenges presented by a growing number of maps in biodiversity conservation. We discovered that over 70% of the U.S. was identified as a priority by at least one of the maps in the collection, however, the areas that all maps in the study agree on cover only 3.5%. To further support this collaborative project, CCI hosted a series of workshops to develop a framework and set of resources that help ensure that future

conservation efforts are planned and implemented in ways that benefit biodiversity, address climate change and advance the wellbeing of people, particularly overburdened and disproportionately impacted communities. The group also shared progress on the framework through a [workshop](#) at the 2024 North American Congress on Conservation Biology in Vancouver.

- ✦ CCI continues to support Defenders' advocacy for more robust management plans for imperiled species that address species' vulnerability to climate change. For example, Defenders published an [assessment](#) of climate change being addressed in management plans for national wildlife refuges. While it is clear that climate change impacts should be considered in refuge management plans, our results indicate that actions being taken are not adequate to protect imperiled species from current and future effects of climate change. This complements CCI's [dashboard](#) that examines the sensitivity of U.S. threatened species to climate change and how management plans discuss climate change threats. Through these and other projects, CCI is making it easier to explain and advocate for climate-related actions to protect vulnerable species and their habitat.
- ✦ CCI published a study in [Geography and Sustainability](#) examining the extent to which designated critical habitats for federally listed species are located within areas with established land protections and those previously identified as climate refugia or climate corridors. Our results show that less than 20% of designated critical habitat overlap with protected lands and climate refugia areas, indicating a dire need to improve the designation and delineation of critical habitat that will help imperiled species recover and ensure their resilience into the future.

Mobilizing a Broader Constituency for Wildlife Conservation



- ◆ Defenders' communications and multimedia experts worked with teams across the organization to support and share our conservation work and to expand our engagement with audiences through print, digital and social media. We produced multiple [blog posts](#) each week for our website to provide an engaging perspective of Defenders' work across the country, including a new "[Summer Road Trip](#)" series of blogs, videos and virtual postcards exploring the states where we work and the species and landscapes we are working to protect. Also new this year, we produced a monthly "[Wildlife Times](#)" video series to share the latest news about our work defending wildlife. The communications team also created an abundance of educational and entertaining content on a variety of topics central to Defenders' mission, including a new "[Good News/Bad News](#)" video series, as well as additions to our "[Day in the Life](#)" video series, our collection of [YouTube videos](#) and numerous others shared on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [TikTok](#) and [X](#) featuring imperiled species and our work across the county to protect them. Our best performing Instagram post, [#HopeCore](#), reached over one million views.
- ◆ This summer Defenders welcomed a new cohort of interns in our paid, 10-week Summer Internship Program. This program aims to diversify the talent pool in the conservation sector and establish meaningful relationships with the next generation of conservation leaders. Through one-to-one mentoring and peer support we provide interns with in-depth exposure to Defenders' conservation work and opportunities to acquire new skills and engage in hands-on projects. Made possible by the generous support of The Pritchard Foundation, we provide interns with a stipend to help ensure equal opportunities for students to gain valuable knowledge and experience from our Conservation Programs teams around the country.
- ◆ In partnership with FWS and local communities in North Carolina, Defenders is leading efforts to support and raise awareness about the ongoing Red Wolf recovery program, promote coexistence measures and improve the safety of roadways for crossing wolves. Along with participants in our Red Wolf Ambassador volunteer program, we hosted a "Who Speaks for Red Wolves" film and art event in Greensboro, North Carolina to build appreciation and pride in Red Wolf recovery and to highlight the important role of the ESA in protecting and recovering the Red Wolf and other imperiled species. We were also invited to give a presentation for the community in Belhaven, North Carolina, which is adjacent to the Red Wolf Recovery Area, during which we shared information about Red Wolves and the incredible biodiversity of the area.



Red Wolf

- ✦ Defenders once again was a sponsor of the Coastal Cultures Conference, which in 2024 was held on St. Helena Island, South Carolina. This annual event provides an important opportunity for us to expand our outreach and to better understand and support underserved communities, including the Gullah-Geechee Nation, to address wetland restoration needs, reduce flood risk and improve climate change resilience.
- ✦ Defenders supported the production of a promotional [video](#) highlighting the important efforts of the Blackfeet Nation, Defenders and other partners to [restore bison](#) to Tribal lands and help bring balance back to prairie grassland ecosystems. The video is a companion piece for a feature film released in October 2023, *Butcher's Crossing*, a historical drama depicting the mass slaughter of bison and its devastating impact on Indigenous people.
- ✦ In celebration of Wolf Awareness Week, we hosted a virtual [paint night](#) for participants of all ages to learn about gray wolf recovery in Colorado while having fun learning techniques to paint this majestic creature.
- ✦ Defenders once again co-sponsored the Florida Panther Festival in Naples, an event we helped initiate in 2011 to raise awareness about this imperiled species, the need for conservation initiatives to protect panthers and their habitat and to provide information about how to coexist and share the landscape with panthers. This year's event attracted approximately 3,500 people. We displayed one of our predator-resistant enclosures to promote the assistance program we provide to help people live peacefully alongside panthers. In addition, we displayed our enclosures at the annual Swamp Cabbage Festival (with 45,000 visitors), the Immokalee Cattle Drive and Jamboree (with 5,000 visitors) and the Big Cypress Heritage Festival (with more than 1,000 visitors).



