Habitat Stewardship Program Application Rubric

Overview

The Birds Georgia Habitat Stewardship Program is a new conservation program geared toward large land holdings and the people who own or manage them. It is designed to enable property owners and stewards to make improvements to their land for the benefit of native wildlife while also connecting them to educational resources, technical assistance programs, cost-sharing and revenue-generating programs, engagement and research opportunities, and perks associated with a Birds Georgia membership such as early access and program discounts. Eligible applicants include any landowners/stewards who are already managing wildlife-friendly lands or are actively making improvements to their lands for wildlife. Once required criteria are met, the applicant is eligible to receive a 'Birds Georgia Habitat Steward' designation plaque. Please note this program is specific to entities in Georgia. Please contact Conservation@BirdsGeorgia.org with any questions.

Enrollment

Applications can be submitted at any time and must be submitted online. The application fee for private landowners is $150 and for public greenspaces, parks, and refuges is $250. This is a one-time fee. Applications will be reviewed as they are received. If you wish to un-enroll from the program, you may do so at any time by contacting the Stewardship Coordinator. If your property already meets many of the criteria listed, you are eligible to receive a Birds Georgia Habitat Steward sign. If your property will be in-progress for many of the criteria listed, we will evaluate your annual monitoring report (see below).

Monitoring

Annual monitoring reports are required to document progress or delays and develop a plan for the upcoming year with the Stewardship Coordinator. There are no additional fees required for submitting monitoring reports. These will be completed via an online portal that includes spaces to attach photos or appropriate documents for the specific criteria selected in the initial application and additional criteria if appropriate. The reports will be reviewed by the Stewardship Coordinator and a follow-up virtual consultation can be scheduled if desired. The monitoring report should be completed as close to the enrollment anniversary as possible. An automated reminder email will be sent prior to the due date.

Rubric

Categories and Subcategories – Each property needs to adhere to category sections 1 (Habitat) and 2 (Community Engagement and Education) for a successful application. Category 3 (Research and Monitoring) is optional. Subcategories fall under the categories.

1. Habitat
    a. Certification and Planning

    b. Best Management Practices
    c. Land Management Pledges
2. Community Engagement and Education
    a. Activities Specific to Public Lands
    b. Activities Specific to Private Lands
3. Research and Monitoring (Optional)
    a. Invasive Species Reporting
    b. Rare Species Reporting
    c. Ecological Research

Type – Classifies the type of property based on size and ownership.

- Type 1: Homesteads and small working lands (10-200 acres)
- Type 2: Large private working lands (200+ acres)
- Type 3: Public greenspaces and parks (city or county) and privately owned lands open to the public
- Type 4: State Parks, National Parks, National Wildlife Refuges

Criteria – These are the **numbered** items under each subcategory. For private lands (Types 1 and 2 above), a minimum of nine criteria must be met under categories 1 and 2. For public lands (Types 2 and 3), eleven criteria must be met under categories 1 and 2. The specific number of criteria per category is listed directly under the heading. Criteria can be met if they are already being applied, or if there is a plan in place to apply them (e.g., if you are not already implementing prescribed fire, but plan to start burning this year, you may select prescribed fire as a criterion under Habitat: Best Management Practices). Documentation of criteria is required, and updates will be required in the annual monitoring reports.

Category 1: Habitat

1A. Certification and Planning: At least **one** criterion required (any Type).

1. All, or a portion of the land is under a conservation easement or covenant with a land trust.
2. A Land Management Plan to improve wildlife habitat has been developed.
3. Collaborates with conservation organizations on land management projects.
4. Enrolled in a recognized carbon market.
5. Holds certifications or enrolled in programs from a conservation non-profit or government entity (e.g., Georgia Department of Natural Resources Private Lands Program Initiatives, Georgia Wildlife Federation's Private Lands Stewardship Program, United States Fish and Wildlife's Habitat Conservation Plan, Forest City Certification, Sustainable Forestry Initiative etc.)

1B. Best Management Practices: At least **five** criteria required (any Type). Please note that the appropriate size or amount planted for numbers 3-16 will be negotiated upon consultation with the Stewardship Coordinator or another Birds Georgia representative.

1. Implements a non-native invasive species removal plan.
2. Implements a feral hog removal plan.
3. Installs/maintains native pollinator meadows/gardens.
4. Plants native tree species.

