Lesser Yellowlegs

Ontario Government Response Statement

Protecting and Recovering Species at Risk in Ontario

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

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

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

The Recovery Strategy for the Lesser Yellowlegs (*Tringa flavipes*) in Ontario was completed on July 9, 2024.

Lesser Yellowlegs is a small- to medium-sized migratory shorebird that breeds in boreal wetlands. Its body is grey-brown with dark wings and a light underside, and it has long yellow legs, a straight black bill and a characteristic white ring around its eye.

Protecting and Recovering Lesser Yellowlegs

Lesser Yellowlegs is listed as a threatened species under the ESA, which protects both the animal and its habitat. The ESA prohibits harm or harassment of the species and

damage or destruction of its habitat without authorization or complying with the requirements of a regulatory exemption.

Lesser Yellowlegs also receives protection under the *Migratory Birds Convention Act, 1994*, which protects adults and young birds, as well as their nests and eggs in Canada.

Lesser Yellowlegs breeds across the northern boreal region in Canada and Alaska (United States [U.S.]) and migrates to non-breeding grounds in the southern U.S., Mexico, Caribbean and South America. It is estimated that 80 % of the breeding range is found in Canada, and during migration Lesser Yellowlegs pass through all provinces. The Prairie Pothole region is an important stopover site for individuals that breed in Alaska and central Canada, while those that breed in eastern Canada – including Ontario – stop to rest and refuel at natural and man-made wetlands, shorelines of rivers and lakes, and agricultural landscapes in the Great Lakes region before making multi-day flights over the Atlantic Ocean. In Ontario, Lesser Yellowlegs breeds primarily in the northern part of the province (i.e., in the Taiga Shield and Hudson Plains). Key staging areas (where birds build fat stores and prepare for their southern migration) are located along the James Bay coast and Great Lakes coastal wetlands. The species can be found throughout central and southern Ontario during migration. Detailed distribution and abundance information is not available for Ontario; the number of locations for Lesser Yellowlegs in Ontario is not known, and population size is not well understood.

Lesser Yellowlegs primarily breeds in boreal wetlands that comprise a diversity of habitats, including peatlands, muskeg, ponds and marshes with raised open areas and trees and shrubs interspersed. The species may also nest in human-modified habitats such as rights-of-way, mine sites and clear-cuts. Breeding pair formation occurs between late-April and mid-May, shortly after arrival on the breeding grounds. Nests are constructed on dry ground using moss, leaves, grass or twigs, typically in close proximity to extensive wetlands. Lesser Yellowlegs generally produce a single brood each season, with an average clutch size of four eggs. Incubation likely occurs throughout June, with peak hatching in late June to early July. Data related to hatching and fledging success are not available for Ontario. The young leave the nest shortly after hatching, though the adults continue to defend the area around the brood. Adult male Lesser Yellowlegs have been observed engaging in threat displays, attacks and chases when other species – such as Greater Yellowlegs (*Tringa melanoleuca*), Short-billed Dowitcher (*Limnodromus griseus*), and Solitary Sandpiper (*Tringa solitaria*) – venture too close to the female and young.

Lesser Yellowlegs is a generalist species, and its diet varies depending on season and geographic location. In coastal areas it mainly feeds on crustaceans, molluscs and

marine worms. In freshwater environments, its diet primarily consists of aquatic insects. The species also occasionally feeds on terrestrial invertebrates. On the breeding grounds, young have been observed foraging close to the nest, while adults may travel farther to forage. More information on home range size is necessary to inform habitat requirements.

Known predators of Lesser Yellowlegs include Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*), Merlin (*Falco columbarius*) and Northern Goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*). During the breeding season, adult Lesser Yellowlegs have been observed responding aggressively to other birds of prey, as well as gulls, Sandhill Crane (*Antigone canadensis*), Common Raven (*Corvus corax*), Black-billed Magpie (*Pica hudsonia*) and Coyote (*Canis latrans*). It is likely these species prey upon eggs and/or young. Other species which are found on the breeding grounds and are likely predators of Lesser Yellowlegs, though not documented, include American Crow (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*), American Marten (*Martes americana*), American Mink (*Neovison vison*), Gray Wolf (*Canis lupus*), foxes and weasels.

