

# Planning Update

## Comprehensive Conservation Plan Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge

Issue 2, September 2008

This planning update describes the progress the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) has made in development of a comprehensive conservation plan for Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge (the refuge). It also summarizes the different alternatives the planning team considered in order to achieve the draft vision and goals. This update includes information about how to comment on the draft plan.

### The Refuge

Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge is 47,756 acres located about 45 miles west of West Yellowstone, Montana, in Beaverhead County. The refuge is one of the most remote in the lower 48 states and encompasses a 32,500-acre wilderness (68% of the refuge). The refuge has the largest wetland complex in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem and supports a diversity of migratory birds and resident wildlife. The refuge welcomes an estimated 12,000 visitors annually.

### Comprehensive Conservation Plan

In 1997, Congress passed the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act. This legislation provides clear guidance for the management of the Refuge System. To implement this guidance, the act requires that, by 2012, the Service will have developed a comprehensive conservation plan for each refuge in the National Wildlife Refuge System.

To meet this requirement, the Service has been preparing a comprehensive conservation plan for Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge. The plan will guide management for all refuge programs. The Service will update this "living" document every 15 years.



Sandhill cranes.

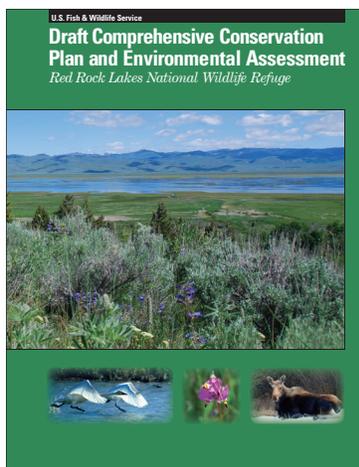
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### Draft Plan Available for Public Review

The Service has completed a draft plan for public review. This plan is based on a draft vision statement, which is supported by six draft goals (inside this update).

An environmental assessment, required by the National Environmental Policy Act, accompanies the plan. The assessment describes the four alternatives (inside this update) that the Service considered to achieve the draft vision and draft goals, plus their effects on the environment.

The Service selected a proposed action—alternative B—and wrote objectives and strategies, which represent the draft plan, based on this alternative.



### How to Provide Comments

We invite you to share your comments about the draft plan (proposed action). We will accept letters, faxes, and emails. To be considered, all written comments must be emailed or postmarked by October 27, 2008.

*Email:* redrocks@fws.gov

#### Postal Mail

Laura King, Planning Team Leader  
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
134 Union Blvd., Suite 300  
Lakewood, CO 80228

*Fax:* 303/236 4792; Attn: Laura King,  
Planning Team Leader

### Public Meetings

You may also wish to participate in our public meetings. There will be a short presentation on the draft plan, and then we will record any comments you would like to provide.

*October 8, 2008; 7:00–8:30 p.m.*

Lima Fire Department Hall  
5 West Section Center  
Lima, MT

*October 9, 2008; 7:00–8:30 p.m.*

Dillon City Hall, Council Chambers  
125 N. Idaho St.  
Dillon, MT

For directions, call 406/276 3536.

### How to Request a Draft Plan

You may request a hard copy of the draft comprehensive conservation plan and environmental assessment from the office at the Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge.

*Telephone:* 406/276 3536

*Email:* redrocks@fws.gov

You may also view the draft plan online:  
[www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/  
planning/states/montana/montana.htm](http://www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/planning/states/montana/montana.htm)

## Draft Vision Statement Draft Goals

*The majestic Centennial Valley of southwest Montana is an expansive mosaic of mountain wetlands, grasslands, shrublands, and forests framed by dramatic mountain peaks.*

*Through partnerships and conservation programs, the valley has maintained its biological integrity and is a working landscape that remains largely undeveloped.*

*To this end, the Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge is a conservation leader in the valley working to maintain and restore natural processes to create and sustain native habitat for migratory and resident fish and wildlife.*

*Visitors have a sense of solitude and wildness that lifts their spirits and stirs their souls. This first-hand experience with the refuge encourages people to participate as stewards, not only of the refuge, but also of the natural resources in their own communities.*



Red Rock Creek.

The Service developed the following draft goals to describe the management focus needed to achieve the draft vision.

