

# History of Maryland's Wildlife Agency

Maryland's wildlife agency had its origins in 1896 when the State Game Department of Maryland was created by legislation passed by the General Assembly.

During the years between 1900 and 1914, the state appropriated \$2,600 annually for the maintenance of the State Game Department.

In 1908, Governor Austin Crothers appointed a three-member commission, called the Maryland Conservation Commission, to develop recommendations for the protection of wildlife. The commission provided their findings to the Governor on December 31, 1909. They recommended the creation of uniform game laws and sufficient funds to enforce those laws. At that time game laws varied county by county.

In 1912, uniform legislation was passed by the General Assembly regarding open and closed hunting seasons for all upland game birds, including bag limits.

In 1916, the Conservation Commission was created combining the State Fisheries Force and the State Game Department. The new commission was charged with the enforcement of the game and fish laws and the propagation of game.

The Conservation Commission was empowered by the legislature to appoint the state game warden, thus relieving the governor of this responsibility. The Commission's first appointment as director was E. Lee LeCompte, who served as State Game Warden until 1945.

In 1918, after only two years in office, LeCompte's administration was instrumental in enacting the first statewide hunting license law. State officials anticipated that the licensing requirements would generate approximately \$35,000 the first year, but it actually produced revenue of \$61,770.43.

The state's first wildlife refuge was opened in 1919 on a 290-acre tract on Gwynnbrook Avenue in Baltimore County for the purpose of breeding game in captivity for propagation purposes.

In 1922, Governor Albert Ritchie created a one-man commission called the State Conservation Department. Harrison Vickers was the first commissioner appointed under Governor Ritchie's "Conservation Reorganization Act" and upon the expiration of Vickers' term on June 1, 1924, Governor Ritchie appointed Swepson Earle as Conservation Commissioner.

In 1924, the *Maryland Conservationist* was first published by the Game Division of the Conservation Department. The *Maryland Conservationist* was a quarterly magazine with articles on hunting, fishing and wildlife management activities in Maryland and elsewhere. The magazine was published for almost 50 years. The last issue was published in the summer of 1981.

Hunting license sales in 1924 were 60,516 to Maryland residents and 1,791 to nonresidents.

The first regulated deer season was opened in 1927 in Allegany County, followed two years later in Garrett County where an estimated five bucks were killed there. In 1931, 20 deer were harvested in Garrett County and 11 were killed by hunters in Allegany County.

In 1928, the first public hunting area was opened on an area of 600 acres on the Washington and Allegany county border.

In 1934, a resident hunting license cost \$5.25 and a non-resident hunting license cost \$15.50. The daily bag limit was 25 ducks, 8 geese, 25 doves, 6 rabbits, 10 squirrels, 10 quail, 2 pheasant, 2 ruffed grouse and 1 wild turkey. One male deer with at least two points on one antler per season was allowed in Allegany, Garrett and Washington counties.

Another name change occurred in 1935, with the Conservation Department becoming the Conservation Commission.

In 1937, the Pittman-Robertson Act was passed by the U.S. Congress. It provided funding to state wildlife agencies for the conservation of birds and mammals. Funding came from an excise tax on guns and ammunition.

By 1938, the wildlife agency owned 10 game farms and refuges comprising 5,301 acres and leased another 34,959 acres of game refuges on 79 properties, mostly privately-owned.

The sale of 77,669 hunting licenses generated \$134,900 in 1938. A statewide license cost \$5.00, a county resident hunting license cost \$1.00 and a non-resident license cost \$15.00.

In 1938, thousands of bobwhite quail were raised at two game farms, including 6,918 at Gwynnbrook and the 5,730 at the Wicomico game farm.

In 1939, during the administration of Governor Herbert O'Connor, the Conservation Commission was divided to form the Game and Inland Fish Commission and the Tidewater Fisheries Commission.

On June 1, 1939 the Governor appointed five members to the commission. Garner Denmead from Baltimore City served as the first chairman of the commission. E. Lee LeCompte still served as the State Game Warden. LeCompte's staff consisted of a Chief Deputy Warden, four secretaries, 23 district deputy game wardens, three game breeders and eight fish hatchery employees.

The federal funding from the Pittman-Robertson Act was made available on July 1, 1939 to the Game and Inland Fish Commission in the amount of \$15,102 and was matched with \$5,034 of state hunting license funds. Some of those funds were used to purchase 1,200 acres in Washington County near Pectonville to demonstrate to the public what can be done in the restoration of wildlife where there is sufficient natural cover which produces natural food.

By 1940, there were four game farms in operation. In addition to the Gwynnbrook State Game Farm, there was one in Wicomico County, one in Montgomery County and one in Washington County. Deer, geese, ducks, pheasants, bobwhite quail and Chukar partridge were raised at Gwynnbrook. Only bobwhite quail were propagated at the Wicomico game farm. Ducks, quail and pheasant were raised at the Montgomery game farm, while wild turkeys were raised at the Washington County game farm.

The Board of Natural Resources was created in 1941 as an umbrella organization for all state conservation agencies. However, the Board of Natural Resources had little or no control over

the individual units like the Game and Inland Fish Commission and the Tidewater Fisheries Commission.