5. Plants native grasses, forbs, shrubs.
6. Maintains streamside management zones comprised of natural communities next to bodies of water.
7. Management and/or removal of outdoor or feral cat populations.
8. Uses prescribed fire on an appropriate return interval to improve and maintain habitat.
9. Implements wildlife friendly best management practices for timber production.
10. Restores disturbed groundcover.
11. Removes fencing types that can impede wildlife movement.
12. Installs/maintains bird nest boxes (density will depend on acreage and habitat type).
13. Installs/maintains bat boxes (density will depend on acreage and habitat type).
14. Retains or creates snags (dead standing trees).
15. Retains or manages wetland habitat.
16. Maintains brush piles (mounds of woody debris and leaf litter stacked together) for wildlife.
17. Other habitat practices may be approved upon review.

1C. Land Management Pledges - At least **one** criterion required (any Type).

1. No insecticide usage (exceptions are made for targeted application to treat invasive fire ants, pine beetles, or other non-native invasive pests).
2. No cutting streambank trees with exceptions made for trees posing significant life or property risks.
3. No purposeful planting of Category 1-4 non-native invasive species listed by the Georgia Invasive Species Council.
4. No developing or negatively disturbing special natural areas (SNAs). SNAs are areas of the property that contain exceptional natural resources and are therefore designated for special management. Designation is afforded to habitats and natural communities that (1) possess high-quality resources, (2) exhibit exceptional biological diversity, (3) possess intact community organization, (4) exhibit exemplary species composition, and/or (5) have maintained their functional and structural ecological integrity.

Category 2: Citizen Science and Community Engagement/Education

2A. Private Lands – At least **two** criteria required (Types 1 and 2).

1. Participates in the Birds Georgia's Private Lands Birding Trail by offering their property as a designated birding site. Please contact the Stewardship Coordinator for questions on participation.
2. Engages with one of the listed citizen science programs (other programs allowed pending approval). Some programs can be hosted, if desired.
    a. Audubon Climate Watch
    b. Christmas Bird Count
    c. The Great Southeast Pollinator Census
    d. City Nature Challenge
    e. Atlanta Firefly Project
    f. Caterpillars Count

g. D-Bird
h. Globe at Night
i. Great Backyard Bird Count
j. Hummingbirds at Home
k. Swift Night Out

3. Hosts guided field trips for schools, community organizations, etc., that foster environmental stewardship.
4. Provides educational event sponsorships, educational seminars/workshops, etc.
5. Supports local Audubon chapter through donations, volunteering, and/or hosting field trips.

2B. Public Lands - At least **four** criteria required (Types 3 and 4).

1. Submits public land as an eBird hotspot, if it is not already one, and use this data to inform conservation plans, educational walks, and interpretive signage.
2. Provides education of native and invasive plants in public greenspaces through use of well-maintained trail signs, interpretive signs, trail guides, etc.
3. Provides bird/birding education and bird ecology information in public greenspaces through the use of well-maintained trail signs, bird blinds, trail guides, binocular loan out programs, observation decks, etc.
4. Hosts guided field trips available to the public (schools and other organizations) that promote appreciation of native plant and bird species and fosters environmental stewardship.
5. Creates and share educational material on a website, in community newsletters, or on social media platforms that promotes awareness of habitat stewardship principles.
6. Works with traditionally underserved communities through programs that prioritize engagement with greenspaces and ecological education.
7. Hosts community native seed and plant exchanges.
8. Engages the community in at least one responsibly conducted citizen science program:
    i. Audubon Climate Watch
    ii. Christmas Bird Count
    iii. The Great Southeast Pollinator Census
    iv. City Nature Challenge
    v. Atlanta Firefly Project
    vi. Caterpillars Count
    vii. D-Bird
    viii. Globe at Night
    ix. Great Backyard Bird Count
    x. Hummingbirds at Home
    xi. Swift Night Out
9. Implements 1-3 highly visible community volunteer habitat events per year (e.g., removing invasive species, installing nest boxes, installing interpretive signs, etc.).
10. Implements a series of 1-3 highly visible community native planting events that engage volunteers to restore native habitat on public properties.
11. Hosts an annual conservation event such as World Migratory Bird Day, Georgia Native Plants Month, Earth Day, etc.

Category 3: Research and Monitoring (Optional)

3A. Invasive Species Reporting

1. Reports invasive species with GA-EPPC (Georgia Exotic Pest Plant Council).

3B. Rare Species Reporting

1. Submit rare species data to the Georgia Department of Natural Resources Georgia Rare Species & Natural Community Data Program.

3C. Ecological Research

1. Participates in ecological research/monitoring in collaboration with a professional lab (e.g., university, agency, non-agency, non-governmental organization).