



← Baltimore-area youth planting a garden with the Living Classrooms Foundation.

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# Cities Gone Wild

Fish and Wildlife Service branches out

STORY BY SUSAN KIEFFER

**U**RBAN LIFE IS NOT ALWAYS conducive to communing with nature. Harried adults navigate rush hour traffic between work and home, and many children and teens spend much of their free time gripping an Xbox controller. To the 80 percent of Americans living in cities, the natural world can seem as distant as the stars. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) aspires to address this issue with its new Urban Wildlife Refuge Initiative.

“We feel it’s important for the Fish and Wildlife Service to be relevant in urban areas for our wildlife conservation message to be heard and hopefully to resonate,” says Genevieve LaRouche, field supervisor of the Chesapeake Bay Field Office in Annapolis, Md. She is referring to the USFWS mission to preserve wildlife for the benefit of the American people.

The Urban Wildlife Refuge Initiative grew out of the USFWS’s long-term plan for the future of its National Wildlife Refuge System. The agency has committed to establishing a presence in 10 cities across the U.S. Staff members are surveying city residents about the ways they like to enjoy the outdoors, developing standards for urban wildlife refuges, and creating urban wildlife refuge partnerships.

These partnerships with state and local agencies are intended to connect an urban populace with wildlife on existing recreational properties such as city parks. “We want to add value to what people are already doing in these places,”

LaRouche says. Eight locations were designated in 2013, including in New Haven, Conn., and Providence, R.I. Two more will be chosen in 2014.

The first Urban Wildlife Refuge Initiative partnership, designated in September, was with organizations working at Masonville Cove, a 125-acre site just outside Baltimore where the Patapsco River laps against a gently sloping shoreline. The property contains 54 acres of wetlands, making it an ideal habitat for many species of birds and fish. USFWS has begun working with local organizations to offer environmental education programs to the community.

The Living Classrooms Foundation, a nonprofit dedicated to educating urban youth, provides classes on the environment in the center’s energy-efficient building and leads nature walks on the site’s hiking trails. Staff from the National Aquarium, along with students and volunteers, have planted native grasses along portions of the site’s wetlands. Residents of Baltimore will be able to watch birds and try their hand at fly fishing from a new pier that juts into the cove. USFWS has developed a wildlife management plan for the site and is conducting outreach to schools, churches, and community groups. In the future, USFWS and its partners plan to fund biannual cleanups and the removal of invasive species.

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For more about the USFWS’s long-term plans, including the Urban Wildlife Refuge Initiative, visit [americaswildlife.org](http://americaswildlife.org).

The New Haven Harbor Watershed Urban Wildlife Refuge Partnership, a site designated in October, includes the Connecticut Audubon Society, Yale University, the New Haven Public Schools, and other agencies. Connecticut Audubon will continue its work providing oases of urban habitat for migratory birds, which require a network of stopovers on their long journeys. Oases will be created in places often overlooked as habitat for wildlife, such as front yards and vacant lots. USFWS is assisting with fundraising and is helping students create wildlife habitat on school grounds, assisting teachers in the development of lesson plans based on ecology and wildlife, and providing job training for students.

The number of Americans living in cities is increasing rapidly. USFWS hopes to provide the access to the outdoors enjoyed by previous, more rural generations and help inspire a new generation of wildlife conservationists. “We want to create some high-quality wildlife habitat and for the public to appreciate and ‘own’ this wildlife and see the value in protecting it,” says LaRouche. ●