



Crab Orchard

National Wildlife Refuges

Summary

*Final Environmental Impact Statement and
Comprehensive Conservation Plan*

August 2006

Final Environmental Impact Statement and Comprehensive Conservation Plan Released

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has finalized the integrated Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) and Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) for Crab Orchard National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) in Illinois. We are grateful to all of the neighbors, visitors, non-government organizations, local officials and many interested citizens who contributed to this planning effort over the course of 6 years.

The comprehensive conservation plan outlines how the Refuge will fulfill its legal purpose and contribute to the National Wildlife Refuge System’s wildlife, habitat, and public use goals. The plan articulates management goals for the next 15 years and specifies the objectives and strategies needed to accomplish these goals. While the planned future condition is long term, we anticipate that the plan will be reviewed, and possibly updated, every 5 to 10 years based on information gained through monitoring habitat and wildlife, as well as recreational use.



Canada Geese, Crab Orchard NWR

Where You Can Find the Final EIS and CCP

The Final EIS/CCP is available online at: www.fws.gov/midwest/planning/craborchard. Copies are also available in libraries in communities surrounding the Refuge. The Final EIS/CCP is also available on compact disc (CD). To request a copy, call the Refuge at 618-997-3344 or write to the Refuge at:

Crab Orchard National Wildlife Refuge
8588 Route 148
Marion, IL 62959.

Next Steps

After the Final EIS/CCP has been available for at least 30 days, the Regional Director, U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Twin Cities, Minnesota will issue a document called a “Record of Decision.” The Record of Decision will officially document the

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Figure 1: Location of Crab Orchard NWR



choice of the management alternative and resulting CCP. We will then assemble a stand-alone CCP from the Final EIS/CCP. The stand-alone CCP will be the working document for the Refuge. It will be available for others, as well.

During the 30-day waiting period, the public or agencies may provide additional information or comments, although no public meetings will be held. Comments may be submitted by mail to the Refuge at the address above; or you may comment by e-mail through a link on the Refuge planning website www.fws.gov/midwest/planning/craborchard.

Who We Are and What We Do

The Refuge is administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service), the primary federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing the nation's fish and wildlife populations and their habitats. The Service oversees the enforcement of federal wildlife laws, management and protection of migratory bird populations, restoration of nationally significant fisheries, administration of the Endangered Species Act, and the restoration of wildlife habitat such as wetlands. The Service also manages the National Wildlife Refuge System, which was founded in 1903 when President Theodore Roosevelt designated Pelican Island in Florida as a sanctuary for Brown Pelicans.

Today, the Refuge System is a network of over 545 refuges covering more than 95 million acres of public lands and waters. Most of these lands (82 percent) are in Alaska, with approximately 16 million acres located in the lower 48 states and several island territories. Overall, the Refuge System provides habitat for more than 5,000 species of birds, mammals, fish, and insects. Refuges also provide unique opportunities for people. When it is compatible with wildlife and habitat conservation, they are places where people can enjoy wildlife-dependent recreation such as hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, environmental education, and environmental interpretation.

Background

A CCP is being prepared to guide the administration and management of the Refuge for the next 15 years. An EIS has been prepared as part of the process, and integrates the components of a CCP (goals, objectives, and strategies) with the requirements of an EIS (alternatives, description of the environment, consequences, and comments with response).

Comprehensive conservation plans are required by the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 to ensure that refuges are managed in accordance with their purposes and the mission of the Refuge System.

Crab Orchard NWR was established in 1947 for wildlife, agriculture, recreation and industry. Located in southern Illinois, the Refuge consists of 43,888 acres, which includes a designated Wilderness Area of 4,050 acres. The Refuge provides habitat for many species of wildlife with a focus on providing food for wintering Canada Geese. The Refuge hosts over 1 million recreational visits each year. People come to boat, water ski, swim, camp, picnic, hunt, fish, and see wildlife among other activities. About 1.2 million square feet of space is currently leased by the Refuge for industrial use that is chiefly the manufacture of munitions. Figure 1 shows the location of the Refuge.