### *Lake, Pond, and Marsh Habitat Goal*

Provide habitat for breeding and migrating birds, native fishes, and resident wildlife that maintains the biological diversity and integrity of montane wetland systems.

### *Riparian Habitat Goal*

Maintain the processes necessary to sustain the biological diversity and integrity of native riparian vegetation for breeding birds, native fishes, and wintering ungulates.

### *Wet Meadow, Grassland, and Shrub-steppe Habitat Goal*

Provide structurally complex native meadow, grassland, and shrub-steppe habitats within a watershed context for sagebrush-dependent species, upland-nesting migratory birds, rare plant species, and other resident wildlife.

### *Aspen Forest, Mixed Coniferous Forest, and Woodland Habitat Goal*

Create and maintain aspen of various age classes within a mosaic of coniferous forest and shrubland for cavity-nesting birds and other migratory and resident wildlife.

### *Visitor Services and Cultural Resources Goal*

Provide quality wildlife-dependent recreation, interpretation, and outreach opportunities that nurture an appreciation and understanding of the unique natural and cultural resources of the Centennial Valley for visitors and local community members of all abilities, while maintaining the primitive and remote experience unique to the refuge.

### *Refuge Operations*

Prioritize for wildlife first and emphasize the protection of trust resources in the utilization of staff, funding, and volunteer programs.

## Alternatives

The following is a summary of alternatives A, B, C, and D, which present different ways to achieve the draft vision and goals for the refuge. More detailed descriptions and consequences for these alternatives can be found in the draft plan. The planning team identified alternative B as the proposed action for the plan.



Mike Parker/USFWS

*Western tanager.*

### *Alternative A (No Action)*

Funding, staff levels, and management activities at the refuge would not change under alternative A.

#### Habitat and Wildlife

Refuge staff would continue to manage habitats with water control structures, cattle grazing, prescribed fire, and invasive plant control. The refuge would continue to divert water from streams and impound water using all Service-installed dikes, diversions, and structures. There would be limited monitoring of habitat and wildlife response.

#### Visitor Services

Wildlife-dependent recreational uses (hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, and interpretation) would continue at current levels. The Service would continue to permit hunting for big game (including a limited-permit state moose hunt) and waterfowl. There would continue to be minimal outreach and environmental education programs. There would be minimal resources to adequately update signs, informational kiosks, and brochures as well as improve hiking trails, access roads, and campgrounds.

#### Staff

The Service would assign to the refuge five full-time employees.

## Alternatives (cont.)

### *Alternative B (Proposed Action)*

This alternative acknowledges the importance of naturally functioning ecological communities.

#### Habitat and Wildlife

Changes to the landscape—human alterations to the landscape, past refuge management creating wetlands, and species in peril requiring special management actions—prevent management of the refuge solely as a naturally functioning ecological community. Because some of these changes are significant, some habitats would require “hands on” management, while refuge staff would restore other habitats. Refuge staff would continue to manage habitats with water control structures, cattle grazing, prescribed fire, and invasive plant control. The Service would greatly expand monitoring and documentation of the response to management actions. Step-down management plans would clearly state habitat and wildlife objectives.

The refuge staff would determine its level of participation in state initiatives to reintroduce bison if they are designated as wildlife in Montana.

#### Visitor Services

The Service would maintain and expand visitor service programs (including hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, and interpretation programs), while maintaining the wilderness characteristics of the refuge.

The Service would adjust the boundaries for big game hunting to reduce confusion, provide more opportunities, and reduce illegal road hunting. The Service would prohibit hunting within 50 yards of the centerline of roads. The Service would expand fishing and, following state regulations, would encourage visitors to keep nonnative fish species that affect the native, lake-dwelling Arctic grayling.

Some refuge roads and trails would provide interpretation and be identified on a new visitor services map. The Service would close to public vehicle access the Idlewild Road (and associated boat ramp) and the north entrance spur roads to reduce maintenance costs. Refuge staff would maintain both campgrounds to support



Mike Parker/USFWS

*Shiras moose winter in the valley.*

wildlife-dependent recreational uses at this remote refuge.

