

DRAFT Government Response Statement  
to the  
Recovery Strategy for the Yellow-breasted Chat in Ontario

---

1 **Yellow-breasted Chat**

2 **Ontario Government Response Statement**

---

3 **Protecting and Recovering Species at Risk in Ontario**

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

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

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

23 The [Recovery Strategy for the Yellow-breasted Chat \(\*Icteria virens\*\) in Ontario](#) was  
24 completed on April 28, 2020.

25 Yellow-breasted Chat is a large songbird with a bright yellow chest and an olive-green  
26 back. They are often found in early-successional shrublands with open canopies.  
27 Although this species was once believed to be a wood-warbler, it is now thought to be  
28 the only member of the family Icteriidae.

29 **Protecting and Recovering Yellow-breasted Chat**

30 Yellow-breasted Chat is listed as an endangered species under the ESA, which protects  
31 both the animal and its habitat. The ESA prohibits harm or harassment of the species

DRAFT Government Response Statement  
to the  
Recovery Strategy for the Yellow-breasted Chat in Ontario

---

32 and damage or destruction of its habitat without authorization. Such authorization would  
33 require that conditions established by the Ontario government be met.

34 The global range of the Yellow-breasted Chat is restricted to North and Central  
35 America, with the most common observations occurring between Panama and the  
36 southern border of Canada. This species typically overwinters in Mexico and Central  
37 America, migrating north to spend the summers from the eastern Great Plains and  
38 central Texas eastward and north to southwestern Ontario. Records suggest that prior  
39 to European settlement, this species was likely not common at the current northern  
40 edge of its range. Logging activities and the abandonment of farmland in the 1900s  
41 allowed this species to expand into new areas with early successional habitat  
42 throughout its range. However, since that time, there has been some range contraction  
43 as many of the shrubland habitats were left to succeed into forests.

44 In Canada, the species' breeding distribution is restricted to a small area of  
45 southwestern Ontario, although there are historical records suggesting they once may  
46 have bred in some areas of Québec. Occasional occurrences in Nova Scotia and New  
47 Brunswick have also been reported; however, these are believed to be unpaired males.  
48 In Ontario, Yellow-breasted Chat has been found on Pelee Island and in Point Pelee  
49 National Park on the north shore of Lake Erie, although records suggest that there have  
50 never been large numbers present in these areas. These two locations are considered  
51 to contain the only core breeding populations in Canada, and historical records suggest  
52 that although individuals have been occasionally documented elsewhere in the  
53 province, the species has never established annual populations in other areas.

54  
55 Yellow-breasted Chat is a migratory species, arriving in Ontario in early May to lay a  
56 single brood of eggs. The species only remains in the area until early to mid-August, at  
57 which point they begin their migration southward.

58 Yellow-breasted Chat is typically found in open-canopy habitats dominated by shrubs or  
59 early-successional forests. Areas in the early stages of re-growth, such as clear-cuts,  
60 abandoned agricultural fields, and forest edges and openings, are preferred by this  
61 species as they offer optimal foraging and nesting habitats. Yellow-breasted Chat  
62 commonly nests in the branches of densely clustered shrubs, most often in areas where  
63 there is a mix of woody and herbaceous vegetation.

64 The preference of Yellow-breasted Chat for early-successional shrublands means a  
65 reliance on regular disturbances in habitat areas to keep conditions suitable.  
66 Historically, intermittent fires, insect infestations and major storm events helped ensure  
67 the regular creation of open areas that would naturally transition into the shrubland this

DRAFT Government Response Statement  
to the  
Recovery Strategy for the Yellow-breasted Chat in Ontario

---

68 species prefers. Following European settlement in North America, Yellow-breasted Chat  
69 has been documented using early shrubby re-growth which is a product of activities  
70 such as forestry practices, right-of-way maintenance, and low-intensity agricultural  
71 practices.

72 The most significant threat to Yellow-breasted Chat is the suppression of natural  
73 disturbances in the areas where they are found, and the resulting decrease in suitable  
74 habitat. Although all of the areas where Yellow-breasted Chat are known to currently  
75 nest in Ontario are located within protected or conservation lands, it is rare for cleared  
76 areas to be maintained as early-successional habitat as they are often allowed to grow  
77 into mature forest. The prevention and suppression of wildfires to protect human life and  
78 property minimizes the creation of cleared forest areas, and the maintenance or  
79 creation of shrubland habitat is not often a conservation priority for rehabilitation  
80 projects.