Ocelot

- ✦ Defenders once again was a sponsor of the annual [Ocelot Conservation Festival](#) at the Gladys Porter Zoo in Brownsville, Texas. The event was another huge success as attendance continues to grow remarkably, from approximately 1,200 in 2022 and 5,100 in 2023 to nearly 7,000 in 2024. For the third year in a row, Defenders also sponsored free entry for the first 250 children from the local community to enter the zoo and attend the festival at no cost to their families. A top priority for Defenders, [this event](#) provides an important opportunity to celebrate and build awareness of the unique presence of ocelots in Texas and call attention to the critical need for ocelot conservation efforts.
- ✦ In October 2023, Defenders co-hosted the annual Rio Reforestation community habitat restoration event in South Texas, bringing together more than 1,500 volunteers from local communities to replant thorn forest habitat on former agricultural land. Participants planted over 120,000 seedlings on 12 acres to restore this increasingly rare habitat that is essential to ocelots and many other native species in the Rio Grande Valley.

- ✦ Defenders once again sponsored the annual [Latino Conservation Week](#) event at Pease District Park in Austin, Texas. This popular event was a great success, with a growing attendance of 75 families in 2024. This “Pasa Un Día En El Parque” event hosted nature-inspired activities such as water quality monitoring, arts and crafts, native plant and seed swap and a bilingual forest habitat walk. A top priority for this event is to engage new communities that have limited access to conservation resources and wildlife education.
- ✦ Defenders served as a lead planning partner for the 6th annual Belugas Count! [event](#) in Alaska. This citizen-science celebration brings members of the public to help spot and count endangered Cook Inlet beluga whales and learn about these iconic Alaska marine mammals from species experts. In addition, one of our [summer interns](#) helped collect data from beluga whale habitat as part of a water quality monitoring [project](#) aimed at protecting this species from water pollution. We also worked with partners to support a proposal approved by the Alaska’s Board of Fisheries to limit the commercial harvest of eulachon smelt, an important source of prey for beluga whales.
- ✦ As part of the Orca Salmon Alliance, Defenders helped organize the annual [Orca Month](#) series of events and activities. This year’s theme was “Clean Water, Healthy Futures” to highlight the need for action to stop toxic pollutants from entering our waterways and harming orcas, salmon and people. Along with our partners, we aim to raise awareness about the threats facing critically endangered Southern Resident orcas and to encourage the public throughout the Pacific Northwest to help protect and celebrate the orcas of the Salish Sea.



- ✦ Defenders and our partners organized and sponsored the 22nd annual [Sea Otter Awareness Week](#) that includes many fun, interactive and educational activities for members of the public. This annual celebration provides a unique opportunity for us to raise awareness of the important role [sea otters](#) play in maintaining ecosystem health, our need to coexist with sea otters and the efforts of Defenders and others in advancing sea otter conservation initiatives.

Protecting Imperiled Species and Habitats in 2025



As we face the devastating impacts of climate change and other major drivers of biodiversity loss, Defenders is more determined than ever to preserve and restore healthy and balanced ecosystems that support all life on Earth. We are eager to build on our many successes over the past year and seize new opportunities to advance our important mission. Whether we are in court, in the halls of Congress and the administration, or in the field, we are ready to meet the growing challenges of the biodiversity and climate crises



with our continued focus on collaborative, innovative and science-based solutions. With your invaluable partnership, we will continue fighting to secure a future for imperiled species and the habitats they need to survive and thrive.

In the year ahead, Defenders will maintain our focus on protecting imperiled species, vital habitats and our bedrock environmental laws. In coordination with our CCI and field teams, the BLC will also continue to design proactive, science-based legal strategies that maximize our impact on preserving biodiversity and create long-lasting conservation outcomes for wildlife. We will also keep leading the fight against the persistent congressional attacks on the ESA and other conservation statutes, vulnerable species and vital wild places. Defenders will continue to work with the executive branch, state agencies, tribes and other partners to safeguard our public lands, improve wildlife and human coexistence, conserve strongholds for imperiled species and strengthen a coordinated response to the biodiversity crisis.

We greatly appreciate your steadfast commitment to wildlife and to securing a bright future for our planet's biodiversity. Defenders undoubtedly owes each of our countless successes to your partnership and support. **Thank you!**