



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Agassiz National Wildlife Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan

Summary

August 2005

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 Agassiz National Wildlife Refuge. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service approved the plan and is making it available online at: <http://www.fws.gov/midwest/planning/agassiz/index.html>

Paper copies and compact disks with an electronic version of the CCP are also available. Please call the Refuge at 218/449-4115 to request a copy or CD-Rom. Copies of the CCP are also available for review at the Thief River Falls Public Library and at the Refuge itself.

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 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.

The Refuge

Located in northwestern Minnesota, the Refuge lies in the aspen parkland transitional zone between the coniferous or boreal forest to the north and east and the tallgrass prairie and prairie pothole provinces to the west and south. This diversity of habitats supports a wide diversity of resident and migratory wildlife, including 287 species of birds, 49 species of mammals, 12 species of amphibians, and nine species of reptiles.

The Refuge's 61,500 acres are a key breeding ground for 17 species of ducks and the Refuge is an important migration



Agassiz NWR has long been noted for its moose population. USFWS

rest stop for waterfowl. Designated as a Globally Important Bird Area, the Refuge is important to many migratory species as well as a large variety of nesting marsh and water birds. One of the largest Franklin Gull nesting colonies in North America is located on the Refuge. The Refuge is also noted for two resident packs of gray wolves, moose, and nesting Bald Eagles.



Western Grebe, USFWS

Agassiz NWR includes the following habitats with approximate acreages:

- 37,400 acres of wetland and shallow open water;
- 11,650 acres of shrubland;
- 9,900 acres of woodland;
- 1,710 acres of grassland;
- 170 acres of cropland managed for the benefit of wildlife; and
- 670 acres of developed land (roads, parking lots, etc.)

Agassiz NWR is an integral part of a sizeable complex of lands managed for wildlife. The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) has acquired and manages over 50,000 acres in three large and several smaller nearby Wildlife Management Areas. The Minnesota DNR works closely with Refuge staff on issues of mutual concern.

Agassiz NWR is responsible for a seven-county Refuge Management District (RMD). Refuge staff work with the National Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and Farm Service Agency (FSA) on wetland determinations, Swampbuster Act provisions, and the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). The Refuge actively collaborates on habitat restoration projects for both uplands and wetlands on private and CRP lands throughout its Management District.

Refuge Vision

The following statement was developed during the CCP process:

Preamble:

Agassiz National Wildlife Refuge lies within the shallow depressional lake plains formed by the pre-historic Glacial Lake Agassiz. The Refuge is located within the aspen parkland transitional zone between the tallgrass prairie to the west and northern forest to the east. Agassiz comprises a diversity of plant and animal species, typical of ecotonal communities. Since the beginning of the 20th century, the lands within this area have been manipulated for agricultural purposes, which highly modified natural landscapes and ecosystem functions. Since its establishment, the Refuge has been intensively managed for the benefit of migratory birds and other wildlife through the construction of dikes and water control structures.

Our Vision:

“Agassiz National Wildlife Refuge and the surrounding area will be the premier natural resource of Marshall County and northwestern Minnesota. The Refuge and its seven-county management district, working with partners, will take a landscape approach to promote functional watersheds and connect natural areas. Refuge management programs and activities will emulate natural functions and processes of the different native habitats for optimal wildlife use. The resulting benefits will be showcased to demonstrate the compatibility of biological diversity, integrity, natural ecological processes and sustainable agriculture.

People will be attracted to the Refuge and northwestern Minnesota to view and enjoy the wonders of natural ecosystems. Visitors will have quality, wildlife-dependent experiences that provide personal and societal benefits, such as a sense of peace and tranquility and support of a strong conservation ethic. Refuge staff, visitors and the community will understand and appreciate a well-functioning landscape and the cultural history of the area. This vision will be the catalyst to further strengthen a positive community-Refuge relationship.”



