

**KENTUCKY
STATE REPORT
MAY 2026**

Rich Storm, Commissioner

Gabe Jenkins, Deputy Commissioner

Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources
1 Sportsman's Lane, Frankfort, KY 40601

Law Enforcement Division – Col. Jeremy McQueary, Director

The Law Enforcement Division recently transitioned its Academy to a newly acquired piece of KDFWR property in Green River State Park. This property, now formerly named Camp Kentucky Afield, is the new home of the Kentucky Game Warden Training Center. The spacious facility spans over 50 acres and allows for on-site lodging and food, as well as a large multi-purpose room and classroom for physical training and instruction. A facility of this type has long been desired by the Division, and it is an exciting change that has brought forth great opportunity.

The Division hired 30 Game Warden Recruits in the Fall of 2025, making it the largest law enforcement hiring effort in many years. 23 Game Warden Recruits are scheduled to be in the field by June of this year. Currently, the Division is in the process of hiring an additional 8 Game Warden Recruits, who will begin academy training in September of 2026.

The Law Enforcement Division's K-9 program is in its fourth year and our teams of three handlers and their three Labrador Retrievers are continuing to become more popular throughout the Commonwealth. From public relations at school events and sportsman's clubs to resource protection and crime deterrence on the backroads, our K-9 teams are paving the way for future growth in the program.

The Law Enforcement Division has recently begun its second year of the three-year process to attain North American Wildlife Law Enforcement Accreditation certification. The Division accreditation team is working hard and is excited about reaching its goal.

The LE Special Investigations Unit (SIU) has had a tremendous year, making large-scale cases throughout our state. With a focus on preventing crimes pertaining to commercialization of fish and wildlife resources, the team has prevented hundreds of thousands of dollars in theft pertaining to commercialization. The team continues to hone their skills and tactics, and the sky is the limit for the impact they will have on the deterrence of fish and wildlife crimes in Kentucky and beyond.

In May of 2025, Kentucky Game Wardens continued to lead the response during natural disaster events in Kentucky. Most recently, they responded to and acted to save lives during the horrific tornadoes that struck East Kentucky, taking the lives of 19 people and injuring over 100 more. From countless rescues to aerial search and recovery missions using our specialized drones, the men and women in green worked fearlessly to save lives and deliver life sustaining supplies to those in need.

Engineering, Infrastructure, & Technology Division – Kevin Rexroat, Division Director

The Engineering, Infrastructure, and Technology Division completed several strategic initiatives this year, including a successful merger with the agency's Stream and Wetland Mitigation team. Key infrastructure achievements include the opening of the Veterans Memorial WMA shooting range and education center, which has quickly become the department's most utilized public range. Additionally, the division reconstructed five boat ramps, removed a hazardous low-head dam to improve waterway safety, improved courtesy dock access at multiple locations, began construction on two headquarters buildings to support aquatic operations, and provided internal support in response to significant floods that impacted agency facilities.

The Stream and Wetland Mitigation program completed high-profile restorations at Lake Barkley State Park and Big Rivers WMA, while also performing environmental remediation at Ivey Creek, and removed over 900 tires within the Levisa Fork watershed. Many other largescale restorations were initiated including a project within the Rolling Fork WMA where 13 miles of stream and 100 acres wetland habitats will be improved.

Information Technology section executed major server upgrades to reduce downtime and improve system performance. IT also advanced public-facing services by launching a new range waiver system, implementing CPI-based license pricing updates, and continuing development of the agency's comprehensive online permit system.

Administrative Services Division – Melissa Trent, Division Director

The Administrative Service Division, comprised of the Accounting, Grants, and Purchasing branches, continues to play a critical role in supporting the mission and daily operations of the department. Throughout the reporting period, the division demonstrated a strong commitment to operational efficiency, financial stewardship, and customer service while managing a substantial volume of financial and procurement activities.

