
Chapter 1: Introduction and Background

Introduction

This document is a comprehensive conservation plan (CCP) for Rice Lake National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) and Mille Lacs NWR in east-central Minnesota. Both refuges are administered by the staff at Rice Lake NWR. Because the administration of the refuges draws from the same resources, it makes sense to consider their management together.

Mille Lacs NWR is the smallest refuge in the National Wildlife Refuge System, which includes more than 545 refuges. The 0.57-acre Refuge consists of two islands, Hennepin and Spirit, in Mille Lacs Lake, and is about 30 air miles southwest of the Rice Lake NWR office (Figure 1). The islands are covered with jumbled rock, boulders, and gravel. Hennepin Island is managed as a nesting colony for the State-listed threatened Common Tern. Spirit Island is used by other colonial nesting species including Ring-billed Gulls, Herring Gulls, and Double-crested Cormorants.

The 20,253-acre Rice Lake NWR is a mosaic of lakes, marshes, forests, and grasslands that provide a variety of habitats for migrant and resident wildlife. Abundant natural foods, particularly wild rice, have attracted wildlife to the area for centuries. The Refuge is especially noted for its fall concentrations of Ring-necked Ducks, which often number over 150,000 birds. Other important migrants include Mallards, Wood Ducks, Canvasback, Canada Geese, and Woodcock. White-tailed deer, black bear, river otter, beaver, Sandhill Cranes, Bald Eagles, Ruffed and Sharptail Grouse inhabit the Refuge. Songbirds, raptors, and nearly all other species associated with the bogs and forests of northern Minnesota, including gray wolves and an occasional moose, are also found on the Refuge.



Rice Lake at Rice Lake NWR. USFWS

Rice Lake NWR includes the 2,045-acre parcel known as the Sandstone Unit (Unit), located approximately 40 miles southeast of the main part of the Refuge near the town of Sandstone, Minnesota. The majority of the Unit is upland forest with smaller components of grassland, forested wetland, shallow marshes, bogs, and riverine wetlands. The State-designated Wild and Scenic Kettle River traverses the west side of the Unit, creating spectacular bluffs and rock outcroppings. The State and Aitkin County manage significant lands in the vicinity of Rice Lake NWR. Figure 2 illustrates these conservation lands that have both wildlife and recreational value.

In the following sections we present our organizational, legal, and policy background. Then, we describe the establishment of the Refuge, its history, purpose, vision, and goals. In Chapter 2 we describe the process we used in planning. Chapter 3 describes the Refuges and our current management. In Chapter 4 we describe how we intend to manage for the next 15 years. In Chapter 5 we describe how we expect to accomplish our plan in

Figure 1: Location of Rice Lake NWR and Mille Lac NWR



terms of projects, staff, and more detailed planning. We use the appendices to present detailed information not included in our narrative.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