81 Additional threats that may affect Yellow-breasted Chat include the presence of invasive  
82 species and problematic native species. Little research has been completed to examine  
83 predation rates by domestic cats or the introduced Eastern Fox Squirrel (*Sciurus niger*),  
84 but both are common on Pelee Island and may consume Yellow-breasted Chat or their  
85 eggs. Additionally, the establishment of invasive shrubs, such as European Buckthorn  
86 (*Rhamnus cathartica*) may decrease habitat quality and available food sources by out-  
87 competing native shrubs. The Brown-headed Cowbird (*Molothrus ater*) is a native  
88 species that lays its eggs in the nests of other birds, including Yellow-breasted Chat,  
89 occasionally removing the eggs already inside. The host bird then raises the hatched  
90 Brown-headed Cowbirds which compete for space and food with any of the host bird's  
91 young that survive. Studies have shown this is very common with Yellow-breasted Chat  
92 nests although it is unknown how significant a threat this poses to the species' survival.  
93 Predation by other native species, such as Eastern Chipmunks (*Tamias striatus*), Blue  
94 Jays (*Cyanocitta cristata*), American Crows (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*), and Raccoons  
95 (*Procyon lotor*), may also pose a threat to the species' survival.

96 The alteration of suitable shrubland habitat for housing developments or the conversion  
97 of these areas to active agriculture has historically posed a threat to this species.  
98 However, due to the limited distribution of Yellow-breasted Chat and the fact that the  
99 vast majority of identified habitat appears to be located on lands managed by Parks  
100 Canada, a conservation authority, and non-profit land conservancies, this threat is  
101 currently minimal. Climate change may also threaten the survival of this species through  
102 habitat shifts and changes in growing conditions, but it is unknown how significant the  
103 effects may be.

DRAFT Government Response Statement  
to the  
Recovery Strategy for the Yellow-breasted Chat in Ontario

---

104 Maintaining a persistent population of Yellow-breasted Chat in Ontario will require  
105 continued appropriate maintenance of the habitat areas the species uses for breeding  
106 and foraging. It is important to acknowledge that range retraction in the U.S and  
107 declines in adjacent states may mean that despite best efforts in Ontario to create and  
108 maintain habitat, it may not be possible to establish large numbers of the species in  
109 Ontario or they may actually decline despite best efforts. Developing appropriate  
110 management techniques that also account for other species in the area and ongoing  
111 land uses will be a key component of successful recovery efforts. Monitoring and  
112 research is also needed to track habitat use by Yellow-breasted Chat and improve  
113 understanding of ongoing threats.

114 **Government's Recovery Goal**

115 The government's goal for the recovery of Yellow-breasted Chat is to support the  
116 persistence of this species in Ontario by minimizing threats and improving habitat  
117 conditions.

118 **Actions**

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

126 **Government-led Actions**

127 To help protect and recover Yellow-breasted Chat, the government will directly  
128 undertake the following actions:

- 129
- Continue to protect Yellow-breasted Chat and its habitat through the ESA.
  - 130 • Undertake communications and outreach to increase public awareness of  
131 species at risk in Ontario.
  - 132 • Educate other agencies and authorities involved in planning and environmental  
133 assessment processes on the protection requirements under the ESA.

DRAFT Government Response Statement  
to the  
Recovery Strategy for the Yellow-breasted Chat in Ontario

---

- 134 • Encourage the submission of Yellow-breasted Chat data to the Ontario’s central  
135 repository (Natural Heritage Information Centre, NHIC) through the [NHIC \(Rare  
136 species of Ontario\) project in iNaturalist](#) or directly through the [NHIC](#).
- 137 • Continue to support conservation, agency, municipal and industry partners, and  
138 Indigenous communities and organizations to undertake activities to protect and  
139 recover Yellow-breasted Chat. Support will be provided where appropriate  
140 through funding, agreements, permits (including conditions) and/or advisory  
141 services.
- 142 • Continue to implement the *Ontario Invasive Species Strategic Plan (2012)* to  
143 address the invasive species (e.g. European Buckthorn) that threaten Yellow-  
144 breasted Chat.
- 145 • Conduct a review of progress toward the protection and recovery of Yellow-  
146 breasted Chat within five years of the publication of this document.

147 **Government-supported Actions**

148 The government endorses the following actions as being necessary for the protection  
149 and recovery of Yellow-breasted Chat. Actions identified as “high” may be given priority  
150 consideration for funding under the Species at Risk Stewardship Program. Where  
151 reasonable, the government will also consider the priority assigned to these actions  
152 when reviewing and issuing authorizations under the ESA. Other organizations are  
153 encouraged to consider these priorities when developing projects or mitigation plans  
154 related to species at risk.