The Purchasing Branch continued to expand its role in streamlining procurement operations and ensuring compliance with applicable purchasing regulations. Staff processed a high volume of procurement-related transactions, including 244 purchase order documents, 611 delivery orders, 25 contract documents, and numerous fixed asset transactions, helping ensure timely acquisition of goods and services while maintaining accountability and transparency.

The Accounting Branch remained focused on maintaining fiscal integrity through accurate financial reporting, payment processing, and budget management. During the reporting period, the branch processed over 2,100 payment documents, more than 1,000 ProCard payment documents, 1,656 utility-related documents, and nearly 1,100 travel payment documents. In total, accounting staff processed thousands of financial transactions and document lines to support agency operations and maintain compliance with state financial requirements.

The Grants Branch continued its oversight of grant funding and reimbursements, ensuring responsible management of grant resources and compliance with funding requirements. The branch managed grant charge documents, federal receivables, and

budget transfer activities that support the department's programs and maximize the effectiveness of available funding.

Collectively, the Administrative Services Division processed more than 10,000 documents and over 90,000 document lines across all branches during the reporting period. These efforts reflect the division's continued dedication to excellence in service delivery, accountability, and efficient management of the department's financial and administrative operations.

Fisheries Division – Dave Dreves, Director

The Fisheries Division, working with the Center for Aquaculture Technologies, identified genetic markers linked to larger Largemouth Bass through its "Thoroughbred Bass Program." Using whole-genome sequencing and a Genome Wide Association Study, more than 3 million genetic markers from 300 bass collected across Kentucky were analyzed, comparing fish over 5 pounds with smaller, slower-growing bass from the same lakes. This represents a major advancement in fisheries science and may be the first successful identification of trophy-growth genetic markers in Largemouth Bass. The program aims to use these genetic markers to selectively breed native Kentucky Largemouth Bass with a higher probability of reaching trophy size. KDFWR's approach preserves local adaptation and genetic integrity by using only Kentucky-origin Largemouth Bass. Broodfish will be screened for desirable genetics, bred in KDFWR hatcheries, and the offspring stocked into public waters, where the improved genetics can gradually integrate into wild bass populations over time. In addition to increasing opportunities for anglers to catch larger bass, the program could help counteract the long-term genetic impacts of heavy fishing pressure, which can reduce the number of large fish in lakes. This is a long-term, science-driven investment in the future quality and sustainability of Kentucky's bass fisheries.

In 2025, Fish Habitat Branch staff worked to assist each of the Fisheries Districts to complete habitat projects at 15 lakes statewide. A total of 6,483 Christmas trees were recycled and repurposed into fish habitat structures, marking the third-highest annual total since the program began in 2017. In addition, Fish Habitat Branch staff continued two large-scale fish habitat projects at Lake Cumberland and Green River Lake in partnership with other KDFWR staff and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE). As part of these efforts, more than 1,400 cedar trees were removed from a nearby wildlife management area (WMA) and repurposed into fish habitat structures, with 996 structures deployed in Lake Cumberland and 463 in Green River Lake. This work enhanced both upland wildlife habitat and aquatic habitat. An additional 340 structures, including PVC, driftwood, pallet, and hybrid tree structures, were installed across the two reservoirs. The Green River Lake project has now been completed, with future efforts focused on maintenance of existing habitat sites. The Lake Cumberland project is expected to continue over the next several years.

Peter W. Pfeiffer Fish Hatchery was inundated by floodwaters in April 2025, which created production challenges involving wild fish and the movement of fish between ponds. Despite these setbacks, hatchery staff worked diligently to harvest fish and adapt operations, enabling the Department to meet most production goals. In total, Kentucky's

two state fish hatcheries stocked 5.3 million fish in 2025. In addition, in cooperation with Wolf Creek National Fish Hatchery, more than 700,000 trout were stocked statewide.

