

Comprehensive Conservation Plan

Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge

September 2005

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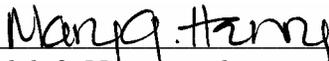
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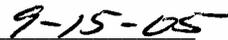
Comprehensive Conservation Plan Approval

Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge

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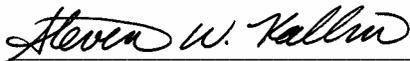


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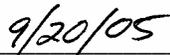


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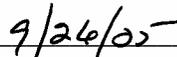


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Summary

This is the summary of the Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) for the Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge, Montana.

Although the Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge currently administers the Swan River National Wildlife Refuge and five waterfowl production areas, the CCP only addresses management of the Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge.

The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 requires that a CCP be developed for every unit of the National Wildlife Refuge System by 2012.

The CCP describes how Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge will be managed during the next 15 years to fulfill its congressionally designated purposes.

BACKGROUND

The 9,225-acre Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge is located approximately 20 miles northwest from the town of Marion (southwest of Kalispell), in Flathead County, Montana.

This refuge was established in 1999 as the 519th refuge in the National Wildlife Refuge System of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Establishment Purposes

- For use as an inviolate sanctuary, or for any other management purpose, for migratory birds.

(Migratory Bird Conservation Act)

Habitat management needs to maintain a mosaic of plant communities for a diversity of foraging and nesting migratory birds.

Plant communities need to be managed for a variety of cover conditions and water levels, with areas of disturbance minimized.

- For the development, advancement, management, conservation, and protection of fish and wildlife resources.

(Fish and Wildlife Act)

- For (1) incidental fish and wildlife-oriented recreational development, (2) the protection of natural resources, (3) the conservation of endangered species or threatened species.

(Refuge Recreation Act)

- For the conservation and enhancement of fish and wildlife.

(Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act)

- Parts of the refuge are mitigative properties in lieu of losses to Flathead WPA. The purpose is to protect and maintain wetland habitat for migratory birds, other animals, and plants; to restore floodplain acreage to its historical role; and to enhance the survival prospects of endangered and threatened species.



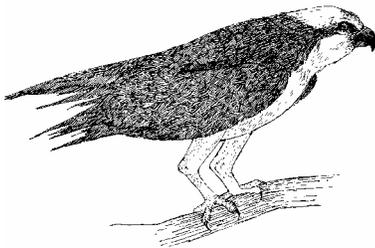
Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge, Montana

HABITATS AND WILDLIFE

Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge is a breathtakingly beautiful area nestled in the Pleasant Valley in northwestern Montana. It can best be described as a long valley crossed by Pleasant Valley Creek and encompassing the 182-acre Dahl Lake. The refuge encompasses wetlands, lush riparian corridors, uplands dominated by prairie and tame grasses, and temperate forests dominated by lodgepole pine and Douglas-fir.

Many of the existing wetlands in the refuge have been altered by water impoundments that created cropland and grazing opportunities before the establishment of the refuge. The channelized nature of some streams, altered for flood protection and irrigation, has removed them from their historical riparian habitat condition and function.

Mallard, lesser scaup, northern shoveler, cinnamon teal, and Canada geese are common breeders in the refuge. A variety of Neotropical migratory birds



Osprey
© Cindie Brunner

such as grasshopper and Savannah sparrows nests in the refuge. Raptors such as golden eagles, ospreys, and northern harriers are common sights at the refuge.

Deer and elk winter in the refuge, with the current winter elk population estimated at over 300 animals. Moose, black bear, mountain lion, wolverine, beaver, and badger are other mammals that also occur in the refuge.

Most fish found in Pleasant Valley Creek show stunting. Although none occur presently, it is likely the creek historically supported redband trout and westslope cutthroat trout. The federally listed bull trout occurs outside the refuge in the Fisher River watershed.

Spotted and Pacific chorus frogs occur at the refuge, which is home to the largest concentration of boreal toads in the Rocky Mountains.

Species of concern that reproduce in the refuge include the bald eagle (federally threatened), black tern, boreal toad, and Spalding's catchfly (federally threatened). The Canada lynx (federally threatened) and the trumpeter swan occasionally use refuge habitats. The threatened grizzly bear and gray wolf occur in Pleasant Valley.

CULTURAL HERITAGE

Native American occupation sites have been documented within the boundaries of the refuge. Petroglyphs that document this early human presence are still in existence in the refuge.

Prior to refuge establishment, the site of Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge encompassed areas used for domestic cattle grazing and public school building sites. Two of the three historical ranch sites in the refuge are eligible for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places.

PUBLIC USE AND THE ECONOMY

Current use of the refuge includes wildlife observation and photography, environmental education, and hunting of deer, elk, mountain grouse, and turkey.

Located in one of the fastest-growing counties in Montana, ranching, recreation, and timber harvest are the main land uses near the refuge.

THE PLANNING PROCESS

The environmental analysis process—as directed by the National Environmental Policy Act—was followed to develop the CCP for the refuge.

Public, partner, and agency involvement was coordinated by the refuge planning team. During the scoping process, major issues were raised by refuge staff, the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks, other federal agencies, refuge partners and neighbors, and the general public.

