

Patuxent Research Refuge

National Wildlife Visitor Center

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Fire to Benefit Wildlife Habitat and Visitors

Laurel, MD. Personnel from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in partnership with the National Park Service and Americorps will be conducting a series of controlled burns on Patuxent Research Refuge lands from February 28 through April 15, 2009. Burns will occur on the North Tract portion of the Refuge located off of MD-198 and the Baltimore/Washington Parkway (295), east of Laurel. Expert fire teams will burn a large field to reduce hazardous fuels, conduct research on controlling non-native plants, and restore important wildlife habitat. Additionally, a forested unit will be burned to restore a savannah/sandy barrens habitat to benefit rare insects and plants. Patuxent Research Refuge will only burn under favorable weather conditions to keep the fire manageable and minimize smoke in local communities. Because burning is weather-dependent, it is difficult to provide significant advanced notice of when each burn will occur. However, appropriate State and County agencies will be notified in advance of each burn.

The first burn period is planned for the weekend of February 28- March 1. Residents and visitors may smell or see smoke in the area. Because human safety is the number one priority during controlled burning, some refuge roads may be closed to the public. Visitors are encouraged to check with the refuge for possible closures [phone 301-776-3090] before coming to the North Tract of the refuge that weekend.

One of the reasons the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service uses controlled burns is to reduce flammable vegetation that could pose hazards to visitors and local communities if they burned in an uncontrolled wildfire. But they do much more than making the refuge safer. According to Refuge Manager, Brad Knudsen, controlled burning is an appropriate and effective tool to manage wildlife habitat. "Research indicates that controlled burning has many benefits over other habitat management practices. Fire helps control undesirable exotic plants, maintains grassland habitat for nesting birds and small mammals, promotes wild flowers and other native plants, reduces the accumulation of organic debris and releases nutrients back into the soil."

Visitors to the refuge benefit from controlled burns because fire promotes native species and habitats. For example, fire can reduce the cover of non-native tall fescue grass, which has limited value to wildlife and increase cover of beneficial native grasses such as broomsedge, Indian grass, and Little Bluestem. Fire can also be used to keep competing plant species from taking over rare savannah/sandy barren habitats in the North Tract.

"The use of controlled burns also support Patuxent's unique role as a research refuge by allowing scientists to study the effect of fire on a variety of refuge habitats," Knudsen says. An objective of one of the burns near Blue Heron Pond is to explore the effects of a combination of controlled burns and herbicide applications on the control of an invasive, non-native plant, Chinese Lespedeza. Refuge biologists hope that the controlled burns stimulate Lespedeza seed germination in the spring so they can eradicate as much of the noxious weed as they can with herbicide in the summer.

Prescribed burns are authorized under Patuxent Research Refuge's Prescribed Fire Plan which was approved by Fish and Wildlife Service officials in 2007.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The prescribed burns will be done in accordance with this mission. The vast lands that make up the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's National Wildlife Refuge System provide not only habitats for wildlife, but provide opportunities for people to enjoy wildlife-related recreational activities such as wildlife photography, bird watching, hunting, fishing and interpretive and educational programs. Refuge staff hope that people in the Baltimore/Washington metropolitan area will be able to learn more about prescribed burns and their relationship to the establishment of healthy wildlife habitat; and that the public will also visit and enjoy the recreational and educational activities of the Refuge.

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