



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Sherburne *National Wildlife Refuge* Comprehensive Conservation Plan

Project Update

February 2006

Comprehensive Conservation Plan Approved

A planning effort that involved neighbors, non-government organizations, local officials and many interested citizens has concluded with the completion of a comprehensive conservation plan (CCP) for Sherburne National Wildlife Refuge (NWR). The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service approved the plan and is making it available online at: <http://www.fws.gov/midwest/planning/sherburne>

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 updated every 5 to 10 years based on information gained through monitoring habitat and wildlife, as well as recreational usage.

Major achievements include restoring uplands to historic habitats, establishing a Visitors' Center, improved hunting opportunities, and fostering partnerships to assist the Refuge in achieving wildlife and habitat goals.

About the Refuge

The 30,575-acre Refuge was established in 1965 at the urging of local conservationists and sportsmen interested in restoring the wildlife values of the St. Francis River Basin, which had been altered by a series of drainage ditches and agricultural production. The land was purchased under the authority of the Migratory Bird Conservation Act of 1929 and is now part of the National Wildlife Refuge System.



Photo by Gary Moss

Sherburne NWR lies on the edge of three important plant communities in Minnesota: the coniferous forests to the north, the broadleaf forests to the southeast, and the prairies to the west.

The Refuge's sandy, thin soils tell the story of the geological history of land that is known as the Anoka Sandplain. Ten thousand years ago, the area was formed as a sandy glacial lake bottom after the Wisconsin glacier started to melt and retreat. A small river, the St. Francis River, runs through the Refuge and drains into the Elk River, which ultimately enters the Mississippi River south of the Refuge boundary.

The land in the area of the Refuge was originally surveyed in 1855, prior to European settlement, by James Marsh. Marsh described a typical township as follows:

“There are quite a number of lakes and ponds in this township, with some fen marshes and tamarack swamps. The surface is gently rolling, soil sandy and light and...second and third rate timber very poor scattering. Mostly a growth of black and bur oaks, aspens with tamarack in the swamps.. there are no settlers in this township.”



Oak savanna habitat, Sherburne NWR

Sherburne NWR represents the largest public land holding in the County. However, urban development throughout the Anoka Sandplain is a major conservation concern. This includes lands surrounding the Refuge. Due to its location and easy access to the St. Cloud and the Twin Cities urban centers, residential and, to a lesser extent, light business development is occurring rapidly in the area around the Refuge. Lands directly adjacent to the Refuge are developing into rural residential and residential subdivisions, especially on the Refuge's east, southeast, and south sides.

Where You Can Find the CCP

The CCP is available online at <http://www.fws.gov/midwest/planning/sherburne>. Copies are also available in libraries in communities surrounding the Refuge. To request a copy, call the Refuge at 763/389-3323 or write to the Refuge at:

Sherburne National Wildlife Refuge
17076 293rd Avenue
Zimmerman, MN 55398

The Planning Process

The planning process for this comprehensive conservation plan began in early 2001. Seven public meetings and workshops were conducted between May 2001 and September 2002. Invitees and participants included members of the public, Ojibway and Dakota Tribes, Sherburne Refuge Friends Group, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, The Nature Conservancy, the University of Minnesota and U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) scientists from Upper Midwest Environmental Sciences Center. The Sherburne NWR CCP planning effort

was unique in that USGS wildlife scientists and university contacts were heavily involved in determining habitat management alternatives, goals, and objectives. The planning effort also benefited from the creative involvement of the public, tribal, state, university, and federal participants.

The Draft CCP and Environmental Assessment (EA) was released for public review and comment on July 18, 2005. A Draft CCP/EA or a summary of the document was sent to more than 200 individuals, organizations, elected officials and local, state, and federal agencies. Both the summary and the full Draft CCP were available on the Sherburne NWR planning web page.

An open house was held on August 17, 2005, at the Refuge following release of the draft document. We received a total of 12 comment letters and e-mails during the 45-day review period. Appendix K of the CCP summarizes these comments and our responses. Several of the comments resulted in changes in the CCP.

Who We Are and What We Do

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. Our specific responsibilities include enforcing federal wildlife laws, managing migratory bird populations, restoring nationally significant fisheries, administering the Endangered Species Act, and restoring wildlife habitat such as wetlands.

The Service's role also includes managing the National Wildlife Refuge System, a network of more than 540 national wildlife refuges encompassing more than 93 million acres of public land and water.



Waterfowl hunting on Sherburne NWR

Refuge Vision

In a region where citizens treasure natural areas managed by national, state, and local governments, the Refuge is celebrated for its wildlife and the extraordinary opportunities it provides for visitors. The Refuge conserves a diverse mosaic of restored, high-quality, native Anoka Sandplain communities and protected cultural resources. The upland habitats are dynamic, ranging from grasslands to oak savanna to forest. These are interspersed with a variety of wetland and riverine habitats ranging from sedge meadow to deep water marsh. The Refuge's hydrologic regime includes a functional St. Francis River riparian system, with clean water flowing into and out of the Refuge. Wildlife and habitat are in balance, and management reflects an adaptive response to climatic change and other changing conditions, using pre-European settlement vegetation as a guide.