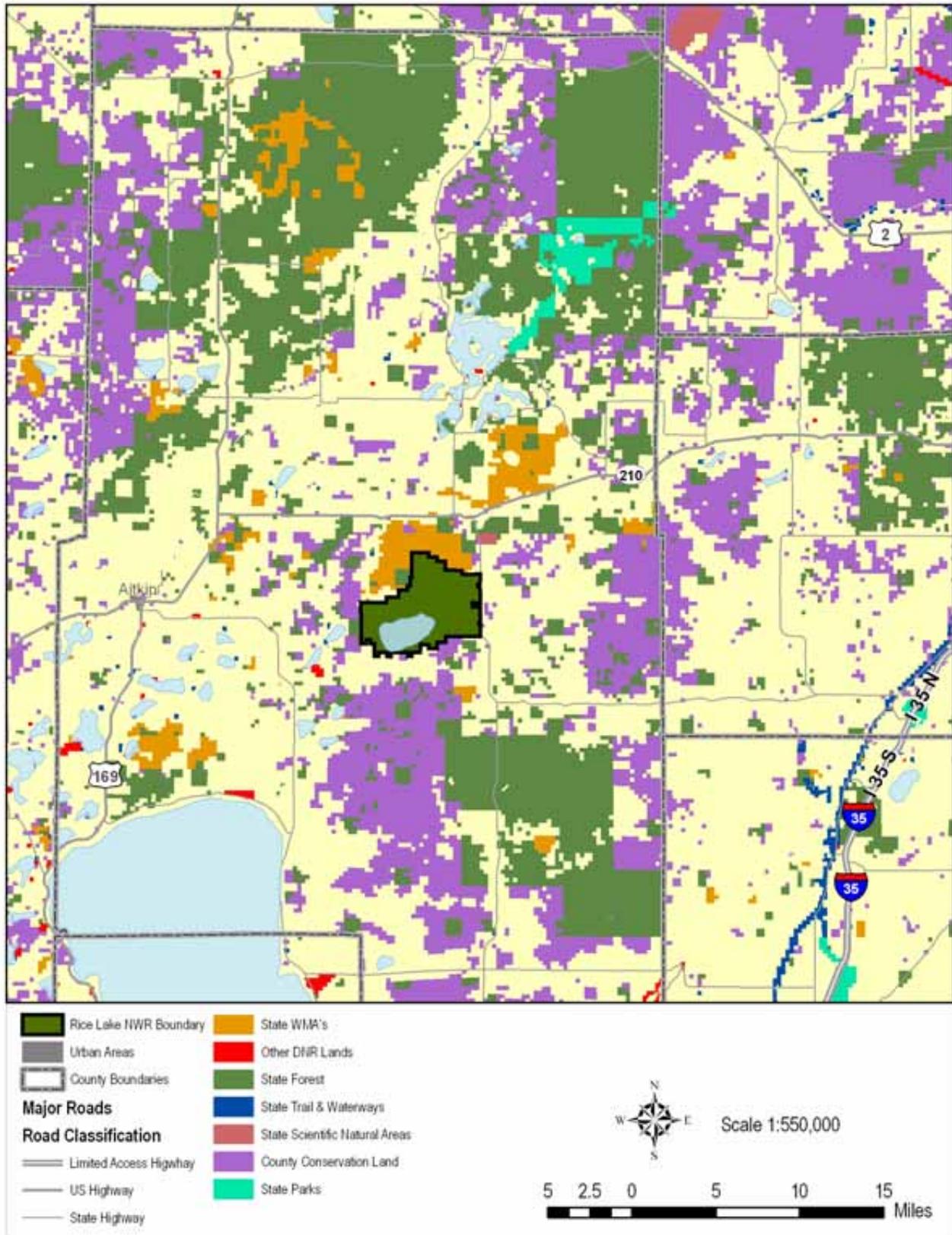
The Refuge is administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service), the primary federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing the nation's fish and wildlife populations and their habitats. The Service oversees the enforcement of federal wildlife laws, management and protection of migratory bird populations, resto-

ration of nationally significant fisheries, administration of the Endangered Species Act, and the restoration of wildlife habitat such as wetlands. The Service also manages the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

The mission of the Service is working with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people.

Figure 2: Conservation Lands Near Rice Lake NWR



The National Wildlife Refuge System

Refuge lands are part of the National Wildlife Refuge System, which was founded in 1903 when President Theodore Roosevelt designated Pelican Island in Florida as a sanctuary for Brown Pelicans. Today, the System is a network of more than 545 refuges covering more than 95 million acres of public lands and waters. Most of these lands (82 percent) are in Alaska, with approximately 16 million acres located in the lower 48 states and several island territories. The National Wildlife Refuge System is the world's largest collection of lands specifically managed for fish and wildlife. Overall, it provides habitat for more than 5,000 species of birds, mammals, fish, and insects. As a result of international treaties for migratory bird conservation as well as other legislation, such as the Migratory Bird Conservation Act of 1929, many refuges have been established to protect migratory waterfowl and their migratory flyways, from their northern nesting grounds to their southern wintering areas. Refuges also play a vital role in preserving endangered and threatened species. Among the most notable is Aransas National Wildlife Refuge in Texas, which provides winter habitat for the Whooping Crane. Likewise, the Florida Panther Refuge protects one of the nation's most endangered predators.

Refuges also provide unique wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities for visitors. When public uses are deemed compatible with wildlife and habitat conservation, they are places where people can enjoy hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, environmental education, and environmental interpretation. Many refuges have visitor centers, wildlife trails, automobile tours, and environmental education programs. Nationwide, approximately 39.5 million people visited national wildlife refuges in 2003.

Mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System

The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System is to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans.

Revised goals for the National Wildlife Refuge System were adopted on July 26, 2006, and incorporated into Part 601, Chapter 1, of the Fish and Wildlife Service Manual (601 FW 1). The goals are:

- # Conserve a diversity of fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats, including species that are endangered or threatened with becoming endangered.
- # Develop and maintain a network of habitats for migratory birds, anadromous and interjurisdictional fish, and marine mammal populations that is strategically distributed and carefully managed to meet important life history needs of these species across their ranges.
- # Conserve those ecosystems, plant communities, wetlands of national or international significance, and landscapes and seascapes that are unique, rare, declining, or underrepresented in existing protection efforts.
- # Provide and enhance opportunities to participate in compatible wildlife-dependent recreation (hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation).
- # Foster understanding and instill appreciation of the diversity and interconnectedness of fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats.