Oak savanna habitat at Agassiz NWR. USFWS



Aerial view of Pool 8, Agassiz NWR. USFWS

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 mission of the 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 Service's role also includes managing the National Wildlife Refuge System, the world's largest collection of lands specifically managed for fish and wildlife. The System is a network of more than 540 national wildlife refuges encompassing more than 93 million acres of public land and water. The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System 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.

When it is compatible with wildlife and habitat needs and the purpose for which the refuge was established, Refuges can be used for wildlife-dependent activities such as hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, environmental education and environmental interpretation.

The Planning Process

The Agassiz NWR CCP has been written with input and assistance from private citizens, non-governmental conservation organizations and employees of tribal, state, and local agencies. The participation of these stakeholders

is vital and all of their ideas have been valuable in determining the future direction of the Refuge and its Management District.

Comprehensive conservation planning for the Refuge began with public participation. An initial scoping meeting was held in December 2002 in Thief River Falls. About 30 individuals attended the meeting, which included an overview of the planning process and an opportunity to discuss ideas with Refuge staff. In January 2003 the Refuge hosted a 1-day focus group in Thief River Falls. The approximately 30 participants in this all-day event had the opportunity to discuss and explore in greater depth the various Refuge issues, goals, and opportunities in a relaxed, congenial setting.

Public involvement continued with the release of the Draft CCP/EA in March 2005. A copy of the document or a summary of the document was mailed to more than 200 individuals, organizations, local libraries, and local, state, and federal agencies and elected officials. An open house event was held on April 6 in Thief River Falls following release of the draft document. We received a total of 20 comment letters and e-mails during the 45-day review period. Several of the comments resulted in changes in the CCP.

Refuge Goals

- Goal 1: Wildlife – Protect, restore and maintain a natural diversity of wildlife native to northwestern Minnesota, with an emphasis on Service Resource Conservation Priority Species.
- Goal 2: Habitat – Restore and enhance a natural landscape within the Refuge and its seven-county Management District to emulate naturally functioning watersheds and habitats within the tallgrass prairie, aspen parkland, and northern coniferous forest, including habitat corridors for wildlife.
- Goal 3: People – Provide visitors and the community with opportunities to experience quality wildlife-dependent activities and to understand and appreciate a natural functioning landscape.

Planned Refuge Program Highlights

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

Habitat Management and Restoration

A large focal area of uplands will be managed as a grassland/shrubland matrix. We will seek to increase the area of native habitats that have declined locally and in Minnesota over the past century, such as prairie grasslands, sedge meadow, and bur oak/savanna. Simultaneously, the



Parker Observation Tower, Agassiz NWR. USFWS

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.

Water Management

The Refuge proposes to restore a more natural sinuosity on two interior watercourses by lowering water levels in three pools. With that effort, the die-off of conifers in the Wilderness Area, which may be related to high water, will be studied. The Refuge is committed to improving water quality and reducing sediment loads both on and off the Refuge.

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, tribal, state and local governments, private citizens, non-profit organizations and educational institutions. 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.

Volunteers

We hope to expand on our active pool of volunteers to assist in everything from research, habitat improvement projects, maintenance and environmental education on and off-Refuge. The goal of any Refuge volunteer program is to have staff and volunteers working side by side in the most efficient manner to accomplish the goals and objectives of the Refuge.

Expanded Public Use Opportunities

Winter wildlife viewing will be enhanced with a designated, un-groomed cross-country/snowshoe/ walking trail. New hunting opportunities are proposed. During and after the deer/firearms season, archery/ deer, muzzleloader/deer, and Ruffed Grouse and Sharp-tailed Grouse hunting will be permitted in the same areas open to deer/firearms. A “youth” waterfowl hunt in the Farmed Pool area and a youth deer/firearms hunt will be permitted in conjunction with the state youth hunting season and regulations.

Plan Implementation, Monitoring and Evaluation

This CCP outlines an ambitious but achievable course of action for the future management of Agassiz 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.

Into the Future

Throughout the comprehensive conservation planning process, many people have contributed time and ideas to make the Agassiz NWR 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 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.

Agassiz 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.