Refuge Vision Statement

The desired future state of the Refuge is described in its vision statement, which helped guide the planning effort. The vision for the Refuge is:

The citizens of Southern Illinois recognize the staff of Crab Orchard National Wildlife Refuge as government employees who listen and care and who meet significant management challenges in a sensible way. Within the Fish and Wildlife Service, Crab Orchard National Wildlife Refuge is recognized not for its exceptions, but for its exceptional management. The Refuge is held as an example of an area once contaminated that is now clean and safe for humans and wildlife. The viewer of a satellite photograph can easily distinguish the Refuge with its large blocks of habitat and its clean water lakes from the surrounding fragmented and developed landscape. Wildlife thrives. Farmers take pride in their operations on the Refuge because they use model conservation practices, benefit wildlife, and make money. The Refuge and the community are proud to contribute to the Nation's defense through the industry that is hosted on the Refuge. In Southern Illinois where a spectrum of outdoor recreation opportunities ranges from the highly developed to the primitive, the Refuge is known for high quality wildlife-dependent opportunities.

The Planning Process

We began asking for public comments regarding the Comprehensive Conservation Plan in October 2000. Three public, open house meetings were held. Hundreds of letters and comments were received. We invited approximately 60 stakeholders who had demonstrated a longstanding interest in the Refuge to three focus group meetings in January 2001. In September 2001, we described four alternative management concepts in a project update and invited people to comment on the concepts. We received 62 letters, 39 e-mail messages, and 527 form letters commenting on the alternatives. We also received a petition supporting gasoline motors on Devils Kitchen Lake.

The Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) and Comprehensive Conservation Plan was distributed in October 2005 with a 90-day comment period that ended January 17, 2006. Nearly 2,000 comments were received via letters, emails, public meeting comment forms, petition, and oral comments. The total accounts for numerous repetitious comments included in form letters. There were 642 commentors on the DEIS. Some commentors submitted comments on a number of topics and sometimes in multiple forms.

Main Points of the Proposed Plan

- Provide for wintering Canada Geese at approximately current levels.
- Continue current management of resident fish and wildlife.
- Recommend an additional 120 acres for Wilderness designation.
- Propose the acquisition of lands that are surrounded by the Refuge and some land along the boundary. We would buy only from willing sellers.
- Reduce forest and grassland fragmentation to benefit certain birds.
- Improve the quality of recreation through consolidation and improvement of facilities.
- Eliminate area designations.
- Maintain the existing group camps.
- Limit camping stays to 14 days.
- Redefine the recreational fee structure.



Crab Orchard NWR

- Expand the no-wake zones on Crab Orchard Lake.
- Officially designate a trail through the Wilderness for hiking and equestrian use.
- Emphasize conservation practices in the agricultural program.
- Continue to provide for defense munitions manufacture.

Changes to the Draft Environmental Impact Statement

Typographical and editorial corrections have been made throughout the document based on the comments of thorough reviewers. These changes are acknowledged in Chapter 7 of the Final Environmental Statement. We have added Executive Order 13186, Responsibilities of Federal Agencies to Protect Migratory Birds, in Appendix C, which lists the key laws and orders that we must follow. In Chapter 4 we have inserted a section that describes the effects of prescribed fire on animals, and we have included “wilderness resource” as a category in assessing potential impacts of each alternative. We have acknowledged that projected timelines in the document are outdated because of the length of the planning process. We will adjust the target dates to reflect the 15 year time-frame of the plan when the final CCP, which will consist of parts of the current document, is published.

Below are the major changes and clarifications made to Alternative E, the preferred alternative, from the Draft to Final EIS. All changes and clarifications were made as a result of comments on the Draft EIS.

Changes

Forest Management

We received a comment that our general forest management program needs to be described in more detail. We agree. Accordingly, we have modified the Features Common to All Alternatives section to include an objective and strategies to address general hardwood forest management. The objective is to manage forest land to favor oak-hickory forest types on suitable sites with all age classes from seedling stage to old-growth represented and to manage native, shade-tolerant tree species (such as sugar maple) to prevent wide-



Crab Orchard Lake Beach, Crab Orchard NWR

spread succession to climax forest cover types. Our rationale for this objective is that oaks are keystone species that are essential to a healthy, diverse forest ecosystem in this area. Typically, with a lack of disturbance shade-tolerant trees increase in dominance while oaks steadily decrease, and understory diversity is greatly diminished. Because timber harvesting, prescribed burning, and other methods of disturbance must occur for oaks to flourish on many sites, we have included these techniques as possible strategies in our proposed forest management program. Much greater detail regarding this program will be presented in the Refuge’s *Habitat Management Plan*, which is a step-down plan scheduled to be completed after the CCP is approved.

