

Chapter 1: Introduction and Background

Tamarac National Wildlife Refuge

Tamarac National Wildlife Refuge (Tamarac NWR), encompassing nearly 43,000 acres, is located in Becker County, 18 miles northeast of Detroit Lakes, Minnesota, (pop. 7,400) and 60 miles east of Fargo, North Dakota (Figure 1 on page 2). Tamarac NWR lies in the glacial lake country of northwestern Minnesota, in the heart of one of the most diverse transition zones in North America. Here eastern deciduous hardwoods, northern coniferous forests and western tall grass prairie converge, creating a rich assemblage of both plants and animals.

The landscape is characterized by rolling forested hills interspersed with shallow lakes, rivers, marshes and shrub swamps. Sixty percent of the refuge is forested with aspen, jack pine, red pine, balsam fir, paper birch, red and white oak, sugar maple and basswood tree types. Large and small wetland complexes comprise about 35 percent of the Refuge. Many refuge lakes and rivers contain large native wild rice beds that produce abundant food for waterfowl and other wetland dependent species. Twenty-eight lakes lie within the Refuge and three rivers flow through the Refuge, while marshes and wooded potholes number several thousand. The remaining 5 percent of Tamarac NWR is grassland, mostly remnants of early settler clearings or small farms.

Tamarac NWR wildlife is as varied as the habitat with more than 258 species of birds and 50 species of mammals. Bald Eagles are common with up to 23 territories producing as many as 33 young in recent years. Resident bear and gray wolves are seen periodically.

The Refuge was historically and remains a prized hunting, fishing, ricing and maple sugaring area for a succession of Native American people. The Dakota/Lakota inhabited the area until the 18th century when they were displaced by the Annishanabe or “Chippewa.” These native people knew the value of the lush beds of *manoomin* (wild rice), stands of sugar maple and abundance of wild foods, fish and game the land provided for their people.



A bird's eye view of Tamarac NWR. Photo Credit: D. Brand

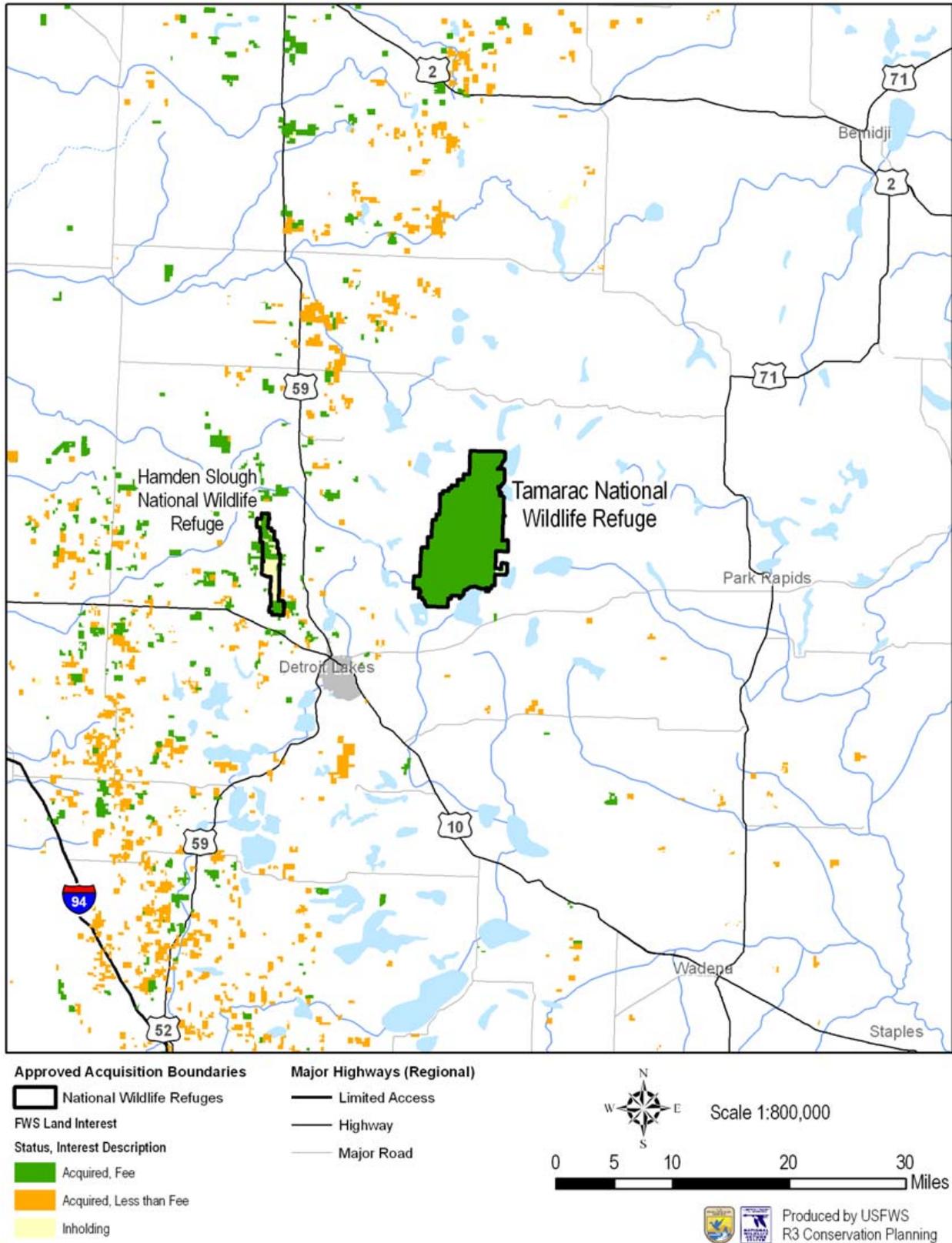
Today, the north half of Tamarac NWR lies within the original White Earth Indian Reservation established in 1867.

