

Chapter 1: Introduction, Purpose and Need, Planning Background



Algific slope located on Driftless Area NWR. USFWS

Introduction

This document is a Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) for the Driftless Area National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge). It follows the basic and accepted format for a CCP and stems from an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) that was completed in 2006.

The Driftless Area NWR was established in 1989 under the authority of the Endangered Species Act of 1973 for the protection and recovery of the federally threatened Northern monkshood plant (*Aconitum noveboracense*) and endangered Iowa Pleistocene snail (*Discus macclintocki*). These species primarily occur on a rare and fragile habitat type termed algific

talus slopes (cold air slopes). The habitat harbors species that require a cold environment, some of which date from the ice age. The habitat is described in more detail in Chapter 3. These are areas where cold underground air seeps onto slopes to provide a constant cold microenvironment.

The Refuge consists of nine scattered tracts or 'units' totaling 781 acres. The Refuge contains upland hardwood forests, grassland, stream and riparian habitats.

Refuge Purpose and Management Background

The purpose of Driftless Area NWR is to conserve fish or wildlife that are listed as endangered or threatened species or plants (16 USC 1534 Endangered Species Act of 1973). The purpose and goals of the Refuge are directly tied to recovery plans which describe the conditions needed to recover the Northern monkshood and Iowa Pleistocene snail (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 1983, 1984).

The Refuge currently consists of nine units in Allamakee, Clayton, Dubuque, and Jackson Counties in northeast Iowa (Figure 1). The Refuge encompasses 781 acres, with individual units ranging from 6 to 209 acres (Table 1). The original authorized acquisition area for the Refuge was approximately 700 acres in eight counties in Iowa, Illinois, and Wisconsin (Figure 1) (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 1986). The most recent acquisitions were through land exchanges in 2001 and 2002. The Refuge has reached its approved acquisition acreage.

The purposes and goals of the Refuge are directly tied to original recovery plans which describe the steps needed to recover and conserve the Northern monkshood and Iowa Pleistocene snail (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 1983, 1984). Because of the fragile nature of their habitat and the low number of populations for each of these species, the primary recovery goal for both species is protecting and conserving the majority of remaining populations and their habitat. The primary threats to the habitat are grazing, logging, sinkhole filling, erosion, pesticides, invasive species, and development. Therefore, acquisition also includes land surrounding the endangered species habitat to provide a buffer area from some of these threats.

A management prospectus was completed by the Refuge in 1990 (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service) to guide Refuge management. At that time, the Refuge consisted of the Howard Creek (208 acres) and Steeles Branch (15 acres) units. The prospectus outlined the need for strict protection of the algific slopes including fencing and signing, a low public use profile, and no development of public use facilities. Buffer areas to protect sinkholes, and cleaning of debris from sinkholes were also mentioned. Management of habitat surrounding algific slopes was to be through natural succession or planting, depending on the site. Most habitat management has occurred on the Howard Creek unit. Two former agricultural fields (51 acres) at the Howard Creek unit were planted with cool season grasses after cooperative farming ended around 1992. Over the years, box elder trees invaded these fields. Box elder trees and other invasive species were controlled with cooperative farming beginning in 1999 and 51 acres have been recently planted to native prairie grasses and forbs. Restoration and management of invasive species at this site are ongoing. Management on the other units has consisted of signing, fencing, law enforcement, and maintaining good relationships with the Refuge neighbors. The Howard Creek and Fern Ridge units were opened for public use in 1994. Northern monkshood population monitoring began in 1991 and Iowa Pleistocene snail population monitoring in 2001. Monitoring occurs on Refuge and sites owned by others.

Refuge Vision Statement

The vision for the Upper Mississippi River NWR Complex is:

The Complex is beautiful, healthy, and supports abundant and diverse native fish, wildlife, and plants for the enjoyment and thoughtful use of current and future generations. This can be stepped down to apply to Driftless Area NWR as follows: The Refuge is beautiful, healthy, and supports and conserves native and rare wildlife and plants for current and future generations.

