

Engineering Underway for New Auto Tour Route at Shiawassee Refuge

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The design and engineering phase for a new auto tour route at Shiawassee National Wildlife Refuge is underway. This phase should be complete in time for the refuge to begin construction in FY2009. Currently, visitors mainly have access to four trails situated on the edges of the refuge and few get to see the wildlife spectacle that makes the refuge unique. The 7.5-mile Wildlife Drive will meander past forests, grasslands, marshes, open water pools, and the Shiawassee River and will enhance the ability of visitors to see waterfowl, herons, eagles and a great diversity of other wildlife. Further, visitors will be able to see the management practices the refuge uses to attract this abundance of wildlife.



Great egrets such as these will be a common sight for visitors along Shiawassee National Wildlife Refuge's wildlife drive. Kim Le Blanc; 2006

The Wildlife Drive is funded via \$2M from the Federal Highway Administration, \$620K from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (FWS) Deferred Maintenance account, and \$200K from FWS Visitor Facility Enhancement funds. Construction will include elevating low roads, improving the gravel road surface, and rounding out restrictive corners. Other important amenities include a new observation platform on the Shiawassee, a new parking area for visitors to access the 4.5-

mile Ferguson Bayou Trail, and a new fishing and canoe access site along the Spaulding Drain.

The new route should increase the refuge's visitor numbers substantially and provide a boost to the local economy. Recreational use at the refuge generated approximately \$1 million in economic activity during fiscal year 2006, according to a report by FWS entitled "Banking on Nature 2006: The Economic Benefits to Local Communities of National Wildlife Refuge Visitation." Approximately 60,000 people visited Shiawassee Refuge in 2006, with non-residents accounting for 63 percent of the total expenditure. The Wildlife Drive will conservatively attract 30,000 new visitors annually. In fact, this facility is by far the most requested improvement to the refuge's visitor services program made by the public.



*A view from Shiawassee National Wildlife Refuge's proposed wildlife drive.
Steven F. Kahl/USFWS; 11/2006*

An important challenge in developing the Wildlife Drive is the poor condition of adjacent county roads. In fact, Curtis and Ambrose Roads are so eroded that the refuge will only be able to open the tour route during the most optimum road conditions to prevent visitors from becoming stuck. The refuge is working with the Friends of Shiawassee NWR, the Saginaw County Road Commission, Spaulding Township, Saginaw Valley Convention and Visitors Bureau, Saginaw County Chamber of Commerce, and the Saginaw County Drain Commission to

obtain federal Public Lands Highway Discretionary Program funds to rehabilitate these county roads. This repair will enable the refuge to keep the tour route open for much greater periods.