



Horicon and Fox River

National Wildlife Refuges

Summary

Comprehensive Conservation Plan

April 2007

Introduction

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 Horicon National Wildlife Refuge and Fox River 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/horicon.html>

Paper copies and compact disks with an electronic version of the CCP are also available. Please call the Refuge at 920/387-2658 to request a copy or CD-Rom. Copies of the CCP are also available for review at Horicon NWR and at libraries in Beaver Dam, Fox Lake, Mayville, Iron Ridge, Juneau, Oakfield, Waupun, and Horicon.

The comprehensive conservation plan is intended to outline 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



Horicon Marsh, Horicon NWR

strategies needed to accomplish these goals. While the planned future condition is long-term, we anticipate that the plan will be reviewed and, if needed, updated every 5 to 10 years based on information gained through monitoring habitat and wildlife, as well as recreational usage.

While comprehensive conservation plans outline management direction, they do not constitute a commitment for staffing increases, operational and maintenance increases, or funding for future land acquisition.

Vital Statistics

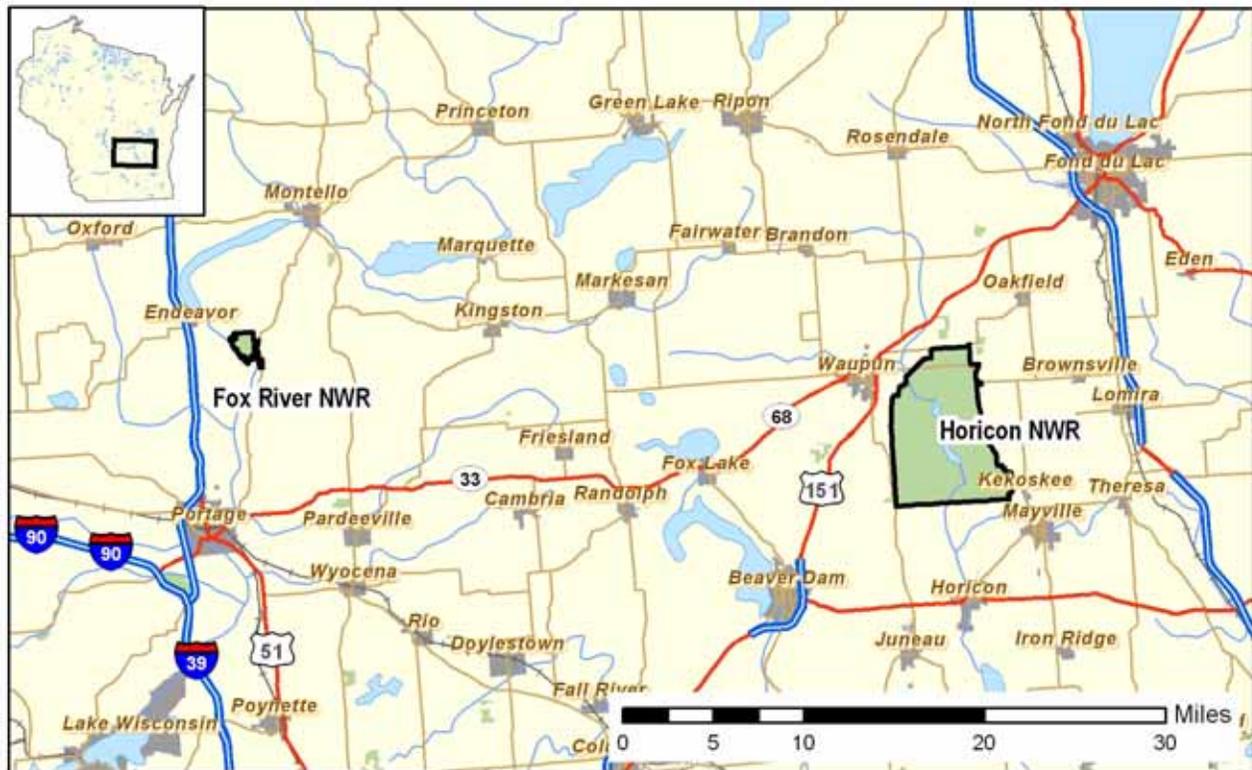
Horicon NWR

Horicon Marsh is the largest freshwater cattail marsh in the United States, consisting of some 32,000 acres. The marsh is 14 miles long and 3 to 5 miles wide and has been classified as a palustrine system dominated by persistent emergent vegetation and floating vascular aquatic beds. The southern one-third of the marsh is managed by the

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Figure 1: Location of Horicon and Fox River National Wildlife Refuges



Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) while the northern two-thirds of the marsh is managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Current Refuge ownership consists of over 15,500 acres of marsh and 5,600 acres of associated upland habitat. Marsh habitat is seasonally to permanently flooded and dominated by cattail, river bulrush, common reed grass, sedges, and reed canary grass. Uplands include nearly 2,000 acres of woodlands and 3,600 acres of grasslands.

