

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

Use: Interpretation, wildlife observation, and photography

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:

Currently, interpretation, wildlife observation and photography account for nearly 640,000 visits annually to the Refuge. Typical use is by individuals, family groups, school groups, and large groups during Refuge-sponsored special events. Interpretation, wildlife observation, and photography are becoming increasingly popular activities for visitors, and a source of economic growth for many communities.

As three of the six priority public uses of the Refuge system, these uses are to be encouraged when compatible with the purposes of the Refuge. The Refuge provides outstanding wildlife viewing opportunities due to the abundance of eagles, swans, ducks, warblers, pelicans, herons and other birds people find unique and interesting. The

National Scenic Byways that border the Refuge for hundreds of miles, and the relatively open access to lands and waters of the Refuge make the Refuge one of the premier wildlife viewing and photography areas in the nation. The public and communities desire more opportunities for these uses. Interpreting the resources and challenges of the Refuge to both the public and students of all ages is an important way to influence the future well-being of the Refuge and the river.

Interpretation: An estimated 250,000 interpretive visits occur each year on the Refuge. This use occurs throughout the year at the kiosks, trails, visitor contact stations, observation decks and boat landings. The Refuge will continue to provide public facilities, including four Visitor Contact Stations with interpretive exhibits. Interpretive signs are the single most popular method of interpretation used on the Refuge. These signs convey site-specific messages at visitors' convenience since they are available any season or time of day. A total of 59 interpretive signs are used along the National Scenic Byways, bike trails, hiking trails, overlook areas and at off-refuge sites overlooking the Refuge. In addition, 63 kiosks, 25 entrance signs and 29 official notice boards provide information about the Refuge.

Wildlife Observation and Photography: In fiscal year 2004, wildlife observation and photography visits had increased to over 389,000. The Refuge allows general public access during anytime of the year to areas designated as open for observing and photographing scenery and associated flora and fauna. The Refuge provides some facilities to support wildlife observation and photography including observation decks, hiking trails, biking trails, canoe trails, and an auto tour route. These facilities offer outstanding wildlife viewing opportunities due to the abundance of eagles, swans, ducks, warblers, pelicans, herons, and other birds. The Comprehensive Conservation Plan recommends adding 2 full-time visitor services specialists and additional facilities including 3 new visitor contact stations, 6 boat launches/accesses, 17 canoe trails, 3 bike trails, 12 hiking trails, 10 observation decks/overlooks, 3 observation towers, 3 photo blinds, 35 information/interpretive kiosks and 24 interpretive signs to enhance observation and photography and bring them to Service standards.

Guided Interpretation and Observation: Commercially guided observation is discussed in the compatibility determination for this economic use. However, various no-fee or not-for-profit tours are conducted by non-profit groups, schools and colleges, or other agencies. Unlike general public wildlife observation, this use does require a Special Use Permit from the respective District Manager due to the impacts that concentrated groups of people may have. Impacts can also be greater since these tours target backwater areas of the Refuge which often contain sensitive wildlife populations such as nesting colonies of herons and egrets. As an example, a non-profit permittee in 2003 reported 29 tour events attended by 453 clients. At present, many of these tours are likely occurring without Refuge knowledge.

Availability of Resources:

Currently, there are three full-time visitor services staff members for the entire refuge. The needed staff for coordinating the interpretive, wildlife observation and photography programs is available but limits the number of guided or facilitated programs. Maintaining the public use facilities is part of routine management duties and staff and funding is available. Additional facilities and visitors services specialists will enhance public opportunities for these uses and improve the quality and quantity of programs.

Administering Special Use Permits for non-profit guided observation increases overall costs of Refuge operations, including but not limited to, development and review of policy and procedure, yearly administration of permits (inquiries, screening applicants, issuing permits), and enforcement of permit conditions. In the short-term, existing staff is adequate. However, the number of permits issued will have to be limited in balance with staff resources. In the long-term, additional administrative and/or other personnel as identified in the Comprehensive Conservation Plan will be needed.

Anticipated Impacts of the Use:

Disturbance of wildlife is the primary concern regarding these uses. Disturbance to wildlife, such as the flushing of feeding, resting, or nesting birds, is inherent to these activities. There is some temporary disturbance to wildlife due to boating and human activities on trails (canoe, hiking, and biking) however, the disturbance is temporary and generally localized. Increased facilities and visitation would cause some displacement of habitat and increase some disturbance to wildlife, although this is expected to be minor given the size of the Refuge and by avoiding or minimizing intrusion into important wildlife locations and habitat.

Guided observation tours generally have impacts similar to the above, but have the potential for significant impacts to nesting colonies of herons and egrets, nesting bald eagles, or other species or sensitive habitats without proper restrictions and oversight. These impacts can include nest abandonment and/or separation of young from parents. Larger boats used in guided tours can also uproot plants and increase turbidity in shallow backwater areas, negatively affecting habitat quality or displacing fish and other aquatic species. Guided tours also introduce more people into backwater areas than would generally occur, with an overall increase in noise and visual disturbance to wildlife.

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 these uses 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:

1. Managers will monitor use patterns and densities and make adjustments in timing, location, and duration as needed to limit disturbance.
2. Use will be directed to public use facilities (both existing and in the future), which are not in or near sensitive areas.
3. Personal portable photo or viewing blinds must be removed each day.
4. Observation areas will continue to provide wildlife viewing scopes to enhance viewing from a distance which reduces disturbance.
5. Commercial and not-for-profit guiding operations will be regulated by permit with timing and spacing constraints to protect sensitive wildlife or habitat (see Commercially Guided Wildlife and Wildlands Observation determination).
6. Not-for-profit guiding requests will be considered without fee but under the applicable stipulations governing commercial guides (areas, licensing, insurance, record keeping and reporting, etc.)
7. Interpretive, wildlife observation and photography activities (including Refuge-conducted) will be discouraged in Waterfowl Hunting Closed Areas when closed to hunting, or Administrative Closed Areas.
8. Trail layout and design will continue to ensure adequate adjacent cover for wildlife and avoid sensitive wildlife areas or habitat.
9. Interpretive presentations and products will continue to include messages on minimizing disturbance to wildlife.

Justification:

Most uses will occur, or be directed to, existing and future facilities in strategic locations providing quality wildlife interpretation, observation, and photography opportunities while limiting wildlife and habitat disturbance. Disturbance to wildlife is also limited by the size and remote nature of large parts of the Refuge. Many species have also grown