155 <b>Focus Area:</b>	<b>Management and Habitat Protection</b>
156 Objective:	Maintain or improve the quality of habitat available for Yellow- 157 breasted Chat, and where feasible and appropriate, undertake 158 habitat restoration activities.

159 The specific habitat requirements of Yellow-breasted Chat rely on the maintenance of  
160 sufficiently sized patches of land at a particular stage of succession. The suppression of  
161 fire and lack of natural disturbances and forest clearings in the area of distribution of this  
162 species in Ontario requires that alternative methods of creating or maintaining early-  
163 successional shrubland be implemented to promote the recovery of this species. A  
164 collaborative approach is needed to effectively implement broadscale measures to  
165 manage existing areas occupied by the species, to plan for the long-term continued  
166 provision of habitat, to restore sites where appropriate, and to effectively manage

DRAFT Government Response Statement  
to the  
Recovery Strategy for the Yellow-breasted Chat in Ontario

---

167 threats. Encouraging an adaptive approach and the use of best management practices  
168 by those involved will help support the recovery of the species.

169 **Actions:**

- 170 1. **(High)** Work collaboratively with landowners, land managers, and  
171 researchers to develop, implement and evaluate management plans and  
172 best management practices to maintain or improve the quality of Yellow-  
173 breasted Chat habitat and viability of populations at existing sites. This  
174 action should be informed by the results of Action 5 below. Plans may  
175 include:
- 176 ○ ecosystem-scale management practices for shrubland communities  
177 that balance the needs of multiple species at risk;
  - 178 ○ identifying opportunities to stagger habitat creation at a landscape  
179 scale to ensure a consistent supply of habitat at the appropriate  
180 successional stage each year; and
  - 181 ○ strategies to remove, manage and/or monitor the presence and  
182 impacts of invasive plants (e.g., European Buckthorn), and native or  
183 non-native predators (e.g., domestic cats, raccoons) in areas with or  
184 adjacent to populations.
- 185 2. Where suitable candidate sites exist near recent Yellow-breasted Chat  
186 breeding locations, and where there are willing partners, undertake on-  
187 the-ground efforts to restore, maintain or enhance Yellow-breasted Chat  
188 habitat in collaboration with organizations, agencies and interested  
189 Indigenous communities and organizations.
- 190 3. As opportunities arise, work with local landowners and community  
191 partners to support the securement of habitat and potential habitat of  
192 Yellow-breasted Chat through existing land securement and stewardship  
193 programs.

194 <b>Focus Area:</b>	<b>Research and Monitoring</b>
195 Objective:	Improve understanding of Yellow-breasted Chat population trends 196 and abundance, habitat needs, threats to the species, and methods 197 for managing identified threats.

198 In order to ensure proper management of Yellow-breasted Chat and their habitat, it is  
199 necessary to gain a more thorough understanding of factors influencing the species in  
200 Ontario. Monitoring and research are needed to better understand any changes in the  
201 population over time, how this species is utilizing existing habitat areas, and what steps

DRAFT Government Response Statement  
to the  
Recovery Strategy for the Yellow-breasted Chat in Ontario

---

202 can be taken to improve or increase the availability of nesting and foraging habitat.  
203 Additional work is required to ensure that potential actions identified to benefit Yellow-  
204 breasted Chat do not negatively affect other species at risk in the area, and that they  
205 account for proper management of identified threats.

206 **Actions:**

- 207 4. **(High)** Monitor Yellow-breasted Chat reproductive success and  
208 population trends in Ontario to improve understanding of productivity in  
209 the province, track changes in species' distribution over time, and  
210 compare findings to other jurisdictions. Actions may include:
- 211 ○ conducting comprehensive surveys (call-broadcast surveys and  
212 vegetation assessments) at locations where the species is observed  
213 during the breeding season; and
  - 214 ○ working with partners to compile and share data obtained from  
215 monitoring efforts within the province and in other areas of the  
216 species' range.
- 217 5. **(High)** Conduct research to evaluate the effectiveness and applicability  
218 of potential habitat management techniques, including:
- 219 ○ determining optimal vegetation management practices to create or  
220 maintain shrublands;
  - 221 ○ determining the effect on abundance and productivity of the Yellow-  
222 breasted Chat; and
  - 223 ○ studying potential impacts of shrubland maintenance on other  
224 species at risk.
- 225 6. Undertake research to determine the minimum viable population size and  
226 minimum habitat area required to maintain a sustainable Yellow-breasted  
227 Chat population in Ontario.
- 228 7. Improve knowledge on habitat use, condition, and availability to inform  
229 habitat protection, management, and enhancement. This may include:
- 230 ○ improved characterization of suitable Yellow-breasted Chat breeding  
231 habitat;
  - 232 ○ data collection on the availability of suitable unoccupied areas or  
233 areas appropriate for habitat restoration in the species' breeding  
234 range; and