Between 1890 and 1930, the Refuge's original stands of red and white pine were logged. Catastrophic fires occurred during this time period due to extensive slash piles that were left behind after the logging. Several dams and ditches were also created by loggers, to transport logs down river to the mill. Settlers followed the loggers, but farming never achieved much prominence due to the dense forest, marginal soils and numerous wetlands.

Though the landscape has been altered by the influences of human history and past management, the Refuge remains largely intact with a functioning ecosystem and retains an untamed character for current visitors to enjoy, use and respect. With the encroachment of development surrounding the Refuge, the promotion of sound land stewardship practices will be key in remaining connected in the landscape.

The Refuge is also responsible for a five-county region known as the Tamarac Wetland Management District (Tamarac WMD). Established in 1987, Tamarac WMD stretches over 10,600 square miles in Beltrami, Cass, Clearwater, Hubbard and Kooch-

Figure 1: Location of Tamarac NWR



ishing Counties, extending the Refuge's sphere of responsibility to the Canadian border. District activities, including an active Partners for Fish and Wildlife program, complement Refuge goals to ensure a landscape perspective for conservation delivery.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Tamarac NWR and WMD are administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service). The Service is the primary federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing the nation's fish and wildlife populations and their habitats. It 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. The Service also manages the National Wildlife Refuge System.

The National Wildlife Refuge System

Refuge lands are part of 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 system is a network of 547 refuges and wetland management districts covering nearly 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.

The National Wildlife Refuge System is the world's largest collection of lands specifically managed for fish and wildlife. Overall, it provides habitat for more than 5,000 species of birds, mammals, fish, amphibians, reptiles, and insects. As a result of international treaties for migratory bird conservation and other legislation, such as the Migratory Bird Conservation Act of 1929, many refuges have been established to protect migratory waterfowl and their migratory flyways.

