

# The First 10

These high-priority species will be fast-tracked for protection using new regulations that will set the provincial standard for endangered wildlife conservation

By Tim Tiner

In May 2007, Ontario Nature's efforts, made in concert with other conservation groups as part of the Save Ontario's Species coalition, were rewarded by a hard-won piece of legislation: a new Endangered Species Act (ESA). The new act promises to create special habitat protection regulations for a vanguard of plants and animals by next June. Going beyond current safeguards, the new regulations will be tailored to the specific needs of each species and precisely define important habitat, in some cases mapping it out.

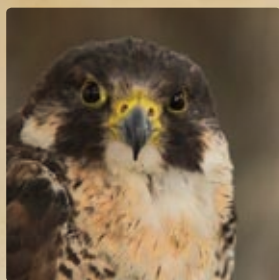
Shortly before enacting the ESA, the provincial government announced a list of the first 10 species for which habitat regulations will be created within a year of the act coming into force on June 30, 2008. "We found 10 species with a high level of threat facing them," says Minister of Natural Resources Donna Cansfield of the wildlife listed

for fast-tracked protection. "We tried to have species represented in both northern and southern Ontario and have a balance of plants, mammals, birds, reptiles and amphibians."

The flora and fauna on the list have been subject to a large body of studies that Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR) staff hope to translate into regulations, which will serve as a template for the remaining 118 species designated as endangered or threatened. Ministry staff are working to complete or revise recovery strategies – mandatory under the ESA for all threatened and endangered species – for each of the fast-tracked species, which should be published on the province's Species at Risk website by the June 2009 deadline.

Listed here are the chosen few: 10 plants, birds, mammals and herpetiles selected for fast-tracked protection.

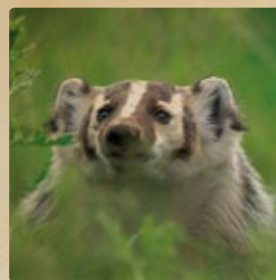
## Peregrine falcon



Ravaged by the effects of DDT in the 1950s and 1960s, the peregrine falcon has by all accounts made a spectacular comeback. After reintroduction efforts began in 1977 – ending in 2006 – the famed raptor nested in Ontario for the first time in more than 20 years, in 1986. Now there are nearly 80 occupied territories in Ontario, the

largest number on cliffs around Lake Superior. But despite the release of more than 500 peregrines over three decades, the birds are still listed as threatened provincially and a species of concern federally. Biologists have been developing a new recovery strategy, and MNR staff are eager to write a habitat protection regulation to safeguard the gains this high-profile species has made. Concerns about this species include continued pesticide use on its wintering grounds in Latin America, human disturbance of nesting sites and capture of peregrines for use in falconry.

## American badger



Biologists estimate that as many as 200 badgers live in Ontario in open, grassy areas primarily near the north shore of Lake Erie. Largely nocturnal and subterranean, badgers dig burrows up to 10 metres long and prey on ground-hogs, rabbits and other small mammals by digging into their dens. With home ranges

that can cover many square kilometres, the habitat of this species is highly fragmented by roads and many are killed by cars and farm operations.

Shortly after the badger was listed as endangered in Ontario in 2000, the government began monitoring the population and soliciting reports of sightings from the public. A recovery team was formed in 2003 and a year later sent MNR a draft recovery strategy, which is expected to receive final approval by the end of 2008. Habitat stewardship by landowners and managers is considered key to preservation efforts.

### Jefferson salamander



Jefferson salamanders persist only in mature hardwood forests with undisturbed leaf litter and pristine breeding ponds. Not discovered in Ontario until 1976, the long, slender amphibian lives mostly under rocks and logs, scattered in about 30 small, isolated populations, mostly in private woodlots in Haldimand, Halton

and the urban shadows of Hamilton, Guelph and Kitchener-Waterloo. Despite being under pressure from urban expansion, the salamander had no habitat protection under the province's old ESA because the species is considered threatened, rather than endangered. The habitat regulation under the new legislation should spell out the specific site characteristics and the size of the areas the salamander needs to survive. A draft recovery strategy for the species was sent to MNR in 2003.

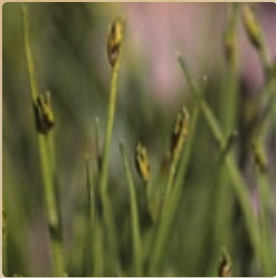
### Eastern prairie fringed-orchid



In addition to being endangered in Ontario and Canada, the eastern prairie fringed-orchid is considered globally imperilled and is listed as threatened in the United States. The province has about one-quarter of the global population, with a maximum of a little more than 1,000 plants. Blooming in a bright bouquet of 10 to 40 frilly white

flowers in late June and July, the rare orchid is found in about 20 fens, wet pockets of remnant prairie and old fields scattered across southern and eastern Ontario. The species has disappeared from another 14 sites, while some of the larger populations at remaining sites have decreased by 60 to more than 80 percent over the past 25 years. Encroachment by agriculture, alteration of the water table, competition from invasive species and habitat succession have all taken their toll. A draft recovery strategy sent to the MNR for review in 2004 has not been finalized.

### Few-flowered club-rush

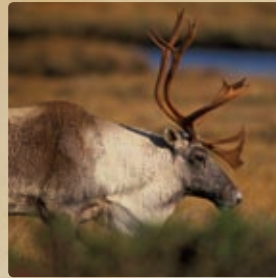


Hamilton's Cootes Paradise Nature Sanctuary is the only place in Canada where few-flowered club-rush definitely persists, marking the northern limit of its range. Another dwindling population in Toronto's Rouge Park has not been found at all in recent surveys. First discovered in Ontario in 1955, the plant, also known

as bashful bulrush, is a sedge that grows in small clumps within gaps in mixed oak forests on steep slopes. Its inconspicuous flowers open in early spring, and its short leaves become matted on the forest floor by the time the plant releases its seeds in summer.

