

Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge
Established 1924
Compatibility Determination

Use: Hunting migratory birds

Refuge Name: Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge (Refuge)

Establishing and Acquisition Authority(ies):

The Upper Mississippi River Wildlife and Fish Refuge was established by Public Law No. 268, 68th Congress on June 7, 1924. This act authorized acquisition of lands for Refuge purposes. Additional lands acquired in fee title by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers are managed as part of the Refuge under a 1963 Cooperative Agreement between the Department of the Army and the Department of the Interior.

Refuge Purpose(s):

“The Refuge shall be established and maintained (a) as a refuge and breeding place for migratory birds included in the terms of the convention between the United States and Great Britain for the protection of migratory birds, concluded August 16, 1916, and (b) to such extent as the Secretary of the Interior by regulations, prescribe, as a refuge and breeding place for other wild birds, game animals, fur-bearing animals, and for the conservation of wild flowers and aquatic plants, and (c) to such extent as the Secretary of the Interior may, by regulations, prescribe a refuge and breeding place for fish and other aquatic animal life.”

National Wildlife Refuge System Mission:

“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.”

Description of Use:

The Refuge allows public hunting of migratory birds on more than 180,000 acres of land and water in accordance with local, state, federal, and Refuge regulations. Migratory birds currently hunted on the Refuge include ducks and geese, coots and gallinules, sora and Virginia rails, snipe, woodcock, mourning doves, and crows. The majority (98%) of the estimated 253,500 visits in 2003 to hunt migratory birds on the Refuge were made to hunt ducks and geese. Except for two managed waterfowl hunts in Pool 13, at Potter’s Marsh and Blanding Landing, the remainder of the Refuge is open to migratory bird hunting on a first-come, first-secured basis.

Fifteen Waterfowl Hunting Closed Areas, totaling about 44,500 acres, are currently located along the entire length of the Refuge. These closed areas are closed to migratory bird hunting at all times and to hunting and furbearer trapping during the duck hunting season. Given the dominant role of the Refuge in the Mississippi Flyway migration corridor, this closed area system was established to provide waterfowl with a network of resting and feeding areas and to disperse waterfowl hunting opportunities on the Refuge. After nearly 45 years, changes have occurred in the closed area system, including the amount and quality of habitat available, the number and species of waterfowl using the system, and the size and number of closed areas. Further, with the habitat decline in many closed areas, waterfowl are being concentrated in fewer closed areas, resulting in gaps in hunting opportunity. Closed areas located in Pools 7, 8, 9, and 13 are supporting the majority of fall waterfowl use on the Refuge. At times, crowded conditions exist in each of these pools reducing the quality of the hunting experience.

Sections of closed area boundary also attract concentrations of waterfowl hunters. These areas, known as “firing lines,” can be crowded, resulting in competition and confrontations between hunters, and shooting at birds out-of-range or skybusting, which often leads to an increase in the number of unretrieved waterfowl. In high quality waterfowl habitat located in open hunting areas, the demand for the best hunting sites can be just as competitive with the same results.

Migratory bird hunters access the Refuge by foot or by using a wide variety of watercraft. Among the type of watercraft used include airboats, hovercraft, flat-bottom boats powered by outboards or “go-devils,” scull boats, and skiffs. Among the techniques employed to hunt migratory birds include decoying, jump shooting, and pass shooting. Scull boating and open water hunting from boat blinds is also permitted in some pools.

Permanent waterfowl hunting blinds are allowed in the Savanna District (Pools 12-14, except the Lost Mound Unit), but are prohibited elsewhere on the Refuge. Among the issues associated with the use of permanent blinds on the Refuge include private exclusive use of public waters, limiting hunting opportunities on public land to just a select few, and confrontations between hunters.

A Refuge Hunting Regulations brochure is available to inform the public of hunting opportunities and Refuge regulations. Maps are also available which show the location of closed areas.

Availability of Resources:

The designated areas open to public hunting are open in accordance with state and Refuge regulations, and except for the Potter’s Marsh and Blanding Landing managed waterfowl hunts, do not require preparation and administration of special hunts. The Potter’s Marsh managed hunt is administered by Service staff utilizing the Illinois Department of Natural Resources’ drawing and permit system. The Illinois Department of Natural Resources operated the Blanding Landing managed hunt on behalf of the Savanna Army Depot, but with transfer of jurisdiction to the Service, hunting on this area

is now the responsibility of the Refuge. However, Illinois will continue to administer this hunt until phased out. Administrative costs to operate these hunts are considerable and are not being fully recovered through recreational fees.

Migratory bird hunters use the existing network of roads to access areas open to hunting. Parking lots, boat ramps, docks, leaflets, information kiosks, and signs are provided by the Refuge for use by migratory bird hunters. The Refuge also provides staff and volunteers to maintain these facilities and disseminate information to visitors. Additional parking lots and boat ramps are provided by other agencies, local units of government, or private interests. Hunters residing next to the Refuge boundary are often able to access open hunting areas from their property.

Refuge law enforcement officers, Service special agents, and State conservation officers/wardens enforce Refuge and migratory bird hunting regulations. Bag checks to determine hunter success are conducted by Service staff and volunteers. Pilots and biologists from the Service and Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources conduct weekly aerial surveys during fall migration to document migratory bird use in selected areas of the Refuge. This information is used by managers and also provided to migratory bird hunters and others through the Refuge's website.