Refuges also play a crucial role in preserving endangered and threatened species. Among the most notable is Aransas National Wildlife Refuge in Texas, which provides winter habitat for the highly endangered Whooping Crane. Likewise, the Florida Panther Refuge protects one of the nation's most endangered predators. Refuges also provide unique recreational and educational opportunities for people. When human activities are compatible with wildlife and habitat conservation, they are places where people can enjoy wildlife-dependent recreation such as hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, and environmental education and interpretation. Many refuges have visitor centers, wildlife trails, automobile tours, and environmental

education programs. Nationwide, approximately 30 million people visited national wildlife refuges in 2004.

The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 established several important mandates aimed at making the management of national wildlife refuges more cohesive. The preparation of Comprehensive Conservation Plans (CCPs) is one of those mandates. The legislation directs the Secretary of the Interior to ensure that the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System and purposes of the individual refuges are carried out. It also requires the Secretary to maintain the biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

The goals of the National Wildlife Refuge System are to:

- Conserve a diversity of fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats, including species that are endangered or threatened with becoming endangered.
- Develop and maintain a network of habitats for migratory birds, anadromous and interjurisdictional fish, and marine mammal populations that is strategically distributed and carefully managed to meet important life history needs of these species across their ranges.
- Conserve those ecosystems, plant communities, wetlands of national or international significance, and landscapes and seascapes that are unique, rare, declining, or underrepresented in existing protection efforts.
- Provide and enhance opportunities to participate in compatible wildlife-dependent recreation (hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation).
- Foster understanding and instill appreciation of the diversity and interconnectedness of fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats.

Refuge Purposes

Tamarac National Wildlife Refuge was established in 1938...

- "... as a refuge and breeding ground for migratory birds and other wildlife: ..." Executive Order 7902, dated May 31, 1938.
- "... for use as an inviolate sanctuary, or for any other management purpose, for migratory birds." 16 U.S.C. 715d (Migratory Bird Conservation Act)

Refuge Vision

The planning team considered the past vision statements and emerging issues and drafted the following vision statement as the desired future state for the Refuge:

Tamarac National Wildlife Refuge is treasured as an ecologically and culturally rich landscape of rolling forested hills interspersed with shallow lakes, rivers and marshes that nurtures a unique and diverse assemblage of plants and animals. Towering red and white pine intermingle with aspens, majestic old growth forests, jack pine barrens and tamarack-spruce bogs. In the land where food grows on water, bountiful wild rice provides for future generations of wildlife and native people. From the vibrant emergence of spring woodland wildflowers to the rich colors of autumn to the quiet hush of winter, people come to revitalize their spirit and connect with a rich wildlife heritage. Tamarac NWR will remain resilient to human influences and provide an unbroken landscape of native plant communities to support healthy and productive native fish and wildlife populations.



A lone canoe. Photo Credit: Heather Lehmann Callaway

Purpose and Need for Plan

This CCP articulates the management direction for Tamarac NWR and District for the next 15 years. Through the development of goals, objectives, and strategies, this CCP describes how the Refuge and district also contribute to the overall mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System. Several legislative mandates within the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 have guided the development of this plan. These mandates include:

- Wildlife has first priority in the management of refuges.
- Wildlife-dependent recreation activities, namely hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, environmental education and interpretation are priority public uses of refuges. We will facilitate these activities when they do not interfere with our ability to fulfill the refuge's purpose or the mission of the refuge system.
- Other uses of refuges will only be allowed when determined appropriate and compatible with refuge purposes and mission of the refuge system.

This CCP will guide the management of Tamarac NWR by:

- Providing a clear statement of direction for the future management of the Refuge.
- Making a strong connection between Refuge activities and conservation activities that occur in the surrounding area.
- Providing Refuge neighbors, users, and the general public with an understanding of the Service's land acquisition and management actions on and around the refuge.
- Ensuring the Refuge actions and programs are consistent with the mandates of the National Wildlife Refuge System.
- Ensuring that Refuge management considers federal, state, county and tribal plans.
- Establishing long-term continuity in Refuge management.
- Providing a basis for the development of budget requests on the Refuge's operational, maintenance, and capital improvement needs.