Some of the major issues raised by other agencies and the public have been addressed in the CCP as follows:

As a result of agency and public participation, the CCP provides for coordinated efforts to control or eradicate invasive plants. This will be achieved through a variety of habitat management methods such as grazing, herbicide applications, rest, and prescribed fire.

The CCP calls for continued studies to ensure adequate water rights exist and that habitat management does not cause loss of water downstream from the refuge.

Wildlife and their habitat will receive foremost consideration. Management for conservation of the grizzly bear and gray wolf will strive to minimize conflicts with humans.

The refuge will ensure that management activities do not harm cultural sites. Furthermore, public uses will be allowed and

managed in a way that will not degrade wildlife habitat. The refuge will continue to provide hunting, wildlife photography, nature trails, and fishing opportunities.

The refuge will pursue adequate refuge staffing levels and public facilities to fulfill its goals and vision.

MANAGEMENT DIRECTION

This vision for the refuge is based on the establishment purposes of the refuge, resource conditions and potential, and the issues.

Refuge Vision

Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge is an integral part of the Columbia River ecosystem and the Pleasant Valley community.

The refuge is a place where wetlands, streams, native grasslands, and forests have been conserved, enhanced, and restored. These habitats support a variety of migratory birds, species of concern, and other associated wildlife and plants.

People learn about and appreciate the natural and cultural environment of the refuge and enjoy opportunities for wildlife-dependent recreation.

Partnering with others fosters natural and cultural resource conservation for the benefit of present and future generations.

These goals were developed to guide achievement of the vision.

- **Riparian Habitat Goal.** Restore, enhance, and maintain a mixed deciduous and coniferous riparian habitat to support indigenous wildlife species and perpetuate the ecological integrity of the Fisher River watershed.
- **Wetland Habitat Goal.** Provide breeding, resting, and feeding habitat for wetland-dependent species of northwestern Montana by restoring, maintaining, and enhancing a mosaic of lake, semipermanent, seasonal, temporary, and saturated wetlands.
- **Grassland Habitat Goal.** Restore, enhance, and maintain Intermountain grasslands, with an emphasis on native bunchgrass prairie to provide habitat for migratory birds, species of concern, and associated wildlife species.
- **Forest Habitat Goal.** Enhance and maintain Douglas-fir, ponderosa pine, aspen, and cottonwood forested habitats within the context of the Fisher River watershed for migratory birds, species of concern, and other associated wildlife species.
- **Invasive Plant Goal.** Native plant communities, composition, occurrence, and density exist without degradation by invasive plants and support associated wildlife.
- **Migratory Bird Goal.** Preserve, restore, and enhance the ecological diversity and abundance of migratory birds of the Intermountain West forest, wetland complexes, riparian habitat, and bunchgrass prairie.
- **Endemic Wildlife Goal.** Restore and maintain resident and endemic wildlife populations of northwestern Montana to maintain and enhance species diversity of Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge and Fisher River watershed.
- **Species of Concern Goal.** Contribute to the conservation, enhancement, and recovery of endangered, threatened, and species of concern populations in Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge and Fisher River watershed.
- **Cultural Resource Goal.** Protect, manage, and interpret archaeological, cultural, and historical resources present at Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge for the benefit of present and future generations.
- **Public Use Goal.** Provide quality wildlife-dependent recreational and educational opportunities for persons of all abilities to learn, understand, and enjoy the Intermountain ecosystem of northwestern Montana; the associated fish, wildlife, and plants of Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge; and the National Wildlife Refuge System in a safe and compatible manner.
- **Administration Goal.** Provide staffing, funding, and facilities to maintain the long-term integrity of habitats and wildlife resources of Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge in supporting the achievement of ecosystem and National Wildlife Refuge System goals.
- **Partnership Goal.** Promote and develop partnerships with adjacent landowners, public and private organizations, and other interested individuals to preserve, restore, and enhance a diverse and productive ecosystem of which Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge is an integral part.

OUTCOME OF THE PLAN

The CCP calls for habitat restoration through full staffing, along with increased compatible public use that is limited when needed to protect wildlife, habitats, and cultural resources.

The staff will manage refuge habitats through:

- restoration of native vegetation, especially prairie grasses and forest;
- restoration of the natural hydrology of Dahl Lake, Pleasant Valley Creek, and wetlands;
- control of invasive plants.

Achieving the refuge's goals, migratory and other birds, large and small mammals, amphibians, reptiles, and fish will inhabit quality habitats where they will feed, loaf, rest, and reproduce.



Spruce Grouse

Species of concern, especially federally listed species, will receive adequate protection and find their life cycle needs met when migrating through or recolonizing the area of the refuge.

Known cultural resources will be protected. The refuge will pursue partnerships and coordination with the state to research and catalog unknown cultural resources.

Compatible public use will receive a boost, especially the priority wildlife-dependent uses:

- Hunting
- Fishing
- Wildlife observation
- Wildlife photography
- Interpretation
- Environmental education

The refuge will pursue administrative independence from the National Bison Range National Wildlife Refuge Complex, as well as funding for seven full-time employees and one half-time employee to manage the refuge and its waterfowl production areas. A contact station will provide information for visitors once budget allows for its construction.

