

Appendix K. NHESP Data Acceptance Guidelines

Guidelines for the Acceptance and Inclusion of Observation Records into the Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program Database

Pursuant to the Massachusetts Endangered Species Act (MESA) regulations, specifically 321 CMR 10:12 (5), the Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program (NHESP) evaluates all observation records in Massachusetts of rare plant and animal species listed under MESA to determine their validity and whether they should be accepted into the Program's database. Rare species reports received by the NHESP come from a variety of sources. Reports are submitted by NHESP staff, other Division of Fisheries & Wildlife personnel, professional biologists, experienced field naturalists and, for certain easily-identified species, from members of the general public. The NHESP generally requests that information be submitted on a Rare Animal or Rare Plant Observation Form with a valid signature, although other data formats may sometimes be acceptable (e.g. technical reports; published scientific literature). The following criteria are used by the NHESP in evaluating reports, although not all are required for record acceptance:

1. Qualifications and credibility of the observer. How much training or experience does the observer have in identifying rare species? This criterion is a major consideration in evaluation of rare species reports;
2. Documentation obtained and submitted in support of the observation; thorough and complete observation report including but not limited to well documented location of sighting; clear photographs and or voucher specimens as appropriate;
3. Ease of species identification. How distinctive is the species? Can it be confused with other species;
4. Appropriateness of the habitat for that species. Are the observations in a type of habitat that is normally utilized by the species in question;
5. Known range of the species in Massachusetts, including its historical distribution; and
6. Phenology. Does the observation date coincide with a time of year when the species is present or conspicuous because of breeding activity, migration, flowering period, etc.

Each submitted report is reviewed on a case-by-case basis considering the criteria listed above. Based on these criteria, reports are either rejected or accepted and incorporated into the NHESP database for use in the Program's biological conservation work. When possible, staff biologists will go into the field to verify insufficiently documented but likely reports. If a field visit is not possible and there is any uncertainty about the accuracy or precision of the report, then the observation is not incorporated into the NHESP's occurrence database. When updating and revising Priority Habitat boundaries, NHESP staff undertake further evaluation of each database record for its suitability for inclusion within Priority Habitat (pursuant to 321 CMR 10:12), for example, to exclude records older than 25 years and exclude certain records where it is determined that the local population has a low probability of persistence.

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