Organization of the Plan

The purpose of the CCP is to specify management directions for Tamarac NWR and the Wetland Management District over the coming 15 years. These management directions will be described in detail through two distinct sets of goals, objectives,

and strategies; one each for the Refuge and District. The Tamarac WMD is managed by the staff of the Refuge. For that reason, some of the written material for the Refuge and District is integrated throughout the CCP. However, Chapter 6 was created to serve as a separate location for the goals, objectives and strategies for the Tamarac WMD.

History of Refuge Establishment and Management

The initial land acquisition for Tamarac NWR was the result of concern for limited waterfowl breeding grounds. During the 1930s, waterfowl populations plummeted due to drought, farming practices and wetland drainage, which reduced the amount of lands suitable for breeding, brood rearing and staging during migration. In response to these concerns, the Bureau of Biological Survey (now the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service), began the National Waterfowl Restoration Program in June 1934 to search for lands suitable for restoration practices that would benefit waterfowl habitat needs.

The Refuge area was first recommended to President Roosevelt's Waterfowl Restoration Committee, of which publisher Thomas Beck was chairman and Jay N. Darling and Aldo Leopold, members. The committee, in turn, recommended investigation by the Bureau of Biological Survey, and studies during the summers of 1934 and 1935 indicated that Becker and Mahnomen Counties had the highest waterfowl nesting indices in the state of Minnesota. The Biological Survey viewed this area as a link in the series of migratory waterfowl refuges being established in the Mississippi Flyway. The Egg Lake region, as this area was known, provided adequate food and dependable water supply, which was rare during the Dust Bowl era. A suitable area for acquisition was laid out in consultation with wildlife officials of the Minnesota Conservation Department (now the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources) and local citizens. The proposed refuge boundary was readily approved by the Becker County Commissioners. Negotiations got under way to acquire these lands, which were owned by a variety of entities including private non-tribal individuals, county tax forfeited lands and Bureau of Indian Affairs. The Collier Agreement of 1935 (Appendix H) was an agreement between the Bureau of Biological Survey and the Bureau of Indian Affairs to establish Tamarac NWR while providing that Native Americans retained certain ricing and trapping privileges within the Refuge. Approximately, the northern half of the Refuge lies within the original boundary of the White Earth Reservation, which was established in 1867.

Tamarac NWR was established by Executive Order No. 7902 on May 31, 1938 by Franklin D. Roosevelt to serve as a "breeding ground and sanctuary for migratory birds and other wildlife". The Refuge was originally known as the Tamarac Migratory Waterfowl Refuge, thus emphasizing the importance of the area to waterfowl. The name was subsequently changed in July 1940 to Tamarac National Wildlife Refuge, as was the case with many other federal wildlife lands. The Migratory Bird Conservation Act of 1929, also known as the Duck Stamp, further solidified the Refuge's purpose. Although the Refuge's original focus was on waterfowl (ducks and geese), other migratory birds (forest passerines and raptors) and year-round resident wildlife (wolves and deer) have received an increasing emphasis in Refuge management over the years.

Following establishment in 1938, the north half of the Refuge was acquired almost instantly through purchases by the Migratory Bird Conservation Commission from willing sellers and of county tax forfeited lands. Much land in the south half was owned by influential hunting clubs. Their opposition to the Refuge delayed complete acquisition in the south half until the early 1960s. Land exchanges with the State completed acquisition of the present boundaries in 1968.

Early Refuge development was started by a Civilian Conservation Corp (CCC) camp in the 1930's and further enhanced in the 1960s by the Army Corp of Engineers Job Corps Conservation Center. These efforts included the construction of dikes, trails, water control structures and a number of refuge buildings. Many of these structures and buildings are still in use today and the trails are the foundation for refuge access.

Legal Context

In addition to the executive order establishing the Refuge, and the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997, several federal laws, executive orders, and regulations govern administration of Tamarac NWR and WMD. Appendix F contains a partial list of the legal mandates that guided the preparation of this plan and those that pertain to Refuge management.