Legal and Policy Guidance

The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 established several important mandates aimed at making the management of national wildlife refuges more cohesive. The preparation of CCPs is one of those mandates. The Act directs the Secretary of the Interior to ensure that the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System and purposes of the individual refuges are carried out. The 1997 Refuge Improvement Act requires the Secretary to maintain the biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health and to identify the archeological and cultural values of the National Wildlife Refuge System. The Act deals with compatibility of uses on refuges and directs the Secretary of Interior to issue regulations for compatibility determinations. The Act also directs that compatible wildlife-dependent uses should be facilitated. Since passage of the Act, the Service has adopted policies that implement direction of the Act.

Compatibility Policy

Service policy says that no uses for which the Service has authority to regulate may be allowed on a unit of the Refuge System unless it is determined to be compatible. A compatible use is a use that, in the sound professional judgment of the refuge manager, will not materially interfere with or detract from the fulfillment of the National Wildlife Refuge System mission or the purposes of the national wildlife refuge. Managers must complete a written compatibility determination for each use, or collection of like uses, that is signed by the manager and the Regional Chief of Refuges in the respective Service region.

Biological Integrity, Diversity, and Environmental Health Policy

The Service is directed in the Refuge Improvement Act to “ensure that the biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health of the Refuge System are maintained for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans...” The biological integrity policy helps define and clarify this directive by providing guidance on what conditions constitute biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health; guidelines for maintaining existing levels; guidelines for determining how and when it is appropriate to restore lost elements; and guidelines in dealing with external threats to biological integrity, diversity and health.

Other Guidance

In addition to the Refuges’ establishing executive orders, authorizing legislation, and the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997,



Coyote. USFWS

several Federal laws, executive orders, and regulations govern administration of the Refuge. Appendix C contains a partial list of the legal mandates that guided the preparation of this plan and those that pertain to Refuge management activities.

Establishment and Purposes of the Refuges

Rice Lake National Wildlife Refuge

Conservationists were concerned about low duck populations during the Dust Bowl years of the 1930s. One strategy to help the populations was to provide for and protect ducks on their southern migration. Rice Lake historically, and even during the drought years, had large populations of migrating waterfowl. Thus, the area was identified as one of the first to be purchased in an attempt to stem the decline of waterfowl populations.

Franklin D. Roosevelt established Rice Lake Migratory Waterfowl Refuge by Executive Order in 1935 “as a refuge and breeding ground for migratory birds and other wildlife.” Following initial land purchases, using NIR Wildlife Refuges Funds (also known as the \$6 Million Fund) and Duck Stamp Funds, early development of the Refuge was accomplished using Civilian Conservation Corps labor (Camp BS-3, Company 2705). A Presidential proclamation changed the name of the Refuge to Rice Lake National Wildlife Refuge in 1940.

The Sandstone Unit (Unit) was initially acquired by the United States in 1932 for the purpose of establishing a federal prison. The Department of Justice, Bureau of Prisons, administered the Sandstone Federal Correctional Institution (FCI) on a portion of the original 2,885-acre acquisition from 1939 to 1949 and again from 1959 until the present. In 1969, the Department of Justice declared 2,405 acres of the FCI surplus to their needs. On February 18, 1970, 2,240 acres were transferred to the Department of Interior for inclusion within the National Wildlife Refuge System. In April 1986, the Service transferred 195 acres of the Unit to the City of Sandstone as part of a three-way exchange between the City of Sandstone, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR), and the Fish and Wildlife Service. Total area for the Unit is currently 2,045 acres.

Lands for Rice Lake NWR were acquired under the original Executive Order, The Migratory Bird Conservation Act, the Refuge Recreation Act, and An Act Authorizing the Transfer of Certain Real Property for Wildlife and Other Purposes. The authority of An Act Authorizing the Transfer of Certain Real Property for Wildlife and Other Purposes was used to transfer the Sandstone Unit from the Department of Justice to the Fish and Wildlife Service.

Service policy states that when refuge land is acquired it takes on the purpose of its acquisition authority plus the purposes outlined in the authorities used to acquire previous land for the same refuge. The Refuge's purposes thus include:

- # “a refuge and breeding ground for migratory birds and other wildlife” (Executive Order 7221).
- # “an inviolate sanctuary, or for any other management purpose, for migratory birds” (Migratory Bird Conservation Act).
- # “(1) incidental fish and wildlife-oriented recreational development, (2) the protection of natural resources, (3) the conservation of endangered species or threatened species” (Refuge Recreation Act).
- # “carrying out the national migratory bird management program” (An Act Authorizing the Transfer of Certain Real Property for Wildlife, or Other Purposes).
- # “... for the development, advancement, management, conservation, and protection of fish and wildlife resources ...” 16 U.S.C. § 742f(a)(4) “... for the benefit of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, in performing its activities and services. Such acceptance may be subject to the terms of any restrictive or affirmative covenant, or condition of servitude ...” 16 U.S.C. § 742f(b)(1) (Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956).