Fourteen Day Camping Length of Stay

We have modified and made more explicit our initial proposal to phase in the 14-day length of stay. We have incorporated ideas expressed in some of the comments. Part of our modification is to designate areas of the Crab Orchard and Little Grassy Campgrounds as long-term camping for the first 2 years. In the following 2 years we plan to limit lengths of stay to 28 days in the long-term area. The following paragraph clarifies and explicitly states the proposal in our preferred alternative.

The length of stay limit of 14 nights, which is comparable with other Federal and State campgrounds, will be phased in. For the first 2 years, approximately one-half of the campsites would remain available for long-term camping and the other half for stays up to 14 days maximum. The second 2-year period would permit up to one-third of campsites be available for 28-day stays and the remaining two-thirds would be limited to 14-day maximum stays. Finally, beginning in the fifth year

camping would be exclusively 14-day maximum stays. At the end of a camping stay, we would require persons to remove all camping equipment from the campground for a minimum of 48 hours. Personal property such as trailers or recreational vehicles may not be stored in the campground during this 48-hour period. In addition, a reservation system will be phased in for Refuge campgrounds.

Devils Kitchen Campground

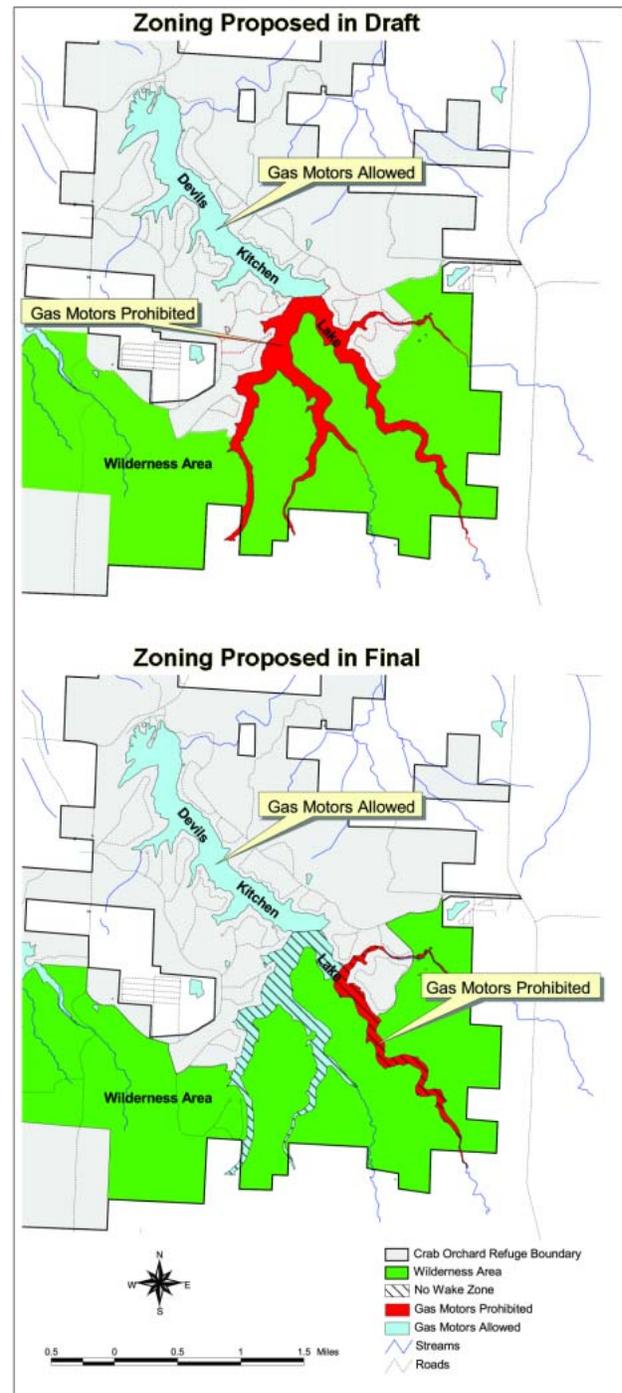
In the Draft our preferred alternative included closing the Devils Kitchen Campground. Based on the suggested compromise of the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, we have changed our proposal to include the provision of primitive camping, boat rental, and picnicking opportunities by a concessionaire at Devils Kitchen. We feel that these low-impact activities are compatible with wildlife and support the recreation purpose of the Refuge. We agree with the DNR comments that primitive camping may appeal to visitors who use non-motorized watercraft.