The two Aquatic Invasive Species branches continued efforts to combat invasive carp in Kentucky waterways through state and federal partnerships across the Tennessee-Cumberland and Ohio River basins. In 2025, more than 8 million pounds of invasive carp were removed from Kentucky waters, bringing the statewide total to over 83 million pounds harvested since 2013. In addition to harvest operations, KDFWR conducts research on invasive carp reproduction, movement, population dynamics, and habitat use to improve management strategies. The Bio-Acoustic Fish Fence at the downstream approach of Lake Barkley Lock remains in continuous operation as a key deterrent system using sound, bubbles, and lights to discourage invasive carp movement. Research results show the system reduces silver carp crossings by at least 50%, helping limit expansion into upstream reservoirs. KDFWR and partner agencies are also investing heavily in mass removal efforts and a large-scale tagging study in Kentucky and Barkley reservoirs to better understand harvest effectiveness and invasive carp exploitation rates. In 2025, staff assisted with tagging 926 silver carp as part of this effort. Telemetry and eDNA monitoring continue to improve understanding of invasive carp movement and expansion risks. KDFWR and its partners currently track more than 1,500 tagged invasive carp using an array of over 170 telemetry receivers, with results showing most fish remain within localized river pools and use tributaries more frequently than mainstem habitats. The department also partners with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to conduct eDNA sampling in major reservoirs as part of its Early Detection Rapid Response program. Recent sampling at Taylorsville and Cave Run lakes showed minimal invasive carp presence, while additional monitoring continues at other priority waterbodies across the state.

Wildlife Division – Ben Robinson, Director

The Wildlife Division has made significant progress in multiple areas, including Private lands efforts, prescribed fire management, turkey research, migratory bird conservation, invasive species control and in our non-game program.

Over the past year our Private Lands Program (PLP) staff have conducted 148 public outreach events, published four KY Afield magazine articles, and shared 180 social media posts to promote habitat management and available resources. Biologists completed 667 site visits, developed 502 management plans covering 53,102 acres, provided 548 follow-up visits, and responded to 2,261 landowner calls to support implementation. The PLP worked with NRCS to establish a wetland restoration Focus Conservation Program in western Kentucky focusing on providing wetland habitat for migratory species heading to the breeding grounds. Together, these accomplishments strengthened partnerships, increased landowner engagement, and enhanced wildlife habitat across the state.

In prescribed fire efforts, 10,356 acres were burned this winter and spring across 79 different units. We continue our support of The Kentucky Prescribed Fire Council by assisting in the training of 30 KY certified burn bosses and providing the Crewmember/Landowner RX Burn course to 183 private landowners and 26 University of Ky Extension agents. Additionally, 12 "Learn & Burn" events have been conducted over the

past year, allowing more than 150 private landowners and NRCS staff to get firsthand experience on the fire line.

Turkey research and conservation efforts have also been extensive. A total of 1,848 turkeys were banded from 2022 to 2026 across 65 Kentucky counties. Collaboration with Tennessee Tech University and the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency resulted in a completed master's thesis and submitted manuscript to the Journal of Wildlife Management documenting statewide male turkey harvest rates of 28-30% per year. Additionally, 3 years of fieldwork by a Tennessee Tech University PhD student resulted in 233 turkeys being captured and equipped with GPS-transmitters for a turkey reproductive ecology study in Muhlenberg, Hopkins, and Ohio Counties. Analysis to date has produced a population growth rate model, and ongoing analyses are targeted at habitat use and gobbling chronology. Additionally on the turkey front, hunters harvested a record 36,439 turkeys during the 2026 spring hunting season in Kentucky, smashing the 10-year average of 30,847 and topping the previous record of 36,097 set in 2010.

Migratory bird conservation efforts resulted in the banding of 6,196 migratory game birds, including Canada geese, wood ducks, and mourning doves. Staff also participated in pre-season duck banding projects in Canada. The Ballard River Pump Project continues to progress and is expected to be completed in time for the 2026 hunting season. Once operational, the pump station will be capable of moving 35,000 gallons of water per minute from the Ohio River. For the 2026 dove season, eight private-land sites were secured, providing 375 acres of public hunting opportunity. Wildlife staff also monitored nesting success for 187 interior least tern nests along the Mississippi River.