Mille Lacs National Wildlife Refuge

The two islands that make up Mille Lacs NWR were given national designation in separate orders. Woodrow Wilson set aside Spirit Island with Executive Order 2199 on May 14, 1915, as Mille Lacs Reservation. On October 13, 1920, Wilson enlarged the reservation by the addition of Hennepin Island under Executive Order 3340. The two islands were to constitute a “preserve and breeding ground for native birds” – its purpose. In the very same 1940

proclamation that renamed Rice Lake Migratory Waterfowl Refuge as Rice Lake NWR, Mille Lacs Reservation was changed to Mille Lacs National Wildlife Refuge, located within the boundaries of Mille Lacs Indian Reservation (Figure 3).

Refuge Vision

The vision for the Refuge provides a simple statement of the desired future condition of the Refuge. From the vision flow more specific goals that lead to even more detailed and measurable objectives. We considered the purposes of the Refuges and the mission of the System as we envisioned what Rice Lake NWR could offer future generations of wildlife and people. Our visions for the refuges are:

Rice Lake National Wildlife Refuge

Rice Lake NWR will be an area treasured by neighbors and visitors alike for its bountiful wild rice, clean water, well-managed forests, abundant wildlife and wildlife recreational opportunities. A towering canopy of red and white pine will intermingle with aspen stands, majestic old growth oak forests, and tamarack-spruce bogs. This mosaic of northern forest types will support a great diversity of neotropical migrants, mammals and unique plant species. The bogs will be free of invasive brush species and home to countless marshbirds, amphibians and species not commonly seen. Rice Lake will be the prominent natural wild rice producing lake in the state. In the fall, people will be captivated by the sight of rice heads swaying in the wind as far as the eye can see and the sounds of hundreds-of-thousands of ducks, geese and swans feasting on the bounty. American Indians will hand-harvest the rice from their canoes, passing on a tradition to the next generation. Visitors will understand the importance of the Refuge, not only for the wildlife but for its history. They will feel welcome, oriented and relish the serenity at hand.

Mille Lacs National Wildlife Refuge

Mille Lacs NWR will be a cornerstone in maintaining the Common Tern population in the Great Lakes Region. Caspian Terns, Ruddy Turnstones, Sanderlings, Dunlin, Least Sandpipers, and Semipalmated Sandpipers, will continue to use this small but important Refuge for resting and feeding during their lengthy migration. Hennepin Island will be managed in a manner that demonstrates scientifically proven techniques in

Figure 3: Location of Mille Lacs NWR ¹



1. Source: Department of Natural Resources, Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe, 2007.



Sunflowers. USFWS

Common Tern production while Spirit Island will be managed in a way that balances the needs of colonial nesting birds. Management will be in cooperation with the Mille Lacs Band and Minnesota DNR.

Refuge Goals

Considering the purposes of the refuges and our vision for the future, we have established the following goals for Rice Lake NWR and Mille Lacs NWR.

Rice Lake National Wildlife Refuge

Habitat

The Refuge will contain a diversity of habitats typical of historical north-central Minnesota.

Wildlife

Fish and migrating and resident wildlife populations on the Refuge will be naturally diverse, healthy, and self sustaining.

Wildlife-dependent Recreation

Visitors will enjoy wildlife-dependent recreation and they, along with residents of the local community, will appreciate the value and need for fish and wildlife conservation.

Cultural Values

The American Indian community and the Refuge will preserve American Indian cultural values through communication, consultation, and cooperation.

Administration and Operations

Funding, staffing, facilities, and public support will be sufficient to accomplish the purposes, vision, goals, and objectives of the Refuge.

Mille Lacs National Wildlife Refuge

Wildlife

An optimum nesting population of Common Terns will exist on Hennepin Island and we will know the productivity and chronology of species using Spirit Island.

Purpose of the Plan

This CCP describes the management direction for Rice Lake NWR and Mille Lacs NWR for the next 15 years. The refuge manager and staff will use the plan as a reference document when developing work plans and making management decisions. The plan provides guidance and rationale for our management direction.

The plan enhances the management of the Refuges by:

- # Providing a clear statement of desired conditions.
- # Ensuring management is consistent with laws, policies, and plans.
- # Ensuring consideration of preservation of historic properties is part of Refuge management and planning.
- # Giving Refuge neighbors, visitors, and the general public an understanding of the Service's management actions on and around the Refuges.
- # Establishing continuity in Refuge management.
- # Providing a sound basis for budget requests.