During the 1941 hunting season, 311 deer were harvested in five counties, namely Allegany, Carroll, Garrett, Washington and Worcester counties.

Millington Wildlife Demonstration Area was purchased in September 1942. The purchase price for this 561.5-acre area was \$2,807.50.

During the 1940s, the Game and Inland Fish Commission increased its force to 53 game wardens, which enforced the state's hunting and non-tidal fishing laws.

In September 1945, Ernest A. Vaughn was appointed the State Game Warden replacing E. Lee LeCompte who served as the director of the wildlife agency for 29 years.

By 1949, the beaver became naturally reestablished in eight streams in Garrett County and three streams in Allegany County from West Virginia.

In 1950, the cost of a non-resident hunting license was increased to \$20.00 by the Maryland General Assembly.

By 1950, there were 22 tracts of land owned by the Game and Inland Fish Commission totaling 21,645 acres. The largest was the Deal Island public shooting area, comprising 4,500 acres.

During the 1951 deer season, the total buck kill exceeded 1,000 for the first time during regulated deer hunting. A total of 1,182 bucks were harvested that year.

The first archery hunting season for deer was opened in 1951. That year only 6 deer were killed with long bows.

The first antlerless deer hunting season was opened in 1957 in Cecil, Somerset, Wicomico and Worcester counties. That year 46 antlerless deer were harvested.

During the 1961-62 waterfowl season, the bag limit for ducks was 2 per day. The season was closed for canvasbacks and redheads. The daily bag limit for Canada geese was 2 and for brant it was 10 per day.

In 1962, the first regulated trapping season for beaver was opened. After an absence of over 100 years, beaver started moving back into western Maryland in the 1920s. The trapping season was enabled by the population increase and eastern expansion. It was opened in Garrett County only on January 16, 1962 and closed on February 28, 1962. A total of 99 beavers were checked in that season.

Wild turkey reintroductions started in 1965 using lived-trapped wild birds from western Maryland. A one-week spring gobbler season was opened in 1970 in the three western counties.

In 1966, the number of deer harvested exceeded 10,000 for the first time since regulated hunting seasons were instituted. A total of 12,612 deer were harvested including 7,653 bucks and 4,959 antlerless deer.

The 1967 Maryland General Assembly increased fees for hunting licenses to \$6.00 for statewide licenses, \$2.50 for county resident hunting licenses and \$24.50 for nonresident licenses.

The number of statewide hunting licenses sold during the 1967-68 was 114, 490. In addition, 68,500 county resident hunting licenses and 8,369 nonresident hunting licenses were sold.

In 1967, squirrel hunting continued as the primary form of hunting in Maryland based on the hunter questionnaire survey, both from the standpoint of numbers of hunters and from standpoint of hunter effort. Rabbit hunting ranked second and deer hunting ranked third.

In 1969, the Game and Inland Fish Commission was incorporated into the newly created Department of Natural Resources and reported to the first Secretary of Natural Resources, J. Millard Tawes. The Department of Game and Inland Fish was created as part of the Department of Natural Resources. George B. Shields continued as the director and Ralph A. Bitely continued as chief of wildlife management.

In June 1970, the commission started publishing the "Maryland Fish and Wildlife News" as a monthly newsletter. It later became a quarterly newsletter. The last issue was published in the fall of 1997.

Maryland's first spring turkey season opened on May 4 and ended on May 9, 1970 in Garrett, Allegany and Washington counties. The bag limit was one bearded turkey per season and shooting hours were ½ hour before sunrise until 10:00 am.

In 1970, there were 20,000 hand-reared mallards released throughout the state. This was the fourth year of the release program.

Hunting license sales for the 1970-71 season totaled 193,864 of which 41,504 were county resident licenses, 119,677 were statewide licenses, 22,395 were junior hunting licenses and 22,395 were nonresident licenses.

The mid-December 1970 count of Canada geese was about 523,000 birds. This was the first time in the history of the waterfowl surveys that Canada geese exceeded a half million birds in Maryland.

In 1971, the state's first endangered species act was passed by the General Assembly. The new law prohibited the taking, transportation, possession, or sale of any wildlife appearing on the federal list of endangered species. The act also mandated the Department of Natural Resources to develop a list of fish and wildlife deemed to be threatened with statewide extinction in Maryland.

On July 1, 1971, a legislative act of the Maryland General Assembly created the Natural Resources Police by combining the Marine Police and the Wildlife Law Enforcement Division. Wildlife law enforcement duties became the responsibility of the Natural Resources Police.

In 1971, the state game farms were closed where ring-necked pheasants, bobwhite quail and other species were once raised.

In 1972, the duties of the Fish and Wildlife Administration were divided into the Wildlife Administration and the Fisheries Administration. Ralph Bitely was the director of the Wildlife Administration.

A permit system was initiated in 1972 to control the antlerless deer herd. The antlerless season was concurrent with the firearm season and held in all counties except Garrett, Allegany, Washington, Frederick and Carroll counties. The bag limit was one, with two allowed in Dorchester County. The number of permits issued differed by county and totaled 46,700.

