

The National Wildlife Refuge System is an extensive network of lands and waters protected and managed especially for wildlife and its habitat.

Refuges stretch across the United States from above the Arctic Circle in Alaska to the subtropical waters of the Florida Keys, and beyond to the Caribbean and South Pacific. The National Wildlife Refuge System is managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which protects and manages over 500 refuges for wildlife and for people to enjoy.



Introduction

The St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge) was established in 1931 to provide winter habitat for migratory birds, and is one of the oldest refuges in the National Wildlife Refuge System. It encompasses about 86,000 acres in Wakulla, Jefferson and Taylor counties, and includes about 43 miles of



north Florida's Gulf coast. Congress has designated 17,350 acres of the Refuge as a National Wilderness Area.

Elevations on the Refuge range from the open water of Apalachee Bay to about 30 feet above sea level. Seven rivers and numerous creeks cross the Refuge. Annual rainfall averages 55 inches, and the driest months tend to be April, May, October, and November.

The St. Marks NWR is divided into five distinct units: **The St. Marks Unit** is primarily slash pine flatwoods, man-made pools, swamps and marshes. The Refuge's offices and Visitor Center are located here on Lighthouse Road, and most public use occurs on this unit. **The Newport Unit**, formerly Flintrock WMA, is adjacent to lighthouse road as you come into the St. Marks Unit from US 98.

To the west lies the **Wakulla Unit**, which is mostly hardwood hammocks, swamps and pine flatwoods. Further west lies the **Panacea Unit**, which is mostly longleaf/wiregrass habitat, flatwoods and sandhills, dotted with lakes and tidal marshes. East of the St. Marks Unit is the **Aucilla Unit**, which includes a boat ramp on the scenic Aucilla River and 640 acres of adjacent wetlands and swamp forest.

About 350,000 visitors come to the St. Marks NWR each year to birdwatch, photograph, hike, fish, picnic, hunt, bike, and simply enjoy the Refuge.

A Look Back

Paleo-Indians occupied the Florida Panhandle over 10,000 years ago. Their descendants, the Apalachee Indians, encountered Spanish explorers including DeSoto during the early 1500's. By 1639, a port was established at the confluence of the Wakulla and St. Marks Rivers, which is today the City of St. Marks. Fort San Marcos de Apalache, first built there in 1679, suffered numerous attacks by pirates and soldiers. Today, the Fort's remains and a small museum are a state park.

The St. Marks Lighthouse, first constructed in 1830, is located at the terminus of Lighthouse Road (Co. Rd. 59) in the St. Marks Unit of the Refuge, a 15-mile drive from the City of St. Marks. The Lighthouse has guided maritime activity ever since. It has survived gun boat battles, the landing of Federal troops



during the Civil War, and many major storms. Today it is on the National Register of Historic Sites.

The land which is today the St. Marks NWR has long provided rich natural resources for area residents. Limestone mined from the Wakulla Unit of the Refuge was used to rebuild Fort San Marcos and to build the foundation of the St. Marks Lighthouse. Refuge salt marshes are dotted with the remains of sea water evaporation vats, which were used to make sea salt during the Civil War. Timber was another source of revenue, and much Refuge land was logged before sale to the government. Turpentine production in the area's pine forests was also a major industry in the early 1900s. The West Goose Creek Seineyard was a major mullet fishing site for decades, and free-ranging cattle and hogs fed on native grasses.



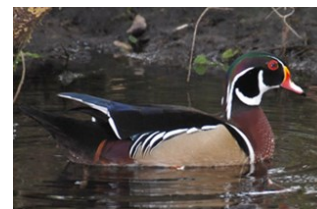
Habitat and Wildlife

The abundance and diversity of wildlife for which the St. Marks NWR is known is only possible because of the many habitats it possesses and manages. Marshes, tidal flats, and man-made pools (impoundments) attract thousands of waterfowl, shore-birds, wading birds and other animals. Open marshes and swamps also provide homes for turtles and thousands of American alligators.



Hardwood swamps support wood ducks, night herons, black bears and river otters, to name a few. Finally, the extensive pine woodlands offer food and cover for turkeys, white-tailed

Apalachee Bay is home to bottlenose dolphins, brown pelicans, wintering redhead ducks, sea turtles and a rich



diversity of marine life. In addition, the salt marshes that connect the Refuge to Apalachee Bay are a valuable nursery area and food source for birds, marine fish, shrimp, and shellfish, and the marshes also provide protection during storms to coastal birds and other animals.

Of the more than 300 species of birds recorded on the Refuge, 98 nest here, including bald eagles. Some 19 species of ducks and two species of geese may be seen from mid-November through January. Migrating hawks, falcons, and shorebirds also use the Refuge. The Refuge's 44 species of mammals include the bobcat and raccoon, as well as the non-native feral hog. In addition, the Refuge hosts 38 species of amphibians and 69 species of reptiles.

Endangered, threatened or rare animals found on the Refuge include the least tern, red-cockaded woodpecker, Wilson's plover, wood stork, swallow-tailed kite, peregrine falcon, American alligator, Eastern indigo snake, frosted flatwoods salamander, and Florida black bear. In addition, visitors occasionally glimpse loggerhead sea turtles and West Indian manatees offshore from the lighthouse. Finally, the Refuge's 1,300 plant species, on which animals depend in various ways, include many state-listed threatened or endangered plants.

