



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

National Wildlife Refuge System

Did You Know...

Wild Things

1903 saw the establishment of the first national wildlife refuge at Pelican Island, Florida.

Superimposed over the Lower 48 States, the 3.6 million acres of islands in Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) would stretch from California to Florida.

The 500th refuge, Canaan Valley NWR (West Virginia), is the highest valley east of the Rocky Mountains and protects remnant plant and animal species that have been lost elsewhere.

The smallest refuge is half-acre Mille Lacs NWR (Minnesota); the largest is Arctic NWR (Alaska) at 19.2 million acres.

North Dakota has the most refuges (64), followed by California (38), then Florida (29).

Refuges support 22 percent of threatened and endangered species; 58 refuges were acquired for that purpose including Ash Meadows (12 species), Nevada, and Crystal River (manatee), Florida.

J. Clark Salyer, "Father of the Refuge System," drove around the country during the Dust Bowl 1930's buying critical wetlands as waterfowl refuges.

Several refuge units are named for writers, including Rachel Carson NWR (Maine), Mark Twain NWR (Illinois/Missouri), and Aldo Leopold Wetland Management District (Wisconsin).

Although 96 percent of National Wildlife Refuge System units are in the Lower 48 States, Hawaii, and U.S. territories, 85 percent of Refuge System acreage is in Alaska.

Early refuges in Oklahoma, Texas, and Wyoming saved species such as bison and elk that faced extinction from market hunting.

The Aleutian islands of Attu and Kiska Alaska Maritime NWR were seized by Japan in World War II, the only U.S. lands controlled by a foreign power since the Revolutionary War.

Oil found on Kenai NWR in 1957 gave impetus to Alaska statehood in 1959.

In 1935, Red Rock Lakes NWR (Montana) was created to save the last endangered trumpeter swans known in the wild. Today, 16,000 of the majestic birds are found in Alaska, Montana, and the upper Midwest.

Several refuges are named for artists including Audubon NWR (North Dakota), Charles M. Russell NWR (Montana) for the cowboy artist, J.N. "Ding" Darling (Florida) for the father of the Duck Stamp, and Agassiz NWR (Minnesota) for wildlife artist Louis Agassiz Fuertes.

One of the largest U.S. swamps, 600-square-mile Okefenokee NWR (Georgia) is also a National Wetlands Conservation Site and home to 15,000 alligators and carnivorous plants such as the hooded pitcher plant and golden trumpet. Some 95 percent of Okefenokee's water is from the 60 inches of annual rainfall, of which 80 percent evaporates or is taken up by plants.

After Izaak Walton League founder Verne Dilg's son drowned in the river, Dilg pushed Congress in 1924 to establish Upper Mississippi National Wildlife and Fish Refuge (Illinois).

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Rembert Roggenbald carries coals with high-tech space shuttles at Merritt Island NWR (Florida), which has more endangered species than any other refuge, including bald eagles, peregrine falcons, wood storks, and manatees.

Visitors collect salt crystals from an extinct inland sea at Salt Plains NWR (Oklahoma).

Numerous refuges are named for political figures, such as Julia Butler Hansen Refuge for the Columbian White-tailed Deer (Washington), Silvio Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge (Connecticut/Massachusetts/New Hampshire/Vermont), John Hay NWR (Massachusetts), Edwin B. Forsythe NWR (New Jersey), and John Heinz NWR at Tinicum (Pennsylvania).

Unique undisturbed natural features qualify several refuges as special research sites or International Biosphere Reserves under the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization: Aleutian Islands of Alaska Maritime NWR, Blackbeard Island and Wolf Island NWRs (Georgia), Cape Romain NWR (South Carolina), and Farallon NWR (California).

Many national wildlife refuges take their names from Indian words. Among them: Seedskadee NWR (Wyoming) means “River of the Prairie Hen” in Shoshone; Okefenokee NWR (Georgia), Seminole for “Land of the Trembling Earth,” refers to the spongy peat that rises and falls as you walk; and Muscatatuck NWR (Indiana) is a Plankeshaw word meaning “Narrow, Meandering River.”

William L. Finley NWR (OR) is named after the famous wildlife photographer and naturalist. Finley is also noted for petitioning President Theodore Roosevelt to establish Malheur and Klamath Basin national wildlife refuges in Oregon and California.

Want more? Call—better yet, visit—your local refuge!

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
National Wildlife Refuge System
1-800-344-WILD
<http://refuges.fws.gov>