

Executive Summary

Introduction

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS, Service) has completed a Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Assessment (CCP) that describes proposed goals and objectives to guide management of Whittlesey Creek National Wildlife Refuge (NWR, Refuge) for the next 15 years.

Whittlesey Creek National Wildlife Refuge (NWR, Refuge) was established in 1999 to protect, restore, and manage coastal wetland, floodplain forest, and spring-fed stream habitat on the south shore of Lake Superior near Ashland, WI. The Service currently owns 304 acres in fee title out of 540 acres authorized along lower Whittlesey Creek and 47 acres of easements out of 1,260 acres authorized in the 12,000-acre Whittlesey Creek watershed.

Restoration of native coaster brook trout is a high priority for the Service and its partners. Migratory birds and many other fish and wildlife species also benefit from protection and restoration of habitat on the Refuge and throughout the watershed. The Service is a partner in the multi-agency Northern Great Lakes Visitor Center (NGLVC, Visitor Center, Center), which offers many opportunities for the public to become more connected with the natural world. The Center also serves as headquarters and contact station for the Refuge.

Refuge Goals

Wildlife: Protect, restore, and maintain a diversity of wildlife species native to naturally functioning Refuge habitats, with special emphasis on coaster brook trout and migratory birds.

Habitat: Preserve, restore, and enhance the native habitats of Whittlesey Creek and its watershed.

People: Provide a diverse audience with opportunities to experience high quality, wildlife-dependent activities and to understand and appreciate a natural functioning landscape.

Issues Addressed

The major Refuge management issues identified during the Whittlesey Creek NWR planning process represent input from the public, other agencies and organizations, and Service staff. The issues focused the planning effort on the most significant topics and were critical in framing the various alternatives considered. More information about the specific issues addressed in this CCP is included in chapters 2 and 3. The five primary topics are:

- Restoring a self-sustaining coaster brook trout population in Whittlesey Creek.
- Providing habitat for migratory birds.
- Setting priorities for stream, floodplain, wetland, and watershed restoration.
- Enhancing public opportunities for hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, environmental education, and interpretation on the Refuge.
- Service participation in the Northern Great Lakes Visitor Center partnership.

Alternatives Considered

Four issue-based management alternatives were developed and evaluated. The primary differences between the alternatives are related to: (1) habitat restoration priorities, and (2) Service involvement in the NGLVC. Under all four alternatives, the Refuge would continue to participate in the Whittlesey Creek coaster brook trout restoration program. More details are included in Appendix A: Environmental Assessment.

Alternative A

1. Opportunistic restoration
2. Maintain Visitor Center involvement

Alternative B

1. Refuge and watershed restoration
2. Maintain Visitor Center involvement

Alternative C

1. Watershed restoration
2. Expand Visitor Center involvement

Alternative D:

1. Refuge restoration
2. Reduce Visitor Center involvement

Proposed Future

The planning team has selected Alternative B as the preferred alternative for future management of Whittlesey Creek NWR. The detailed objectives and strategies found in Chapter 4: Future Management Direction were developed based on this recommendation. Key elements include:

- Continue to participate in the interagency coaster brook trout program on the Bayfield Peninsula of Lake Superior, with Refuge responsibility for restoration of brook trout habitat in Whittlesey Creek.
- Develop and implement new criteria to prioritize and integrate all stream, floodplain, wetland, and watershed restoration activities to maximize fish and wildlife benefits. Emphasize use of existing sediment, hydrology, and climate models. Work with partners to determine priorities.

- Continue to use and improve current methods of logjam and culvert design and installation. Review road and bridge infrastructure; work with local governments to repair deficiencies.
- Restore forest blocks in conjunction with riparian restoration projects to benefit migratory birds. Continue to use and improve current tree planting methods.
- Restore historic seasonal wetland basins in the floodplain.
- Work with U.S. Forest Service, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, Bayfield County Land and Water Conservation Department, and others to develop a more comprehensive watershed-based partnership. Collectively secure funding to implement high-priority projects. Expand partnerships with local governments and landowners.
- Maintain current Service involvement in the NGLVC. Keep Refuge office on-site. Participate in partnership events when consistent with Refuge purposes. Develop cooperative agreement to clarify the Service's role and responsibilities.
- Continue the hunting program. Open the Refuge to fishing in accordance with state regulations.
- Continue to develop Refuge-specific education and interpretive programs; expand themes to include the watershed/trout connection.
- Add foot trail from NGLVC boardwalk to Coaster Classroom.