Gas Motors on Devils Kitchen Lake

In the Draft our proposal was to prohibit the use of gas motors south of the southern-most boat ramps on Devils Kitchen Lake. Based on concerns expressed in comments and a site visit, we have modified our proposal and expanded the area in which gas motors would be permitted. Our proposal in the preferred alternative of the Final limits the use of gas motors on Devils Kitchen Lake in Grassy Creek and the eastern arm of Devils Kitchen Lake from the mouth of Grassy Creek south to the Refuge boundary. The portion of the lake south of Line Road 6 boat ramp will be designated a no-wake zone.

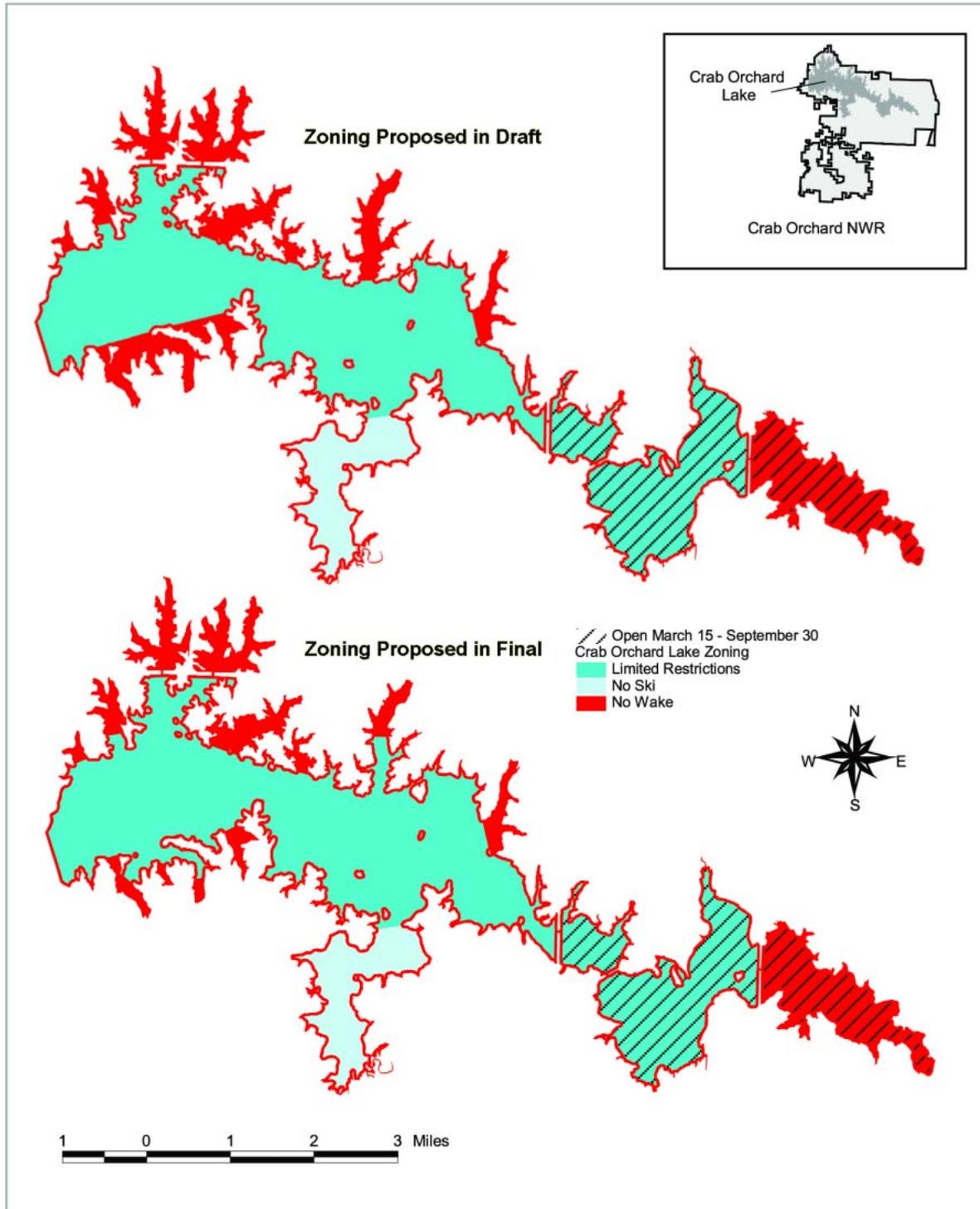
The modification will allow continued access to the majority (85 percent) of the lake by boats using gas motors and provide the power that some feel is required for safe navigation. Boats equipped with gas motors would be able to use the entire lake, but would be required to use only an electric motor or paddles for propulsion on 107 acres (15 percent) of the lake. Our intent for the modification is to offer an area on one of the large Refuge lakes that would provide a different boating experience for the public and also address the concerns of gas motor users. We feel that offering a different boating experience on a portion of the Refuge may make Devils Kitchen Lake more attractive to some users and actually