Resource management at the Refuge involves using a variety of techniques to preserve and enhance habitats for wildlife, with programs both in marsh and upland management. Marsh management involves the manipulation of water levels to achieve a desired succession of wetland plant communities to meet the seasonal needs of wildlife populations. Upland management includes establishing and maintaining grasslands to provide nesting habitat for ducks, Sandhill Cranes, and various song birds. Management objectives include waterfowl production and migratory bird use, with Redhead ducks being emphasized.

Fox River NWR

Established in 1979, Fox River NWR consists of 1,004 acres of land located 10 miles north of Portage, Wisconsin, along County Road F. The Refuge is administered by staff at Horicon NWR, approximately 40 miles to the east.

The majority of the Refuge is shallow marsh, sedge meadow, fen, or wet prairie wetlands. Upland prairie and forest is also present on the Refuge. The matrix of wetland and upland habitat provides excellent habitat for both wetland and upland associated wildlife, such as ducks, Greater Sandhill Cranes, herons, rails, songbirds, deer, turkey, and Bobwhite Quail. Approximately 50 cranes use the Refuge during the summer and more than 300 use it as a staging area during fall migration.

Current management on the Refuge is focused on restoring historic upland habitats including oak savanna and open grasslands. The natural hydrology of the area is also being restored primarily through the filling of agricultural

drainage ditches. Visitor facilities and opportunities are minimal but include two parking areas, signs, and an annual deer hunt.

Fox River NWR is located across the highway from a County Park named after John Muir, a famous conservationist in the 19th and early 20th centuries, who lived near the County Park and the Refuge during part of his boyhood years.

Who We Are and What We Do

The Refuges are 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



White-tail deer buck, Horicon NWR

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.

Refuge Vision Statements

Horicon NWR

Horicon National Wildlife Refuge will be beautiful, healthy, and support abundant and diverse native fish, wildlife, and plants for the enjoyment and thoughtful use of current and future generations. The Refuge's hydrologic regime will include a functional Rock River riparian system, with clean water flowing into and out of the Refuge. The Refuge will be a place where people treasure an incredible resource that upholds the distinction of a Wetland of International Importance.

Fox River NWR

Fox River National Wildlife Refuge will consist of diverse, productive habitats and wildlife that provides conditions found historically (pre-European settlement) in the Upper Fox River watershed. Specifically, the Refuge consists of a mosaic of oak savanna, dry and wet prairie, fens, sedge meadow, and shallow marsh habitats managed to perpetuate a variety of native plant and wildlife species, namely those of priority to the Service.

Refuge staff, located at Horicon NWR, are a multi-disciplined team dedicated to providing quality habitat and wildlife management, as well as quality wildlife-dependent public use opportunities compatible with Refuge purposes. Local communities and visitors value the Refuge for the personal, financial, and societal benefits it provides. A strong conservation ethic is promoted in the surrounding communities where both John Muir and Aldo Leopold were inspired by nature's beauty, complexity, and value.

The Planning Process

A team that included Refuge staff and Regional Office planners prepared the CCP for Horicon and Fox River NWRs. The CCP was published in two phases and in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). The Draft Environmental Assessment was included as Appendix A in the Draft CCP. The Draft EA presented a range of alternatives for future management and identified the preferred alternative. The alternative that was selected has become the basis of the Final CCP and will guide management on the Refuge over the coming 15-year period. It will guide the development of more detailed step-down management plans for specific resource areas and it will underpin the annual budgeting process through submissions to the Refuge Operating Needs System (RONs) and Maintenance Management System (MMS). Most importantly, it will direct day-to-day decision-making and actions for managing habitat, wildlife, and visitors at Horicon and Fox River NWRs.

The CCP planning process began in January 2005 when Refuge staff and Service staff in the Regional Office met to identify issues and opportunities for Refuge management. The next step was to invite the public to share views on Refuge management, including neighbors, people interested in the Refuges' future, and representatives of local government, state and other federal agencies, and non-governmental organizations. In March 2005 the Refuge hosted open house events held in Montello, Wisconsin, for Fox River NWR and in Waupun and Mayville, Wisconsin, for Horicon NWR. Approximately 25 people attended.

The Draft CCP/EA was released for public review and comment on July 10, 2006. A Draft CCP/EA or a summary of the document was sent to more than 600 individuals, organizations, and local, state, and federal agencies and elected officials. Following the release of the document, an open house to discuss the Draft was held on August 9, 2006, at the Horicon NWR Headquarters. Another open house was held on August 10, 2006, at Moundville Town Hall to discuss the Draft CCP as it related to Fox River NWR. We received a total of 35 comment letters and e-mails during the 45-day review period.

Throughout the planning process, public input was encouraged and obtained in a variety of ways, including open houses, written comments during a public scoping period, issue-based focus groups, and personal contacts.

As a first step in developing management alternatives to explore in the draft environmental assessment, we hosted day-long public focus group workshops to obtain more detailed input on the issues and opportunities identified in preliminary scoping. A workshop for Horicon NWR was held on June 1-2, 2005, and a workshop focused on Fox River NWR was held on June 7, 2005. Twenty-eight people representing the Wisconsin DNR, Refuge staff, conservation organizations, neighboring communities, Refuge users, and other stakeholder organizations attended these discussions.