Visitors have high-quality experiences that provide personal and societal benefits, including heightened awareness and support of a strong conservation ethic. Refuge staff, visitors, and the community understand and value the cultural history of the area. Visitor use and management activities are consistent with the maintenance of sustainable populations of wildlife and their associated habitats. The Refuge is part of the community and the community claims ownership of, actively supports, and advocates for the Refuge mission, purpose, and programs. The surrounding lands are recognized as valuable to the integrity of the Refuge by providing green corridors and habitat continuity to adjacent natural areas.

Refuge Goals

Goal 1: Upland Anoka Sandplain habitats approximate mid-1800s conditions, contributing to the preservation of these declining ecotypes and their associated Service priority species.

Goal 2: A diverse mosaic of riverine and wetland habitats meets the needs of Service priority riparian and other wetland-dependent species.

Goal 3: A balanced diversity of native migratory birds and other native wildlife reflects an emphasis on Service priority species appropriate to Refuge habitats.



Waterfowl at Sherburne NWR

Goal 4: A complex of natural areas, corridors, and watershed conservation practices in the surrounding landscape complements Refuge habitat and wildlife goals.

Goal 5: Visitors enjoy wildlife-dependent opportunities that further an appreciation of Refuge wildlife and habitats.

Goal 6: Visitors and local citizens demonstrate a strong conservation ethic that leads to support of the Refuge, conservation of the surrounding landscape, and global environmental awareness.

Goal 7: The cultural resources and cultural history of the Refuge are valued and preserved, and connect Refuge staff, visitors, and the community to the area's past.

Planned Refuge Program Highlights

The Comprehensive Conservation Plan identifies a number of key programs and strategies that can be implemented:

Upland Habitat Management and Restoration: A large focal area of upland habitat will be managed as oak savanna and will be one of the largest oak savanna restorations in the Midwest. Sherburne NWR will seek to increase the area of these native habitats that have declined nationally over the past century. Simultaneously, the Refuge will aim to reduce the area now taken over by lowland shrub, aspen/mixed hardwood, and cattail or phragmites-dominated marsh, which either have lower intrinsic value for wildlife or have simply become too abundant. In turn, these habitat shifts will help those wildlife species associated with the rarer habitats.

New Approaches to Wetland Management: The wetlands of Sherburne NWR will be managed to maximize their productivity for water birds in migration. This means that many of the wetlands will be drawn down asynchronously on a 4- to 5-year cycle to simulate semipermanent wetlands. This wetland type creates a dynamic cycling of water and nutrients and provides a rich resource for all waterbirds.

Refuge management will maintain a portion of the current water impoundment system to provide migratory habitat for water birds. This would create a diversity of wetland types to support water-dependent species. A hydrologic study is proposed with the understanding that the information gained may require refining and revising planned management actions.

Expanded Partnerships: A principal theme throughout the CCP is the tremendous potential for expanding and reinvigorating partnerships to attain the purpose, goals, and objectives of the Refuge. Existing and potential partners include nearby communities, industries, tribal, state and local governments, private citizens, and non-profit organizations. Many such partnerships already exist, but the Refuge has further potential for bringing together larger and more effective private and public partnerships for the mutual benefit of the Refuge as well as these stakeholders.

Expanded Visitor Services: The new visitors' center will be designed to provide optimal educational opportunities for teaching the visiting public and school groups about Refuge wildlife and habitat management. The visitor's education begins on the short walk from the parking area to the building, which leads through oak savanna and prairie opening habitat, preparing visitors visually for the messages they will receive inside. Outside the visitors' center a modest trail system will provide an opportunity for short-stay visitors and school groups to experience oak savanna, prairie opening and wetland habitats. Other facilities will include interpretive signs providing habitat and wildlife messages, an observation deck for wildlife viewing, and a wetland boardwalk to facilitate wetland studies.

In addition to the proposed new visitors' center, improvements to visitor services will be accomplished as environmental education and interpretation programming continues to grow. Additional information kiosks and interpretive panels are possible. Partnerships with local schools, communities and businesses will also facilitate improved programming.



Sandhill Cranes, Sherburne NWR

Improved Hunting Opportunities: Sherburne NWR has a long-standing tradition of providing hunting opportunities for waterfowl, white-tailed deer, and upland game. The CCP outlines several strategies to improve on this program and provide for increased appreciation of the Refuge by the hunting public. The CCP calls for the Refuge to develop an operational definition of success and measures for hunting through a survey of hunter satisfaction. The survey will include indicators directed toward recreational users with disabilities. In addition, the Refuge will increase hunting opportunities from the current level offered by adding a spring turkey hunt for hunters with disabilities.

Into the Future

Throughout the comprehensive conservation planning process, many people have contributed time and ideas to make the Sherburne NWR CCP a better plan. 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 nature's everchanging conditions. Although the plan is complete, we expect to revise it 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.

Sherburne NWR is a place for both wildlife and people to use and enjoy, now and in the future. We hope that you will continue to care about and participate in conserving the Refuge's wildlife and habitat.