Figure 2: Devils Kitchen Lake Zoning



increase recreational use. The zoning on Devils Kitchen Lake proposed in the Draft and Final are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 3: Crab Orchard Lake Zoning



No Wake Zones on Crab Orchard Lake

In the Draft we proposed including most of the coves as additional no wake zones for Crab Orchard Lake. We have modified our original proposal and reduced the extent of the no-wake zone based on comments that we received from waterskiers. They pointed out that particular coves are protected from prevailing winds and are valuable for waterskiing. We have reduced the size of the no-wake zones in the lake in our proposal to better accommodate waterskiing. The no wake zones proposed in the Draft and Final are shown in Figure 3.

Clarifications

Recreation Fee Program

We received a comment that pointed out confusion and inconsistency in our discussion of recreation fees. We have changed the text in the Final EIS to correct our error. Table 1 on page 29 of the Draft EIS correctly reflected our proposal. Congress passed an act during planning that changed how we propose to collect fees. The table was updated, but not the text. Entrance fees provide access into a recreation site and user fees authorize a visitor to use specific facilities, programs or resources sponsored by a recreation site. We collected fees in the past as user fees under authority of the Omnibus Consolidated Rescissions and Appropriations Act of 1996. The Service is now collecting fees under the authority of the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (REA), which was a part of the *2005 Consolidated Appropriations Act (PL 108-447)*. In the language of the REA, a user fee is referred to as an expanded amenity recreation fee. To meet the direction of the REA, we are now going to collect an entrance fee and an expanded amenity recreation fee for boat launching facilities and quota hunts. The proposed fee schedule reflects the multiple categories and classifications for how the entrance fee can be paid and the user fees for boat launching. Our proposal is consistent with the standard schedule for most refuges.

Competitive Fishing Events

In the Draft we sought to clarify our policy related to large fishing tournaments and small competitive fishing events called "Fish-offs." We have added language to the Final to be more explicit. The following paragraph describes our management of Fish-offs.



Ruddy Duck, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Fish-offs are club events that have 20 boats or fewer with a scheduled date, time, and ramp on either Crab Orchard, Devils Kitchen or Little Grassy Lakes. Fish-offs are regulated by a fish-off permit. Any organization may have one fish-off per lake, per year, for a total of three Refuge fish-offs. We allow one fish-off per lake per day and do not allow any to take place on holiday weekends, i.e., Memorial Day, Fourth of July, Labor Day. Fish-off permits are issued on a first-come, first-served basis.

Into the Future

Throughout the planning process, many people have contributed time and ideas to make the Crab Orchard NWR EIS and CCP a better document. We are grateful to everyone who cared enough about the Refuge and its future to participate in this planning effort.

To succeed, a refuge management plan has to adapt to changing ecological conditions. We expect to review the plan every 5 to 10 years in response to conditions that could not be anticipated in the planning process. We will continue to welcome your thoughts on Refuge management. We hope that you will continue to care about and participate in the future of Crab Orchard NWR.