Efforts to control invasive species remain a priority, with more than 3,000 acres treated with aerial herbicide applications to combat bush honeysuckle, kudzu, sericea lespedeza and autumn olive. These ongoing initiatives demonstrate the Wildlife Division's dedication to conservation, habitat management, and sustainable wildlife populations.

The Nongame Program implemented actions identified in Kentucky's State Wildlife Action Plan. The Center for Mollusk Conservation used in-vitro techniques to propagate several species of greatest conservation need (SGCN) including the tan riffleshell, catspaw, pheasant shell, wavyrayed lampmussel, plain pocketbook, fanshell, fluted kidneyshell, Cumberland bean, Kentucky creekshell, dwarf rainbow, and creeper. Staff conducted mussel surveys at 20 release sites in the Licking and Green River systems to monitor released individuals and document survivorship and potential reproduction. Hellbender salamander surveys located two new nests within the known breeding area; 450 eggs were collected within the watershed for captive rearing. At-risk species staff conducted and/or coordinated 52 bat hibernacula surveys (Indiana bats, gray bats, little brown bats, northern long-eared bats, and tricolored bats), installed a cave gate to protect a maternity colony of over 5,000 endangered gray bats, surveyed historic locations of northern long-eared bats to assess survivorship of populations post-white nose syndrome, and installed the first condo-style roost for a little brown bat maternity colony. Avian biologists facilitated installation of nine Motus stations, surveyed bald eagle territories within the eastern third of the state, and documented 19 active peregrine falcon territories, banding chicks where possible.

Information, Education and Marketing Division – Kevin Kelly, Director

The division consolidated social media accounts and launched five regional Facebook and Instagram pages focused on local hunting, fishing and outdoor recreation opportunities. The department now manages 27 social media accounts reaching more than 985,000 followers/subscribers combined across four platforms (Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, X). A [department-produced low-head dam safety video](#) has received more than 20,000 YouTube views since June 2025.

Camp John Currie at Kentucky Lake and Camp Robert C. Webb at Grayson Lake earned American Camp Association accreditation in Fall 2025 after meeting national operational and safety standards.

A regulation change in March 2026 created annual and one-day permits for firearm and archery use at department-managed and affiliated shooting ranges to track range use, improve safety and range upkeep; 5,483 permits were issued in the program's first two months.

The division has expanded recruitment, retention and reactivation (R3) efforts by revising the agency's R3 Strategic Plan with division and consultant input. We've partnered with the University of Kentucky to create three new R3 positions supporting Cook Wild KY and hunting and shooting sports. We've developed a Kentucky-specific Hunter Education manual, improving instruction and reducing annual costs. Our Becoming an Outdoors Woman four events served about 200 participants. Hunter educators certified more than 11,000 hunters during the 2023–2024 federal reporting period, including 303 bowhunter certifications. Lastly, NASP continues to expand to where we have 839 Kentucky schools serving more than 133,000 students. The 2025 state bullseye tournament hosted 8,317 archers from 383 schools, while the 3D Challenge hosted 2,926 archers from 168 schools.

Attendance at the Kentucky State Fair increased license, merchandise and Kentucky Wild membership sales by 21%. Interest in Kentucky elk hunting also reached a record 98,180 applications for the 2026 Elk Hunt Drawing.

In August, the department launched fundraising permit packages supporting wildlife conservation while offering opportunities for special elk hunts and bonus deer, black bear and turkey harvest privileges. Packages also include a complimentary two-night stay at Kentucky State Resort Parks.

As of May 2026, Kentucky Wild had 3,827 active members and had raised more than \$1 million since 2018. Partnerships with Kentucky State Parks expanded membership and merchandise sales, and the program welcomed its first three ambassadors.

One of Frankfort's most visited attractions, the Salato Wildlife Education Center welcomed 39,937 visitors in 2025, including 11,241 students on more than 223 school field trips - up from 200 in 2024. Its new "Healthy Hunting Grounds" exhibit, launched in July, earned first place in the Education category of the Association for Conservation Information (ACI) Awards. In September, the center also received the 2025 Outstanding Community Partner award from the Kentucky Association for Environmental Education.