

## Final Compatibility Determination for Hunting on North Platte National Wildlife Refuge

**Use:** Hunting

**Refuge Name:** North Platte National Wildlife Refuge

**Establishing and Acquisition Authority(ies):**

- Executive Order 2446 of 1916

**Refuge Purpose(s):**

The purpose of the North Platte National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) is to “. . . a preserve and breeding ground for native birds.”

**National Wildlife Refuge System Mission:**

The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System (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 (U.S.) for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans.

**Description of Use:**

*What is the use?*

- As described in the 2020 hunting and fishing plan, expand youth hunting opportunities to better align with state regulations.
- Expand acres open for youth hunting opportunities.
- Open new youth hunting opportunities for more species, including turkey, porcupine, and prairie dog.
- Extend the date range for archery deer and youth hunting of pheasant, squirrel, rabbit, coyote, raccoon, opossum, long-tailed weasel, mink, fox, badger, and striped skunk until November 1.

North Platte NWR is now open to archery deer hunting and youth-only hunting opportunities for squirrel, rabbit, pheasant, coyote, raccoon, opossum, long-tailed weasel, mink, fox, badger, and striped skunk. Extending the hunting date range from October 15 until November 1 would allow youth hunters to participate in the Nebraska youth pheasant season in late October.

Extending archery deer hunting and youth hunting on Lake Alice Unit to November 1 also would allow youth hunters to participate in the Nebraska youth pheasant season in late October. Opening new youth hunting for turkey, porcupine, and prairie dog at Lake Alice Unit would better align with State of Nebraska youth opportunities. Nebraska youth turkey season occurs in late April. Youth hunting opportunities for turkey and deer would be open at the 135-acre Stateline Island Unit.

The Lake Alice Unit of the refuge is currently open to archery deer hunting and a youth-only hunt for coyotes, furbearers, squirrels, rabbits, and pheasants through October 14. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) proposes to expand these hunting opportunities through October 31. The Service also proposes to open youth hunting opportunities for porcupine, prairie dog, and woodchuck. These hunting opportunities will be conducted in accordance with state and federal regulations.

While huntable populations for some of the target species may exist, the Lake Alice Unit is not known for an overabundance of such small upland game and furbearer species. For this reason, the Service is proposing to keep youth-only hunting of these species, providing an opportunity for adult mentors to introduce children to hunting. All hunters would be allowed to hunt deer prior to the November 1 closure.

The entire Lake Alice Unit would remain closed to all public entry from November 1 through January 14 to provide undisturbed habitat during peak waterfowl and eagle use periods.

The Service also proposes to open the Stateline Island Unit of the refuge to youth deer and turkey hunting. This refuge unit is small in size (135 acres), and youth hunts would be administered in coordination with the commission to limit the number of youth hunters to better ensure a safe hunting environment.

*Where is the use conducted?*

Hunting on the refuge is permitted on two refuge units only: Lake Alice and Stateline Island. The Lake Alice Unit offers nearly 700 acres of grassland and approximately 1,300 acres total. Stateline Island provides 135 acres of grassland and woodland next to the North Platte River. The Lake Minatare and Winters Creek units remain closed to all hunting.

*When is the use conducted?*

All hunting will be conducted in accordance with state, federal, and refuge-specific regulations. The refuge is open to hunting from September 1 through October 31 and during the spring turkey youth season typically during the months of April and May.

*How is the use conducted?*

All hunting will be conducted in accordance with state, federal, and refuge-specific regulations.

*Why is the use being proposed?*

Hunting is a priority public use identified in the National Wildlife Refuge Improvement Act of 1997 and it has traditionally occurred at the refuge without adverse impacts to the purpose for which the refuge was established. In addition, expanding hunting opportunities and aligning regulations with state agencies implements Secretarial Order 3347, "Conservation Stewardship and Outdoor Recreation," and Secretarial Order 3356, "Hunting, Fishing, Recreational Shooting, and Wildlife Conservation Opportunities and Coordination with States, Tribes, and Territories." The hunting program is administered in accordance with sound wildlife management principles and the utmost concern for public safety.