DRAFT Government Response Statement  
to the  
Recovery Strategy for the Yellow-breasted Chat in Ontario

---

- 235                   ○ supporting efforts to identify, describe, and characterize wintering  
236                   and migration areas.
- 237           8. Investigate potential threats to the species and methods for mitigating  
238           impacts including:
- 239                   ○ evaluating impacts to the species from establishment of invasive  
240                   plants in habitat areas;
- 241                   ○ examining potential direct and indirect impacts to the species as a  
242                   result of climate change;
- 243                   ○ assessing predation rates from domestic cats and other predators;
- 244                   ○ evaluating impacts of Brown-headed Cowbird parasitism; and
- 245                   ○ identifying and/or developing suitable best management practices  
246                   (e.g., invasive plant removal, predator management) for areas of  
247                   occupied and potential habitat.

248	<b>Focus Area:</b>	<b>Outreach and Awareness</b>
249	Objective:	Increase public awareness of and participation in efforts to 250 minimize threats to Yellow-breasted Chat

251 Although Yellow-breasted Chat is currently found in Ontario on lands that are  
252 predominantly protected or managed long-term as natural areas, most nearby areas of  
253 potential habitat are located on private lands. Therefore, the education and involvement  
254 of the public is a key factor in supporting recovery of the species, particularly to  
255 encourage best management practices on existing shrublands and control of invasive  
256 species where needed. Ensuring landowners are aware of the presence of the species  
257 and potential threats will require collaboration between agencies with an emphasis on  
258 sharing the best available information.

- 259           **Actions:**
- 260           9. Develop and distribute materials or programs that educate landowners,  
261           land managers, and land users on topics relating to:
- 262                   ○ the value of shrubland habitat and activities that can be undertaken  
263                   to maintain it;
- 264                   ○ the impacts of domestic cats and invasive species on Yellow-  
265                   breasted Chat and actions that can be implemented to reduce these  
266                   threats to the species; and,



DRAFT Government Response Statement  
to the  
Recovery Strategy for the Yellow-breasted Chat in Ontario

---

- 267                   ○ general awareness about Yellow-breasted Chat and its habitat  
268                   including how to identify the species, its habitat requirements and  
269                   protection afforded under the ESA.

270    **Implementing Actions**

271    Financial support for the implementation of actions may be available through the  
272    Species at Risk Stewardship Program. Conservation partners are encouraged to  
273    discuss project proposals related to the actions in this response statement with Ministry  
274    of the Environment, Conservation and Parks staff. The Ontario government can also  
275    advise if any authorizations under the ESA or other legislation may be required to  
276    undertake the project.

277    Implementation of the actions may be subject to changing priorities across the multitude  
278    of species at risk, available resources and the capacity of partners to undertake  
279    recovery activities. Where appropriate, the implementation of actions for multiple  
280    species will be co-ordinated across government response statements.

281    **Reviewing Progress**

282    The ESA requires the Ontario government to conduct a review of progress towards  
283    protecting and recovering a species no later than the time specified in the species'  
284    government response statement, or not later than five years after the government  
285    response statement is published. The review will help identify if adjustments are needed  
286    to achieve the protection and recovery of Yellow-breasted Chat.

287    **Acknowledgement**

288    We would like to thank all those who participated in the development of the Recovery  
289    Strategy and Government Response Statement for the Yellow-breasted Chat (*Icteria*  
290    *virens*) in Ontario for their dedication to protecting and recovering species at risk.  
291

DRAFT Government Response Statement  
to the  
Recovery Strategy for the Yellow-breasted Chat in Ontario

---

292 **For Additional Information:**

- 293 Visit the species at risk website at [ontario.ca/speciesatrisk](http://ontario.ca/speciesatrisk)  
294 Contact the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks  
295 1-800-565-4923  
296 TTY 1-855-515-2759  
297 [www.ontario.ca/environment](http://www.ontario.ca/environment)