

Summary

Located east of Toledo, Ohio, on the southwestern shore of Lake Erie, the Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge Complex provides critical wetland habitats for a diversity of wildlife, fish and plants. As a major migration corridor, the area is vital to migratory birds including waterfowl, shorebirds, raptors and songbirds that need rest and food either after crossing Lake Erie on their way south or before they head back north over the water. As much as 70 percent of the Mississippi flyway's population of black ducks use Lake Erie marshes for migration.

The Ottawa Refuge Complex consists of three national wildlife refuges: Ottawa, Cedar Point and West Sister Island. This Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) identifies the role each refuge will play in supporting the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System. The plan articulates long-term management goals and specifies objectives and strategies that will achieve those goals. The plan also meets the requirements of the National

Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act enacted in 1997. The CCP for the Ottawa Refuge Complex is meant to be a guide for refuge managers, visitors, nearby community leaders and others interested in the wildlife resources of Ohio's coastal marshes. The CCP will be of value to anyone wishing to chart the course for action on these three refuges for the next 10-15 years.

In accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act, the Draft CCP included an Environmental Assessment (EA) that presented four alternatives for future management of the Ottawa Refuge Complex. Each alternative was designed to contain a reasonable mix of fish and wildlife habitat prescriptions and

wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities. The environmental consequences of each alternative were described and compared in the EA. The planning team chose an alternative that called for improving the quality of services to refuge visitors and shifting habitat emphasis to include more wooded wetlands, natural marsh and scrub/shrub lands. The EA is included as Appendix A in this document.

The CCP planning process began in July 1997 with informal discussions among refuge staff and a 2-day scoping session with local residents and representatives of groups concerned with the future of the Ottawa Refuge Complex. Members of the public were invited to attend two local open house events in November 1997. In addition to the open house events, the planning team sought input from technical experts, including a group of regional migratory bird biologists and others. The public was also invited to comment



Photo by Sharon Cummings



on a concept newsletter distributed in January 1999 and on the Draft CCP when it was available in June-July 2000.

Goals, objectives and strategies were developed individually for Ottawa, Cedar Point and West Sister Island National Wildlife Refuges even though they share many similar goals. Goals were developed under three major categories: Wildlife, Habitat and People. The following are the goals for the Ottawa Refuge:

- Wildlife:* Maintain native wildlife populations in balance with the habitat available while decreasing and limiting exotic plant and animal species. Surveys based on sound scientific methods for fish and wildlife populations will be conducted to determine viable habitat prescriptions to enhance the attractiveness of the refuge for optimum numbers of species and peak populations.
- Habitat:* Restore functional components of the Lake Erie marsh ecosystem which includes marshes, wooded wetlands, estuary, and scrub/shrub to provide benefits to endangered species, waterfowl, shorebirds, migratory songbirds, colonial waterbirds, fish, and other species of concern.
- People:* Provide public outreach and wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities to a diverse audience by offering a variety of quality educational and recreational activities when they are compatible with wildlife needs. This will promote understanding, appreciation, and support for the Ottawa Refuge Complex and the entire National Wildlife Refuge System.

Please refer to the CCP for details on objectives and strategies. In general, objectives were written to show desired quantity and to be measurable, especially under the habitat goal. The plan lists more than 60 strategies to achieve refuge management goals for the Ottawa Refuge alone.

This CCP outlines an ambitious course of action for the future management of the Ottawa Refuge Complex. The ability to intensively manage water impoundments, especially to benefit migratory birds, is relatively expensive. The Service will need to retain supplemental funding in order to implement many of the objectives in this plan. The highest priority projects include a Visitor Education Center, habitat restoration on acquired lands and improved access to refuge trails.

The goals outlined in this CCP need the support and partnership of Federal, state, and local agencies; non-governmental organizations; and individuals. An ecosystem approach to managing fish and wildlife resources extends beyond social and political boundaries and requires a broad base of support and diverse stakeholder strengths and interests. The Ottawa Refuge Complex CCP has been written with the participation of refuge users, conservation organizations and the local community. Refuge staff and the entire planning team are grateful to all of the people who have contributed their time, expertise and ideas to this effort.