Despite the lack of precise population size data, significant and increasing declines in Lesser Yellowlegs populations are evident over the past several decades, and are projected to continue. It is estimated that there has been a 28.8 to 32.8 % decline in Ontario populations over the last three generations, and a decline of 20 to 60 % is projected to occur over the next three generations. Due to its migratory behaviour, Lesser Yellowlegs is exposed to both local and global threats. The most significant threat to the species is likely overharvesting on the wintering grounds. Lesser Yellowlegs are hunted for food, sport and trade in the Caribbean and South America. Although there have been efforts to introduce conservation and sustainable harvest measures in these areas, current estimated harvest rates still likely exceed sustainable levels. Habitat loss and degradation due to land use changes, pollution and impacts from climate change threaten the species throughout its range, and contribute to additional threats like changes in food availability and increased predation. Repeated human disturbance (e.g., beach use, boat traffic) at stopover sites in Ontario and on the non-breeding grounds can cause birds to abandon or avoid important foraging areas. Overgrazing by Canada Geese (*Branta canadensis*) and Snow Geese (*Anser caerulescens*) may alter breeding and/or stopover habitat, but the effects on Lesser Yellowlegs are not known.

Recent research and monitoring efforts have contributed to a better understanding of Lesser Yellowlegs' biology and behaviour, but many knowledge gaps remain. Additional research is needed to gain a better understanding of vital rates, habitat requirements, and scope and severity of threats in an Ontario-specific context to inform and effectively

target recovery approaches. Standardized monitoring is required to better understand the species' habitat use and abundance and population trends in order to focus protections and refine recovery objectives.

Lesser Yellowlegs is a migratory species that relies on habitat and experiences numerous threats outside the province. It is recognized that recovery will require collaboration and recovery efforts at a variety of scales. Maintaining important breeding, staging and stopover habitats within Ontario and supporting inter-jurisdictional efforts to protect and conserve shorebirds will be key to the global recovery of the species.

Government's Recovery Goal

The government's goal for the recovery of Lesser Yellowlegs is to achieve and maintain a stable, self-sustaining breeding subpopulation in Ontario.

Actions

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

Government-led Actions

To help protect and recover Lesser Yellowlegs, the government plans to undertake the following actions:

- Continue to protect Lesser Yellowlegs and its habitat through the ESA.
- Continue to collaborate with partners and other jurisdictions to fill knowledge gaps and implement conservation actions for subarctic shorebirds through initiatives such as the Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas, Ontario Shorebird Survey and James Bay Shorebird Project.
- Continue to hold spillers accountable through the enforcement of the *Environmental Protection Act* and implement the Ministry of the Environment and

Climate Change Emergency Response Plan (2017) as necessary to respond to environmental spills within Ontario.

- Undertake communications and outreach to increase public awareness of species at risk in Ontario (e.g., through Ontario Parks Discovery Program, where appropriate).

- Continue to monitor populations and mitigate threats to the species and its habitat in provincially protected areas, where feasible and appropriate.

- Educate other agencies and authorities involved in planning and environmental assessment processes on the protection requirements under the ESA.

- Encourage the submission of Lesser Yellowlegs data to Ontario's central repository through the NHIC (Rare species of Ontario) project in iNaturalist or directly through the Natural Heritage Information Centre.

- Continue to support conservation, agency, municipal and industry partners, and Indigenous communities and organizations to undertake activities to protect and recover Lesser Yellowlegs. Support will be provided where appropriate through funding, agreements, permits and/or advisory services.

- Work with all levels of government, communities and sectors to take action on climate change, and to report on progress in reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

- Conduct a review of progress toward the protection and recovery of Lesser Yellowlegs within 10 years of the publication of this document.

Government-supported Actions

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

Focus Area:	**Research and Monitoring**
Objective:	Address knowledge gaps related to Lesser Yellowlegs population trends, habitat, biology and threats.

It is necessary to gain a more thorough understanding of the factors influencing Lesser Yellowlegs in order to develop quantitative recovery targets and ensure that recovery efforts are effective. Standardized surveys will improve knowledge of the species' biology, population trends, demographic parameters, and habitat use during breeding, staging and migration. Identification of key habitat areas used by the species is essential to understanding threats and prioritizing recovery activities. Targeted research relating to threats across the species' range will improve our understanding of the causes of decline and how to best mitigate those threats. Where possible, these actions should be undertaken in collaboration with Indigenous communities and organizations and other conservation partners to promote inclusion of local knowledge and resources.