#### Staff

The Service would assign to the refuge seven full-time employees and one permanent seasonal employee, along with numerous seasonal employees and volunteers. Due to the lack of housing around this remote refuge, the Service would construct up to four housing units.

### *Alternative C*

This alternative acknowledges the importance of a naturally functioning ecosystem.

#### Habitat and Wildlife

The Service would place emphasis on management actions that allow wetland and riparian habitats to function naturally; this includes restoration of all created and modified wetlands. Refuge staff would continue to manage habitats with the remaining water control structures, cattle grazing, prescribed fire, and invasive plant control. The Service would greatly expand monitoring and documentation of the response to management actions. Step-down management plans would clearly state habitat and wildlife objectives.

The refuge staff would determine its level of participation in state initiatives to reintroduce bison if they are designated as wildlife in Montana.

#### Visitor Services

The Service would improve and expand visitor service programs, particularly environmental education and interpretation, while maintaining the wilderness characteristics of the refuge.

The Service would adjust the boundaries for big game hunting to reduce confusion, provide more opportunities, and reduce illegal road hunting. The Service would prohibit hunting within 50 yards of the centerline of roads. The Service would expand fishing and, following state regulations, would encourage visitors to keep nonnative fish species that affect the native, lake-dwelling Arctic grayling.

There would be some off-refuge environmental education and interpretation programs provided. Educational kits and an expanded, interactive, refuge website would be available to teachers in surrounding communities. Some refuge roads and trails would provide interpretation and be identified on a new visitor services map.

The Service would close to public vehicle access the Idlewild Road (and associated boat ramp) and the north entrance spur roads to reduce maintenance costs. Refuge staff would maintain only one campground to support wildlife-dependent recreational uses at this remote refuge.

#### Staff

The Service would assign to the refuge eight full-time employees and one permanent seasonal employee, along with numerous seasonal employees and volunteers. Due to the lack of housing around this remote refuge, the Service would construct up to five housing units.

## Alternatives (cont.)

### Alternative D

This alternative further acknowledges the importance of a naturally functioning ecosystem.

#### Habitat and Wildlife

The Service would place emphasis on the restoration of all natural processes; this includes restoration of all wetland and riparian habitats and removal of water control and diversion structures. The Service would greatly expand monitoring of habitat and wildlife response to management actions. Step-down management plans would clearly state habitat and wildlife objectives.

The refuge staff would participate in state initiatives to reintroduce bison if they are designated as wildlife in Montana.

#### Visitor Services

The refuge staff's emphasis would be to create a wilderness setting in all areas away from the refuge headquarters. The Service would maintain current visitor service programs, while promoting a wilderness experience with little to no signage or interpretation.

The Service would adjust the boundaries for big game hunting to reduce confusion, provide more opportunities, and reduce illegal road hunting. The Service would eliminate all hunting of moose. The Service would prohibit hunting within 50 yards of the centerline of roads. The Service would expand fishing and, following state regulations, would encourage visitors to keep nonnative fish species that affect the native, lake-dwelling Arctic grayling.

The Service would close to public vehicle access the Idlewild Road (and associated boat ramp) and the north entrance spur roads to reduce maintenance costs. Refuge staff would close both campgrounds.

#### Staff

The Service would assign to the refuge seven full-time employees and one permanent seasonal employee, along with numerous seasonal employees and volunteers. Due to the lack of housing around this remote refuge, the Service would construct up to four housing units.

## Next Steps

1. There is a 30-day public review of the draft comprehensive conservation plan and environmental assessment, which includes public meetings.
2. The Service revises the draft plan as needed based on public comments, and the regional director selects the preferred alternative, which guides development of the final plan.
3. A "notice of availability" published in the *Federal Register* lets the public know that the Service has completed and approved the final comprehensive conservation plan. The Service makes copies of the final plan available.
4. The Service begins implementation of the approved, final plan.

## Contact Information

To learn more about the Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge, please visit our website: [www.fws.gov/redrocks](http://www.fws.gov/redrocks).

You may reach the refuge staff by telephone at 406/276 3536, or by email at [redrocks@fws.gov](mailto:redrocks@fws.gov).



Michele Hernandez/USFWS

**U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
Division of Refuge Planning  
134 Union Blvd., Suite 300  
Lakewood, CO 80228**

**RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED**

**September 2008**