Purpose and Need for the Plan

Purpose

Comprehensive conservation plans are designed to guide the management and administration of national wildlife refuges for a 15 year period, help ensure that each refuge meets the purpose for which it was established, and contribute to the overall mission of the Refuge System. The CCP helps describe a desired future condition of the Refuge, and provides both long-term and day-to-day guidance for management actions and decisions. It provides both broad and specific policy on various issues, sets goals and measurable objectives, and outlines strategies for reaching those objectives. A CCP also helps communicate to other agencies, and the public, a management direction for a refuge to meet the needs of wildlife and people.

A long-term management direction did not exist for Driftless Area NWR. Management was guided by endangered species recovery plans, general policies, and shorter-term plans. The Refuge Improvement Act of 1997 mandates that the Secretary of the Interior, and thus the Service, prepare CCPs for all units of the National Wildlife Refuge System by October, 2012. In addition to this mandate, there are several reasons why preparation of a CCP was needed. There are new threats to

Figure 1: Location of Driftless Area NWR in Iowa



endangered species habitat, new laws and policies have been put in place, new scientific information is available, and levels of public use and interest have increased.

The National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 requires that federal agencies, and thus the Service, follow basic requirements for major actions significantly affecting the quality of the human environment. These requirements are: 1) consider every significant aspect of the environmental impact of a proposed action, 2) involve the public in its decision-making process when considering environmental concerns, 3) use a systematic, interdisciplinary approach to decision making, and 4) consider a reasonable range of alternatives. The EIS documents met those requirements and provided the necessary information and analysis to the decision-maker.

Finally, the planning process was an excellent way to inform and involve the general public, state and federal agencies, and non-government groups who have an interest, responsibility, or authority in the management or use of certain aspects of Driftless Area NWR.

Need

This CCP will help ensure that management and administration of the Refuge meets the mission of the Refuge System, the purpose for which the Refuge was established, and the goals for the Refuge. The mission, purpose, and goals are considered needs. These three needs are summarized in the following paragraphs. More detail on issues related to these needs can be found in the next chapter.



Golden saxifrage, Driftless Area NWR

Need 1: Contribute to the Refuge System Mission.

The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System set forth in the Refuge Improvement Act of 1997 is:

“To administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans.”

Need 2: Help Fulfill the Refuge Purpose. The Refuge purpose is defined by the Endangered Species Act of 1973; that is: to conserve fish or wildlife which are listed as endangered or threatened species or plants (16 USC 1534 ESA). Achievement of the Refuge purpose will help reach endangered species recovery goals that will lead to delisting.

The Refuge has reached its existing approved acquisition acreage. Since Refuge establishment, additional information indicates the need to expand the Refuge geographic area and acreage, as well as to address ecological issues related to protection of endangered species.

Need 3: Help Achieve Refuge Goals.

Goal 1. Habitat: Conserve endangered species habitat and contribute to migratory bird and other wildlife habitats within a larger landscape. Related needs are to:

- # permanently conserve additional endangered species habitat to achieve delisting of the target species.
- # permanently conserve additional habitat for glacial relict species of concern to preclude listing
- # manage invasive species

- # restore grassland and forest habitats
- # assist others to manage off Refuge impacts to endangered species habitat

Goal 2. Species management: Manage and protect endangered species, other trust species, and species of management interest based on sound science through identification and understanding of algific slope communities and associated habitats. Related needs are to:

- # ensure all algific slopes and endangered species locations are known
- # inventory plants and animals associated with algific talus slopes
- # update the recovery plans for Iowa Pleistocene snail and Northern monkshood
- # determine the amount of buffer area needed to adequately protect algific slopes
- # assess deer impacts to the Refuge and endangered species

Goal 3. Visitor Services: Visitors understand and appreciate the role of the Refuge in protecting endangered species. Related needs are to:

