

Preliminary Draft
Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge
Gibbs Lake Waterfowl Hunting Management Plan
February 2007

Background:

During preparation of the Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) for the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge (Refuge), several alternatives were developed to address crowding, competition, skybusting, and crippling loss associated with waterfowl hunting in the area north of the Lake Onalaska Closed Area in Pool 7. This area is generally referred to as the Gibbs Lake Area. An early preferred alternative presented in the Draft CCP was to establish a highly controlled, managed hunt for the area. This alternative was not selected for the Final CCP, and instead, the CCP calls for the preparation of a Gibbs Lake Waterfowl Hunting Management Plan in cooperation with local waterfowl hunters and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources.

The plan seeks to meet the following goals outlined in the CCP:

1. Reduce competition and conflict in securing preferred hunting sites.
2. Reduce pre-emptive use of choice hunting sites.
3. Reduce crowding.
4. Reduce skybusting (long distance shooting at high flying birds) and resulting crippling or loss of downed birds.
5. Improve the quality of the waterfowling experience.
6. Be fair, simple, and efficient to administer and manage.

Description of the Area

Nearly 140 acres located at the north end of the Lake Onalaska Closed Area are designated as the Gibbs Lake Special Hunt Area (see map). Included in this area is the firing line located along Gibbs Chute or "Main Street" that marks the north boundary of the Lake Onalaska Closed Area. Locally known hunting sites along the firing line (from west to east along Main Street) are: Minnesota Point or the Picnic Grounds; Golden Chair; Cut Blind; Mud Blind; S-Turn Blind or Old Faithful; Barrel Blinds; and The Meadows.

The Barrel Blinds and The Meadows comprise the Barrel Blinds Area, which is one of the most sought after waterfowl hunting locations on Pool 7 due to the location and proximity to the Lake Onalaska Closed Area boundary. While included in the Gibbs Lake Special Hunt Area, a 17-acre area around the Barrel Blinds Area has been designated the Barrels Staked Area. Note: the size and boundaries may be adjusted as we review in the field.

Overview of the Preliminary Plan

The Gibbs Lake Special Hunt Area would have two components:

1. An overall special hunt area of approximately 140 acres where special regulations for waterfowl hunting apply.
2. A smaller area of approximately 17 acres within the special hunt area where hunters would be limited to hunting at or near staked sites, thus controlling the number and spacing of hunting parties in this small area.

The regulations for each area would apply to all waterfowl hunting. The current list of applicable seasons include the early September goose hunt, youth waterfowl hunt, regular waterfowl hunting season, and late goose hunting season.

Signs would be placed along the boundaries of each area in advance of the hunting season.

Gibbs Lake Special Hunt Area (Gibbs Lake SHA):

Within the Gibbs Lake SHA, the following would apply:

1. This area remains available to the public on a first come, first-secured basis. Except for the Barrels Staked Area, there is no minimum distance spacing requirement between hunting parties.
2. Hunters are allowed to construct temporary blinds according to Refuge regulations.
3. All hunters may discharge no more than 25 shotshells per day (no limit on number of shotshells possessed). The shotshell limit is designed to reduce skybusting. Skybusting can have a marked effect on the number of birds crippled and unretrieved, and may lower the quality of the hunting experience for neighboring hunters. A shell limit will decrease skybusting by providing an incentive (longer hunting experience) for making judicious shooting decisions.
4. To further reduce the loss of waterfowl to crippling in the Gibbs Lake SHA, hunters are required to *immediately* make every reasonable effort to retrieve downed birds. This is a change from the current Wisconsin DNR retrieval regulation which states: “No person may kill or cripple any game bird without making every reasonable effort to retrieve such bird. This *should* be done without delay to prevent the loss of the bird. Crippled birds *should* be immediately pursued.” (*Note: implemented through Refuge-specific regulation*)
5. Commercial guiding of waterfowl hunters is not permitted on weekend days and federal holidays in the Gibbs Lake SHA. (*Note: implemented through a Refuge-specific regulation*)

Barrels Staked Area:

The Barrels Staked Area will have the same regulations as the Gibbs Lake SHA with the following additional stipulations:

1. Stakes would be placed at 3-5 traditional hunting sites within this area.
2. Hunting is only permitted at or within 10' of these stakes and hunters must return immediately to same after retrieving downed birds. This regulation is intended to reduce crowding in this popular area, minimize the disruption that occurs when late arriving hunters try to crowd-in on hunters already set-up, and provide adequate spacing between hunting parties.
3. The 3-5 staked sites would be available daily on a first-come, first-secured basis.
4. A maximum of 3 licensed hunters per stake.

Three hunters per stake based on the following analysis of our recent bag check data obtained at the Upper Brice Prairie Landing:

- 10/01/05 opener – ave. party size in 21 parties was 1.7 with range of 1-3
 - 10/15/05 reopener – ave. party size in 24 parties was 2.1 with a range of 1-4 (1 party of 4 hunters)
 - 9/30/06 opener – ave. party size in 18 parties was 2.3 with a range of 1-4 (2 parties of 4 hunters)
 - 10/14/06 reopener – ave. party size in 60 parties was 2.1 with a range of 1-4 (1 party of 4 hunters)
5. Hunting sites may not be reserved by leaving unattended personal property, such as a light, in blinds. *(Note: implemented through a Refuge-specific regulation)*
 6. Sites may not be reserved for other parties. *(Note: implemented through a Refuge-specific regulation)*

Education:

Beginning as soon as the plan is finalized, develop and conduct an education and awareness campaign with the following components:

1. Conduct comprehensive public information and education effort to inform waterfowl hunters of the changes that will be implemented beginning with the 2008 waterfowl hunting season. Use personal contacts, presentations, special meetings, leaflets, signing, news releases, websites, and media interviews as applicable.

2. Educate hunters on subjects pertaining to individual waterfowl hunter responsibility. Include specifics related to waterfowl hunting on a heavily hunted national wildlife refuge. Among the subjects to consider including in this program: ethics, waterbird identification, applicable regulations, distance estimation, and firearms patterning.

Seek partnerships in developing and implementing this program among the waterfowl hunting community, clubs and organizations, and agencies. Because waterfowlers from all over the Midwest hunt this area, providing the opportunity for outstate waterfowlers to participate will be a challenge.

Plan Monitoring:

Monitoring the effectiveness of changes resulting from implementation of this plan has been placed in two categories: monitoring that can be completed using existing funding and staffing, and a monitoring effort requiring additional resources.

Using existing resources, monitoring would be addressed through a variety of means. Among them: feedback received from hunters through bag check surveys and personal contacts, sharing of information between law enforcement officers working in the Gibbs Lake area, and field observations. This program would be designed to document hunter attitudes and satisfaction with the Gibbs Lake SHA and Barrels Staked Area. This information could also be used to make adjustments in the program.

With additional funding, a study using many of the same protocols developed for the canvasback project conducted in the early 1990's, could be completed. The activities of waterfowlers in the field would be monitored by trained observers. Shooting distances, number of shots fired, and the outcome of each encounter with passing waterfowl would be recorded for each party observed. Hunter attitudes and satisfaction with the program and bag check information would also be obtained. The cost for a project of this magnitude is estimated at \$50,000 to \$60,000 per year in 2006 dollars. Such a study could be handled by researchers from the U.S. Geological Survey, Upper Midwest Environmental Sciences Center.