**Availability of Resources:**

Resources are currently limited to administer the expanded hunting program. Expansion requires a change to regulations, brochures, signage, and the website. A minimal law enforcement presence is required to administer a successful program and to provide for visitor safety.

**Anticipated Impacts of the Use:**

*Short and Long-Term Impacts:*

Hunting removes individual animals from the population and causes some wildlife disturbance. This disturbance is limited to fall and winter months when most wildlife have completed critical life processes and are migrating or absent from the refuge. State and federal game harvest regulations are in effect to assure perpetual populations of game animals and to also prevent populations from reaching unreasonable numbers resulting in die-offs or nuisance problems.

*Indirect and Cumulative Impacts:*

Proposed changes or additions to hunting on the refuge would have minor effects on wildlife species in Nebraska. Although the proposed expanded opportunities will likely increase hunting activity on the refuge, the slight increase will not rise to a significant level.

**Public Review and Comment:**

The Service prepared this compatibility determination concurrently with the draft environmental assessment and companion hunting and fishing plan for the refuge. Public review and comment were achieved concurrently with the public review and comment period for the draft hunting and fishing plan and environmental assessment. Public review and comment was solicited through public posting of notices at the refuge and notices in local newspapers.

**Comments Review:**

*Comment (1):* We received one comment fully supporting the expansion of hunting opportunities.

*Response:* Hunting is a nationally recognized use of national wildlife refuges.

*Comment (2):* One commenter stated that we did not have adequate law enforcement or staff to administer the hunt.

*Response:* While the Service could use more law enforcement and staff, the lack of law enforcement and staff alone does not result in an incompatible use. A more detailed response is provided in the environmental assessment.

**Determination:**

- Use is not compatible.
- Use is compatible with the following stipulations.

**Stipulations Necessary to Ensure Compatibility:**

- Lake Minatare and Winters Creek Units remain closed to all hunting.

- All hunting is youth only with the exception of archery deer hunting on Lake Alice Unit prior to November 1.

Listed below are refuge-specific regulations that pertain to hunting on the refuge as of the date of this compatibility determination. These regulations may be modified as conditions change, or if refuge expansion continues or occurs. The following information is from 50 Code of Federal Regulations 32.46.

*(e) North Platte National Wildlife Refuge.*

*(1) [Reserved]*

*(2) Upland game hunting. We allow youth hunting of pheasant, porcupine, prairie dog, rabbit, state-defined furbearers, squirrel, turkey, and coyote on designated areas of the refuge subject to the following conditions:*

*(i) We close the Lake Alice Unit to all public entry from November 1 through January 14 and we close the Minatare and Winters Creek Units to all public entry from October 15 through January 14.*

*(ii) Hunters must be 15 years of age or younger (“youth hunters”). A licensed hunter 19 years of age or older (“adult guide”) must accompany youth hunters. Adult guides must not hunt or carry firearms.*

*(iii) We close the refuge to public use from legal sunset to legal sunrise. Youth hunters and adult guides may enter the designated hunting area 1 hour prior to legal sunrise.*

*(iv) We allow the use of dogs for hunting upland game.*

*(3) Big game hunting. We allow archery hunting of mule deer and white-tailed deer on designated areas of the refuge subject to the following conditions:*

*(i) The condition set forth at paragraph (e)(2)(i) of this section applies.*

*(ii) We close the refuge to public use from legal sunset to legal sunrise. However, archery deer hunters may enter the designated hunting area 1 hour prior to legal sunrise and remain until 1 hour after legal sunset.*

*(4) Sport fishing. We allow sport fishing on designated areas of the refuge.*

*(f) \* \* \**

*(2) Upland game hunting. We allow upland game hunting on designated areas of the district subject to the following condition: The conditions set forth at paragraphs (f)(1)(i) and (ii) of this section apply.*

*(3) Big game hunting. We allow big game hunting on designated areas of the district subject to the following condition: The conditions set forth at paragraphs (f)(1)(i) and (ii) of this section apply.*

**Justification:**

Based on biological impacts described in the environmental assessment and hunting and fishing plan, it is determined that recreational hunting within the refuge will not materially interfere with