Refuge Management Goals

The goals are designed to meet the purposes of the Refuge and the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System. The following goals were established for Horicon and Fox River NWRs and will form the direction for the Refuge over the next 15 years.

Horicon NWR

Goal 1. Wildlife – Protect, restore, and maintain a diversity of wildlife species native to habitats historically found on the Refuge, with special emphasis on Service Regional Conservation Priority Species.

Goal 2. Habitat – Provide a diverse mosaic of wetland, upland, and riverine habitats that meet the needs of Service priority species dependent upon them through habitat preservation, restoration, and management.





Horicon NWR

Goal 3: People – Provide quality wildlife-dependent recreational and environmental education opportunities to a diverse audience. These activities will promote understanding, appreciation, and support for Horicon National Wildlife Refuge, the National Wildlife Refuge System, and wildlife conservation.

Fox River NWR

Goal 1: Wildlife – Protect, restore, and maintain a diversity of wildlife species native to habitats historically found in the Upper Fox River Watershed, with special emphasis on Service priority species, through habitat preservation, restoration, and management.

Goal 2: Habitat – Protect, restore, and enhance the wetland and adjacent upland habitat on the Refuge to emulate a naturally functioning, dynamic ecosystem containing a variety of habitat conditions that were present prior to European settlement, namely dry tallgrass prairie, oak savanna, fens, sedge meadow, and shallow emergent marsh wetlands.

Goal 3: People – Provide quality visitor services compatible with the purposes for which the Refuge was established and/or the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System. These wildlife-dependent activities will promote an understanding and appreciation of the naturally functioning landscape and the Service's management efforts on the Refuge.

Planned Refuge Program Highlights at Horicon NWR

Marsh Management: Management strategies will try to re-establish a meandering river system flowing through the north end of the Horicon Marsh. Rotational water management will continue on the Main Pool and 16 sub-impoundments to benefit specific Regional Resource Species of Concern.

Upland Habitat Restoration: The Refuge will restore historic vegetation and create habitats that are lacking in the area. Up to 100 acres of oak savanna will be restored to benefit regional habitat diversity and grassland-dependent wildlife species. Between 500 to 1,000 acres of upland grasslands, primarily native dry tallgrass prairie, will be restored and managed to benefit declining wildlife species that depend on this habitat type, including Bobolinks, Grasshopper Sparrow, Henslow's Sparrow, and Eastern Meadowlark.

Reduced Wildlife-Vehicle Collisions on State Highway 49: The CCP outlines physical and educational strategies to reduce the loss of wildlife along State Highway 49, which is a major high speed roadway bisecting the northern section of the Horicon Marsh for 2.5 miles.

Increased Conservation Projects with Landowners in the Upper Rock River Watershed: Refuge staff will work closely with the federal Partners for Fish and Wildlife staff, Wisconsin DNR, counties, and non-profit groups to encourage understanding, and action, of private landowners in the upper watershed. Landowners and the public will be informed of the critical issue of soil erosion and contaminants impacting the Horicon Marsh.

Expanded Recreational Opportunities: Opportunities for quality wildlife-dependent recreational activities, including hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, environmental education and interpretation, will increase over the course of the CCP through the expansion and enhancement of new and existing facilities and programs, seasons, and opportunities for access.

Opportunities include expansion of the deer and small game hunting season to match the state seasons, ice fishing, increased access and new facilities for education, wildlife observation and photography.

Planned Refuge Program Highlights at Fox River NWR

Habitat Restoration: General Land Office surveys from 1832 suggest that much of the landscape around the Refuge was historically dry prairie and oak savanna. The Refuge will continue working to restore these upland habitats, as well as maintain the fens, sedge meadow, and shallow emergent marsh wetlands.

New Recreational Opportunities: The future for the Refuge will include more opportunities for wildlife-dependent recreation. Historically, the Refuge has been closed to public use except during the deer season. New opportunities will include the initiation of a fishing program, new wildlife observation and photography opportunities, and the beginning of an interpretation program. All new activities will occur at times that minimize disturbance of migratory birds and other wildlife.

Plan Implementation, Monitoring and Evaluation

This CCP outlines an ambitious but achievable course of action for the future management of Horicon NWR and Fox River NWR. Pursuing and ultimately achieving goals set out in this CCP will require considerable staff and partnership commitment. Throughout the life of this CCP we will monitor our progress on achieving the goals, objectives and strategies it establishes. On a periodic basis, the Service will evaluate Refuge activities in light of the CCP. Additional “step-down” management plans will also be necessary to provide more details on Refuge programs such as visitor services, hunting, habitat management, water management and law enforcement.



Birding on the Boardwalk, Horicon NWR

Into the Future

Throughout the comprehensive conservation planning process, many people have contributed time and ideas to make the Horicon NWR and Fox River NWR CCP a better document. We are grateful to everyone who cared enough about the Refuges and their 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 planning. We will continue to welcome your thoughts on Refuge management.

Horicon NWR and Fox River NWR are places 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.