Wildlife Management

One management tool for wildlife is the protection and enhancement of natural habitats. Such efforts include adjusting water levels in man-made lakes and ponds (termed impoundments) for wildlife access and growth of food; limiting the spread of invasive plants and certain animals (such as feral hogs); and thinning trees to achieve multi-age stands of pine woodlands. Artificial nesting structures have also been used successfully by several bird species.

Prescribed burning is used to mimic natural lightning-caused fires, and most areas of the Refuge are burned on a three-year cycle. Fire plays an important role in the ecosystem by reducing fuels on the forest floor, releasing nutrients in the soil, and stimulating certain plants to produce seeds and fruits for wildlife.



In some cases, restoration of historic habitat or wildlife populations is the goal. Planting long-leaf pines and wiregrass helps to restore the historic environment in areas impacted by past agricultural practices. The population of red-cockaded woodpeckers has been increased by introducing birds from other areas and creating nest holes in mature pines.

Environmental Education & Public Programs

Visitor Services programs bring people and wildlife together. Refuge staff teach about wildlife and conservation to around 10,000 school children each year. Annual events for the public include: the Monarch Butterfly Festival (October), migratory bird tours (November- April), and the Wildlife, Heritage & Outdoors Festival (February). Check our website for event details.

www.fws.gov/refuge/st-marks



Make Your Visit Meaningful

St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge offers something for everyone who appreciates and enjoys nature. First-timers especially should stop at the Visitor Center to acquire maps and view displays describing Refuge wildlife and habitats, before venturing out. The Visitor Center is open Monday through Friday from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. and on Saturday and Sunday from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

The Visitor Center is closed on federal holidays. The Refuge is open during daylight hours throughout the year.

The main route to view wildlife is Lighthouse Road. It is roughly 7 miles from the Visitor Center to the historic St. Marks Lighthouse at

the end of the road. Please drive slowly to protect our wildlife.

The Nature Store is open Fridays 10 am until 4 pm and Saturday and Sunday from 10 am until 5 pm. Shop for field guides, postcards, t-shirts, insect repellent, etc. Supporting the Nature Store through purchases and memberships helps the Friends of St Marks Wildlife Refuge assist the Refuge with various programs.

Insects and sun can make an enjoyable day quickly turn uncomfortable, so be prepared before starting out. Wear a hat, closed shoes, and carry water. You may want to carry insect repellent and sunscreen. Of course, bring your binoculars, field guides and camera!

Being in the right place at the right time ensures successful wildlife sightings and photo opportunities. Knowing the animals likely to be found in certain habitats and patiently waiting helps, too. A bird and unusual wildlife sighting log is kept in the Visitor Center to assist you. Remember that wild animals can be unpredictable and it is illegal to feed or harass them. Please stay a safe distance from all wildlife.

Two primitive hiking trails on the St. Marks Unit (7 and 12 miles), and two on the Panacea Unit (5 and 9 miles), offer views of different habitats. Shorter nature trails include: trails near Headquarters Pond, around Tower Pond, and along the Lighthouse Levee, and the Cedar Point trail near the lighthouse boat ramp.



The Florida National Scenic Trail extends 56 miles through the St. Marks NWR, and the Refuge is in Segment 5 of the Florida Circumnavigational Saltwater Paddling Trail. Some parts of the

Refuge may be closed seasonally to protect sensitive wildlife areas. For more information on trails, check with Visitor Center staff and the website.

St. Marks Refuge is open to bank fishing all year. Boats, kayaks and canoes are only permitted in Refuge impoundments along Lighthouse Road from March 15 to October 15, and they must be hand-

launched and use trolling motors or paddles. In Otter Lake, boats, including canoes, may use motors of up to 10 hp. Crabbing is only allowed in the tidal creek and the shore near the lighthouse.

Boat launching is permitted where marked. Saltwater access is available at a boat ramp near the Lighthouse, the Aucilla River boat ramp, the end of Bottoms Road near Panacea, and the end of Wakulla Beach Road (no ramp). Freshwater access is available at Otter Lake and East River Pool.

Launching of commercial or sport net boats from the saltwater boat ramp on Lighthouse Road is prohibited.

Hunting is allowed in designated areas for resident game species on specific dates from Fall through Spring. Contact the Refuge for current dates, regulations and how to apply for permits.

Other Refuge Regulations

- Entrance Fees are required of all Refuge visitors traveling beyond the Visitor Center on Lighthouse Road. Annual passes are available. Educational groups and official visitors must stop at the Visitor Center for a non-fee pass.
- Flying drones is prohibited on all Refuge land.
- Some trash receptacles are available, but please take trash and litter home if possible.
- Taking government property or any natural feature, artifact, animal or plant is prohibited.
- Pets must be on a leash under the owner's control at all times. For their safety, please keep them away from the water.
- Fireworks and ground fires are prohibited.
- Horses must remain on roads, and ATVs are not allowed.

For further information, contact:
St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge
P.O. Box 68
St. Marks, Florida 32355 Tel: 850/925-6121
www.fws.gov/refuge/st-marks

St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge General Information