- # provide wildlife-dependent recreation while protecting endangered species habitat
- # provide environmental education

National Wildlife Refuge System Mission, Goals, and Principles

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

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the primary Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing fish and wildlife and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. Specific responsibilities include enforcing Federal wildlife laws, managing migratory bird populations, restoring nationally important fisheries, administering the Endangered Species Act, and restoring wildlife habitat such as wetlands. The Service also manages the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Goals of the National Wildlife Refuge System

The Refuge System had its beginning in 1903 when President Theodore Roosevelt issued an Executive Order to set aside tiny Pelican Island in Florida as a refuge and breeding ground for birds. From that small beginning, the Refuge System has become the world's largest collection of lands specifically set aside for wildlife conservation. The administration, management, and growth of the Refuge System are guided by the following goals (Director's Order, January 18, 2001):

- # To fulfill our statutory duty to achieve refuge purposes and further the System mission.
- # To conserve, restore where appropriate, and enhance all species of fish, wildlife, and plants that are endangered or threatened with becoming endangered.
- # To perpetuate migratory bird, interjurisdictional fish, and marine mammal populations.
- # To conserve a diversity of fish, wildlife, and plants.
- # To conserve and restore where appropriate representative ecosystems of the United States, including the ecological processes characteristic of those ecosystems.
- # To foster understanding and instill appreciation of native fish, wildlife, and plants, and conservation, by providing the public with safe, high-quality, and compatible wildlife-dependent public use. Such use includes hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation.

The National Wildlife Refuge System is a network of more than 540 refuges encompassing 95 million acres of lands and waters, 41 wetland management districts that are responsible for 2.4 million acres of Waterfowl Production areas, and 50 coordination areas covering 317,000 acres that are managed by State fish and wildlife agencies under cooperative agreements. Refuge System lands span the continent from Alaska's Arctic tundra to the tropical forests in Florida and from the secluded atolls of Hawaii to the bogs of Maine.



Northern Flicker: U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

National wildlife refuges are established for different purposes. Most refuges have been established for the conservation of migratory birds, while some have been established to provide habitat for endangered species. Others have been formed to protect and propagate large mammals such as bison, elk, and desert bighorn sheep. Refuge habitats consist of a great diversity of plants and animals.

Refuges also provide unique opportunities for people. When it is compatible with wildlife and habitat needs, refuges can be used for wildlife-dependent activities such as hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, environmental education and environmental interpretation. Many refuges have visitor centers, wildlife trails, automobile tours, and environmental education programs. Nationwide, an estimated 39.5 million people visited national wildlife refuges in 2003.

The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 established many mandates aimed at making the management of national wildlife refuges more consistent. The preparation of comprehensive conservation plans is one of those mandates. The legislation requires 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. It also requires the Secretary to maintain the biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health of the Refuge System.

Legal and Policy Framework

Driftless Area NWR is managed and administered as part of the National Wildlife Refuge System within a framework of organizational setting, laws, and policy. Key aspects of this framework are outlined below. A list of other laws and executive orders that have guided preparation of the CCP and EIS, and guide future implementation, are provided in Appendix E.

Driftless Area NWR is managed as part of the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge Complex. The complex is completing a Comprehensive Conservation Plan for each unit, including Upper Mississippi River NWFR, Trempealeau NWR, and Driftless Area NWR. Because of the different purpose, land base, and management needs of Driftless Area NWR, this CCP is separate but following much the same time line and process as the other CCPs.

Compatibility Policy

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.

Wilderness Review

As part of the CCP process, we reviewed the lands within the boundaries of Driftless Area NWR for wilderness suitability. No lands were found suitable for designation as Wilderness as defined in the Wilderness Act of 1964. The Refuge does not contain 5,000 contiguous roadless acres, nor does the Refuge have any units of sufficient size to make their preservation practicable as Wilderness.