The club-rush is designated as endangered in Ontario and nationally, and is thought to be most threatened by forest succession due to fire suppression and disturbance by trails. A recovery strategy approved in 2007 suggests that prescribed burns or shrub removal could aid the species but calls for more extensive research and monitoring.

### Woodland caribou

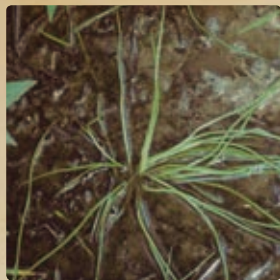


Threatened nationally as well as provincially, woodland caribou appear to be declining by about 11 percent annually in Ontario's boreal forest (see "Last of the caribou" on page 18). They vanish wherever logging operations occur within a dozen kilometres of their range.

In August 2008, MNR released a woodland caribou recovery strategy, written by a team of biologists mainly from government agencies and academia. The strategy is the first completed in accord with the new ESA for any of the 10 fast-tracked species. A caribou herd needs, on average, 12,000 square kilometres of undisturbed habitat; the strategy calls for management plans for the entire range covered by each population. It also recommends more large parks and protected areas and an approach to land-use planning that considers the cumulative effects of all development and resource removal in caribou habitat, as well as the possible reintroduction of caribou.

The ESA requires the government to develop a response statement to recovery strategies within nine months of receiving them. MNR is preparing a caribou conservation plan, with additional input from the public and from an independent science panel.

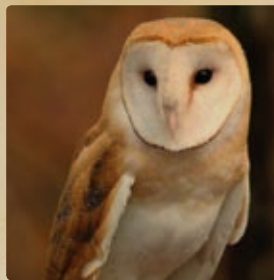
### Engelmann's quillwort



Engelmann's quillwort, an aquatic fern, grows in clusters of limp, spiky leaves in riverside shallows and mud flats. Widespread in the eastern United States, the species was first found in Ontario in 1988 and today grows in only two places – sections along the lower Severn River near Georgian Bay and the Gull River in Haliburton,

both provincially designated Areas of Natural and Scientific Interest. Boat traffic, worsening water quality, growing numbers of zebra mussels and removal by plant collectors have afflicted the quillwort in some locales. It is listed as endangered nationally and provincially. A recovery strategy calling for more research, monitoring and management guidelines, approved in 2007, is being revised to meet the requirements of the new ESA to describe important habitat more specifically.

### Barn owl

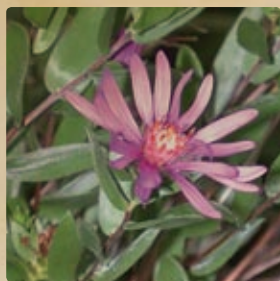


Only three breeding pairs of barn owls have been confirmed in Ontario in the past 25 years, all close to the shores of Lake Erie. At the northern limit of their range in southern Ontario, the ghost-faced owls are designated as endangered provincially and nationally. They commonly occupy barns, silos, steeples and abandoned buildings, but

are so stealthy and quiet that they are extremely difficult to detect. Five to 10 pairs are estimated to nest in far southern Ontario, though there is little certainty about population numbers or whether they are fluctuating. Of the 10 definite and eight highly probable barn owl sightings reported between 1999 and 2005 during fieldwork for the *Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Ontario*, five were road fatalities.

The non-migratory owls, which hunt for mice and voles in meadows, pastures, hayfields and marshes, are probably under the same pressure from development and agricultural intensification that is driving the decline of other grassland birds. The Ontario Barn Owl Recovery Project, begun in Haldimand-Norfolk counties in 1997, formed the basis for the official team that submitted a draft recovery strategy for the owls to an MNR Species at Risk Unit review in 2004. Under the ESA, the ministry is required to release a final version of the strategy by the end of 2008.

### Western silvery aster

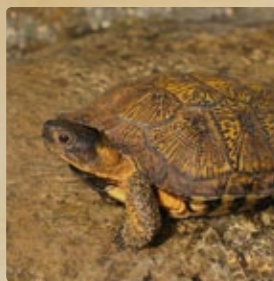


Endangered provincially and threatened nationally, the range of the western silvery aster just barely reaches into Ontario along the southeast shore of Lake of the Woods and on an island in the same sprawling lake. This plant, which is named for the dense, silky, silvery hairs that cover its leaves, grows in patches of

prairie and oak savannah and blooms with yellow-centred pink to light purple flowers in August and September.

The aster has failed to turn up at two other sites in north-western Ontario where it grew previously. The remaining plants could be vulnerable to cottage and recreational development. While its habitat was protected under the old ESA, a draft recovery strategy for this species, submitted to MNR in 2007, is being used to prescribe more detailed site protection.

### Wood turtle



Moving along rivers and creeks in home ranges often covering more than five hectares, tortoise-like wood turtles spend almost half their time on land in the summer, foraging for berries, leaves, flowers and worms. Their wandering ways make them particularly vulnerable to illegal collection for sale as pets, as well as to road

mortality. The wood turtle range has contracted to a few isolated refuges in southern Ontario, central Ontario and north of Lake Huron, and parts of eastern Ontario north of Pembroke. Its population is estimated at between 1,000 and 1,600 adults. A recovery team is still working on a strategy for the turtle, which is listed as endangered provincially and a species of special concern nationally.