Actions:

1. **(High)** Implement standardized surveys or systematic application of established monitoring protocols to:
    i. determine current abundance and monitor population trends in Ontario, and, where necessary and appropriate, on wintering grounds of Ontario breeders
    ii. identify and describe Lesser Yellowlegs habitat used for breeding, staging and migratory stopovers in Ontario
    iii. assess whether habitat availability in Ontario is limited at known breeding, staging or stopover sites
    iv. monitor effectiveness of targeted recovery actions
2. Investigate the impacts of and potential mitigation measures for known and potential threats to Lesser Yellowlegs in breeding, staging and migration habitat within Ontario. Targeted areas of research may include:
    i. **(High)** climate change and severe weather
    ii. **(High)** habitat loss and degradation
    iii. human disturbance
    iv. problematic native species
3. Conduct research to improve knowledge of Lesser Yellowlegs biology and ecology, including:
    i. migration routes and timing

ii. site fidelity and home range size in breeding areas

iii. demographic parameters (e.g., nest success, juvenile survival, adult survival)

iv. minimum viable population size

Focus Area:	**Management**
Objective:	Maintain or improve Lesser Yellowlegs habitat and mitigate threats to Ontario breeders and migrants.

A significant portion of the global Lesser Yellowlegs population breeds in or migrates through Ontario. Although recovery efforts in Ontario alone may not be sufficient to recover the species, increasing habitat quality can help to maximize individual fitness, reproduction and survival, and managing local threats may reduce some population decline. A collaborative approach will be essential for ongoing management of the species, both locally and globally. Recovery efforts that benefit multiple species at risk should be considered whenever possible.

Actions:

4. **(High)** In collaboration with landowners, land managers, conservation organizations and Indigenous communities in Ontario:

   i. continue to update and implement existing conservation and/or management plans, such as the Ontario Shorebird Conservation Plan and the Bird Conservation Strategy for Bird Conservation Region 7 in Ontario

   ii. identify and mitigate site-specific threats to Lesser Yellowlegs in breeding, staging and stopover habitat in Ontario

   iii. restore or rehabilitate breeding, staging and stopover habitat in Ontario, where necessary and appropriate

5. Collaborate with partners and other jurisdictions on initiatives to conserve key habitats within and outside of Ontario, such as efforts being undertaken through the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network.

Focus Area:	**Awareness and Stewardship**
Objective:	Increase the level of public awareness of and engagement in protecting and recovering Lesser Yellowlegs throughout its global range.

As a migratory species, Lesser Yellowlegs uses habitat across North, Central and South America, and is subject to both local and global threats throughout its range. Accordingly, collaboration among jurisdictions to promote awareness of the species and its threats and engage in protection and stewardship activities is essential for recovery of the global population of Lesser Yellowlegs. When possible, information should be shared with other jurisdictions to enhance understanding of the species and coordinate efforts.

Actions:

6. Collaborate with other jurisdictions, organizations and communities, including Indigenous communities throughout the global range of Lesser Yellowlegs to:
    i. promote awareness of the species and its threats
    ii. promote use of legal and policy frameworks targeted toward sustainable hunting
    iii. research and mitigate the impacts of climate change on the species
    iv. encourage rapid response to spills and other discharges to surface water
    v. encourage consistent monitoring and data sharing

Implementing Actions

Financial support for the implementation of actions may be available through the Species at Risk Stewardship Program. Conservation partners are encouraged to discuss project proposals related to the actions in this response statement with Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks staff. The Ontario government can also provide guidance about the requirements of the ESA, whether an authorization or regulatory exemption may be required for the project and, if so, the authorization types and/or conditional exemptions for which the activity may be eligible. Implementation of the actions may be subject to changing priorities across the multitude of species at risk, available resources and the capacity of partners to undertake recovery activities. Where appropriate, the implementation of actions for multiple species will be co-ordinated across government response statements.

Performance Measures

Progress towards achieving the government's goal for the recovery of Lesser Yellowlegs will be measured against the following performance measures:

- The rate of Lesser Yellowlegs population decline is reduced by 2036 (within 3 generations).
- The number of mature individuals in the Ontario breeding subpopulation is stable by 2064 (within 10 generations).

Reviewing Progress

The ESA requires the Ontario government to conduct a review of progress towards protecting and recovering a species no later than the time specified in the species' government response statement, which has been identified as 10 years. The review will help identify if adjustments are needed to achieve the protection and recovery of Lesser Yellowlegs.

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank all those who participated in the development of the Recovery Strategy and Government Response Statement for the Lesser Yellowlegs (*Tringa flavipes*) in Ontario for their dedication to protecting and recovering species at risk.

For Additional Information:

Visit the species at risk website at ontario.ca/speciesatrisk
Contact the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks
1-800-565-4923
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www.ontario.ca/environment