Staff at the Savanna District spend additional time on law enforcement and handling complaints connected with the use of permanent blinds by waterfowl hunters. Additional time is also expended on removing debris left from permanent blinds.

Under the current migratory bird hunting program, administering the two special hunts in the Savanna District, the printing costs for maps and the Refuge Hunting Regulations brochure, and additional law enforcement staff time strain current human and fiscal resources. Changing the closed area system, addressing firing lines at several locations, reducing skybusting and crowded conditions elsewhere in the open hunting area, and enforcing revised regulations will require additional resources or a redirection of current resources to adequately manage the migratory bird hunting program.

In summary, existing staff resources are available to manage migratory bird hunting, since it has been deemed a high priority activity. However, other activities such as fish and wildlife monitoring and other public use programming are reduced, delayed, or forgone. Changes proposed in the Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) should help reduce or cover some costs, especially in regard to managed hunts and permanent blinds. Facilities are deemed adequate when considered in combination with the network of state, local, and private access facilities.

Anticipated Impacts of the Use:

Although hunting causes mortality and disturbance to those species hunted, bag limits, season dates, and other regulations are set to protect the long-term health of populations.

Considerable effort is made to educate migratory bird hunters on species identification to better prepare them for the challenges of hunting on the Refuge. Hunters occasionally commit unlawful acts, such as exceeding the daily bag limit, taking non-target species, or hunting in a closed area. These incidents, while locally significant, usually have minor impacts on the migratory bird resource.

Repeated use of an area by boats equipped with “go-devils,” and airboats, can damage emergent and submergent vegetation beds. The construction of hunting blinds using natural vegetation results in localized damage to plants.

Migratory bird hunters may also disturb migratory birds and other wildlife as they travel to and from their hunting sites or when retrieving downed birds. Depending on the location and the number/species of migratory birds in the area, a disturbance can be temporary with displaced birds moving to nearby backwaters, or major in the case of motoring through a large raft of canvasbacks. For some species like bald eagles and other predators, migratory bird hunting creates a readily available food source due to birds lost or wounded.

Conflicts between hunters competing for prime hunting spots and harvest opportunities can be serious in areas where birds frequent or use as flight lanes. Conflicts have also occurred in conjunction with permanent blinds in the Savanna District. Proposals in the Refuge CCP are designed to reduce these conflicts.

Under current regulations, conflicts between other Refuge user groups have been few, largely because migratory bird hunting seasons occur in the fall or late winter (crows) when fewer people use the Refuge. Hunting or possession of firearms is prohibited on the Refuge between March 15 and the opening of the State fall hunting seasons, usually in early September, except that wild turkeys can be hunted during the State spring turkey season. This regulation reduces the potential for conflicts between the various Refuge user groups.

Public Review and Comment:

A draft of this Compatibility Determination was included in the Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) released May 1, 2005 for a 120-day comment period. It was also available during a subsequent 90-day review period on a supplement to the EIS released December 3, 2005. Public notification included notices in the Federal Register, media announcements, and 31 public meetings and workshops attended by more than 3,700 persons. Many comments on migratory bird hunting were received and are found in Chapter 7 of the EIS, with a Service response. However, no comments specific to this determination were received.

Determination:

_____ Use is Not Compatible

xx Use is Compatible with Following Stipulations

Stipulations Necessary to Ensure Compatibility:

To ensure compatibility with Refuge purposes and the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System, migratory bird hunting can occur on the Refuge if the following stipulations are met:

1. This use must be conducted in accordance with state and federal regulations, and special Refuge regulations published in the Refuge Hunting Regulations and Public Use Regulations brochures.
2. A system of Waterfowl Hunting Closed Areas must be maintained to ensure that migratory birds have adequate resting and feeding areas while hunting seasons are occurring.
3. To minimize potential conflicts between user groups, no hunting should occur on the Refuge prior to September 1 of each year and all hunting should end March 15, except for spring wild turkey hunting and squirrel hunting on the Illinois portion of the Refuge.
4. This use is subject to modification if on-site monitoring by Refuge personnel or other authorized personnel results in unanticipated negative impacts to natural communities, wildlife species, or their habitats.
5. Changes outlined in the CCP dealing with closed areas, permanent blinds, managed hunts, and hunting regulations, when approved, will be incorporated into the migratory bird hunting program. In addition, Electric Motor Areas and Slow, No Wake Areas, although open to hunting, are likely to affect the quality of the hunt and use levels in these areas.

Justification:

Migratory bird hunting seasons and bag limits are established by the states within a framework set nationally by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. These restrictions ensure the continued well-being of overall populations of migratory birds. Hunting does result in the taking of many individuals within the overall population, but restrictions are designed to safeguard an adequate breeding population from year to year. The system of Waterfowl Hunting Closed Areas on the Refuge provides feeding and resting areas for migratory birds during the hunting season. Specific Refuge regulations address equity and quality of opportunity for hunters. Proposed changes to both closed areas and Refuge regulations will make these aspects of the migratory bird hunting program even more effective. Disturbance to other fish and wildlife does occur, but this disturbance is