In 1973, the Nongame and Endangered Species Act was passed by the Maryland General Assembly. This act expanded the protections afforded by the original state endangered species act by authorizing the Department to create and fund a full-time staff position to investigate and manage nongame wildlife and endangered species. The new law also established a consultation process with other state agencies to ensure their actions did not jeopardize the continued existence of endangered species in Maryland.

In 1975, the fees for hunting licenses were increased by the Maryland General Assembly. The new fees were \$8.00 for residents over 16 and under 65 years of age, \$1.25 for senior residents, \$30.50 for nonresidents and \$5.00 for nonresidents under 16 years of age.

The spring season for wild turkeys was expanded in 1975 to two weeks and was opened for the first time in Dorchester, Frederick, Harford and Montgomery counties.

By 1975, there were 36 wildlife management areas totaling over 67,500 acres.

In 1977, the Maryland General Assembly passed a law that required first time hunters to complete a hunter safety education course before purchasing a hunting license. Anyone who hunted prior to 1977 was exempt from this requirement.

Hunting deer with a muzzleloader was allowed in 1978 when the first muzzleloader hunting season was opened.

In October 1983, the Wildlife Administration was merged with the Forest and Park Service to become the Forest, Park and Wildlife Service. Donald MacLauchlan was appointed as the director. He had been in charge of the Forest and Park Service prior to the merger. Bernard "Bud" Halla continued as the head of the wildlife division.

Program Open Space funds became available to the Department of Natural Resources in 1969 to purchase land for conservation. This fund became the primary source of funding for purchasing additional acres of Wildlife Management Areas.

The first coyote in Maryland was reported from Harford County in 1985.

In 1988, a significant funding mechanism for nongame and endangered species was established through the enactment of tax checkoff legislation. After eight years of attempts to pass a tax checkoff for nongame and endangered species, the Maryland General Assembly created the Chesapeake Bay and Endangered Species Fund. Half of the annual donations by taxpayers to this fund went to DNR.

The spring turkey harvest exceeded 1,000 birds for the first time in 1988 when 1,018 bearded turkeys were taken.

In 1992, the wildlife agency was moved into the Fish, Heritage and Wildlife Administration along with the fisheries agency and the Natural Heritage Program. Dr. Robert Bachman was named the director. He had been the director of the fisheries agency. Joshua Sandt was the director of the Wildlife Division.

In 1993, a resident Canada goose season was opened for the first time in September.

In 1995, the wildlife and natural heritage sections of the Fish, Heritage and Wildlife Administration were separated from the fisheries section and combined with the Forest Service to become the Forest, Wildlife and Heritage Service. Eric Schwaab was appointed the director of the newly combined agency. Joshua Sandt was replaced in 1996 by Michael Slattery as the director of the Wildlife and Heritage Division.

In 1995, a moratorium on the hunting of migratory Canada geese was implemented in Maryland to curtail the drastic decline in the wintering population. This moratorium was later lifted beginning with the 2001-2002 hunting season.

In 2001, the Wildlife and Heritage Service was separated from the Forest Service. Paul Peditto was appointed as the director of the Wildlife and Heritage Service.

State Wildlife Grants funding became available to state wildlife agencies in 2001 to help conserve fish and wildlife species of conservation concern. These federal funds were appropriated by the U.S. Congress annually and provided to the states by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Maryland received \$634,704 the first year these funds were provided.

On October 24, 2004 the first bear hunting season was opened in over 51 years. A lottery system was instituted with 2,272 hunters applying for 200 permits. That year 20 black bears were harvested.

During the 2008-09 hunting season, the number of deer harvested exceeded 100,000 for the first time in Maryland. Of the 100,437 deer killed, white-tailed deer totaled 98,258 and sika deer harvested were 2,179. The harvest was comprised of 34,725 antlered deer and 65,712 antlerless deer.

In 2010, a hunter recruitment and retention program was initiated to increase the number of new hunters entering the sport, reduce the number of hunters leaving the sport and encourage inactive hunters to become active participants once again. The program was funded by federal Pittman-Robertson funds.

The federally-listed endangered Delmarva fox squirrel was removed from the federal list of endangered species on December 16, 2015. When listed in 1967, this species only occurred in four counties on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. Maryland's wildlife agency played a major role in this endangered species' recovery.

During the 2018-19 hunting season, there were 107,440 full season hunting licenses sold. Of those, residents purchased 88,745 hunting licenses and nonresidents purchased 18,695 licenses. An additional 8,598 nonresident 3-day hunting licenses were sold for waterfowl hunting.

At the 50<sup>th</sup> year anniversary of the Department of Natural Resources in 2019, the Wildlife and Heritage Service had 84 permanent employees including wildlife biologists, technicians and administrative staff. The wildlife agency consisted of four programs, namely game management,

regional operations, natural heritage program and administration. The agency managed 64 wildlife management areas totaling 126,609 acres. The Wildlife and Heritage Service spent \$10,484,364 in support of the agency.