

**Draft North Platte National Wildlife Refuge
Hunting and Fishing Plan**

March 2020

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

**North Platte National Wildlife Refuge
Minatare, NE**

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Draft North Platte National Wildlife Refuge

Hunting and Fishing Plan

I. Introduction

National wildlife refuges are guided by the mission and goals of the National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System), the purposes of an individual refuge, United States (U.S.) Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) policy, and laws and international treaties. Relevant guidance includes the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966 (NWRSA), as amended by the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997, Refuge Recreation Act of 1962, and selected portions of the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Manual.

A. Establishment and Administration

The 2,722-acre North Platte National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) was established in 1916 by Executive Order 2446 as a “preserve and breeding ground for native birds.” It is located in the Nebraska panhandle, within the central flyway, near Scottsbluff (Figure 1) and is administered by the Service. The impetus for national wildlife refuge status was primarily fall concentrations of up to 250,000 mallards, 11,000 Canada geese, and bald eagles. The refuge was, and still is, superimposed on Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation) projects and remains subject to “Reclamation service uses.”

Originally, the refuge had four Reclamation irrigation reservoirs, which were constructed between 1910 and 1917. Three of these are still part of the refuge: Lake Minatare – 430 acres; Winters Creek – 780 acres; and Lake Alice – 1,377 acres. The Little Lake Alice reservoir was removed from the Refuge System in 1961 by Public Land Order 2291. In 1990, the Service, by Memorandum of Agreement with Reclamation, also assumed management of Stateline Island, a 135-acre diversion project on the North Platte River. It, too, is subject to Reclamation uses. Today, the refuge covers four dispersed management units, all of which are superimposed on Reclamation projects and subject to Reclamation uses. Originally, refuge management was the responsibility of the Bureau of Biological Survey, now the Service. All units, except Lake Minatare, were closed to the public year-round. The Lake Minatare unit was open to public recreation (primarily fishing, boating, camping, and swimming) from May 16 to September 15; the north half of the lake was closed to boating. The entire Lake Alice, Winters Creek, and Lake Minatare units are closed to all public entry from October 15 through January 14 to provide undisturbed habitat during peak waterfowl and eagle use.

The predominate cover types are shown in Table 1.

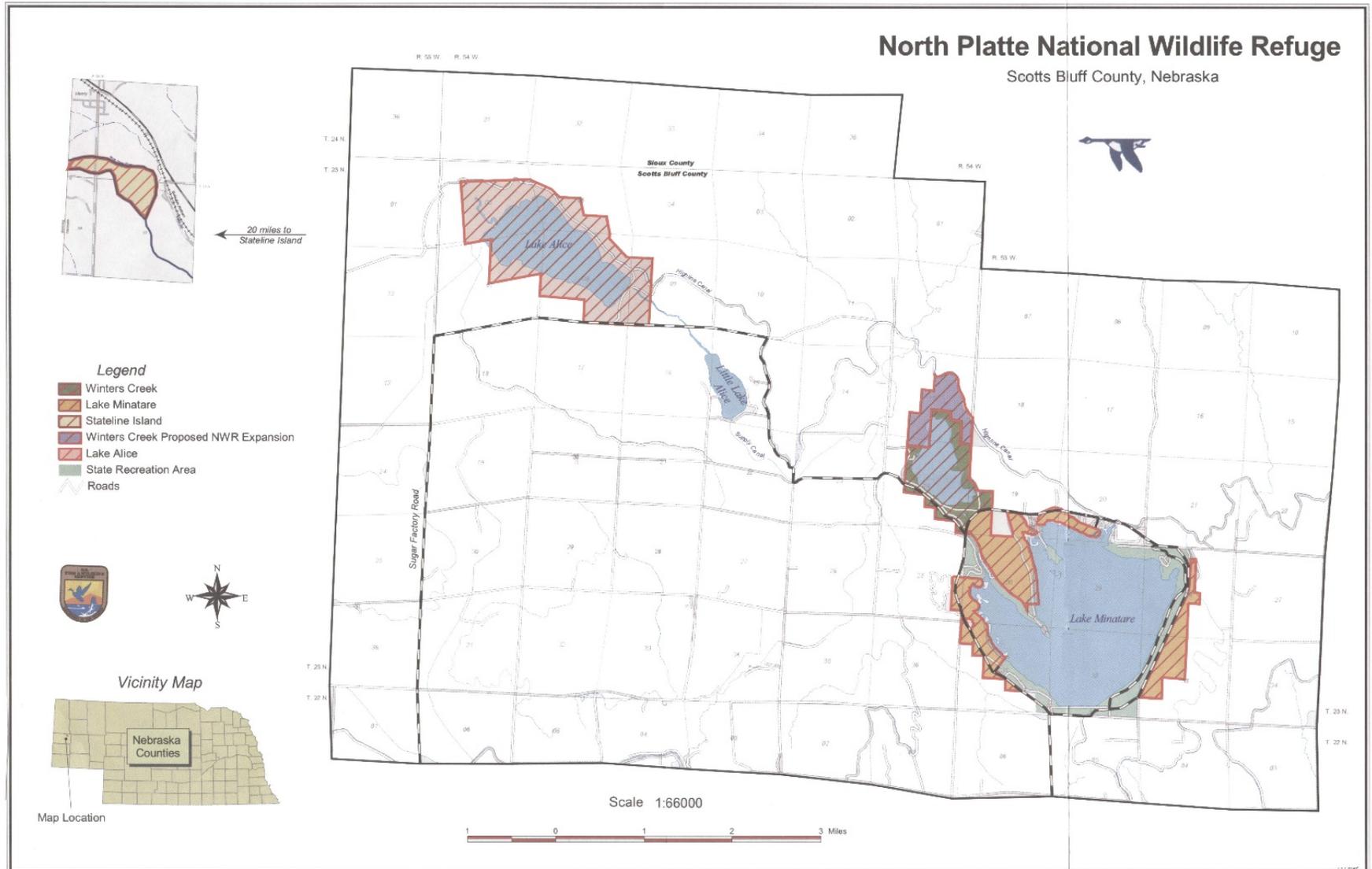


FIGURE 1

Figure 1. North Platte National Wildlife Refuge Hunt Unit Map.

Table 1. Summary of Basic Habitat Types for Each Refuge Unit.

Habitat Type	Minatare (acres)	Winters Creek (acres)	Lake Alice (acres)	Stateline Island (acres)	Total Acres
Open water (lakes)		345	576		921
Small wetlands (with emergent vegetation)		8			8
Grasslands	327	349	698	65	1,439
Trees and scrub shrub	103	55	92	65	315
Administrative (roads, dams, canal)		23	11	5	39
TOTALS	430	780	1,377	135	2,722

Lake Alice is the only unit of the refuge that is currently open to hunting. Lake Alice and Stateline Island units are proposed to be open to hunting opportunities.

The mission of the Refuge Service, as outlined by the NWRSA, as amended by the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 (16 U.S. Code 668dd et seq.), 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.”

The NWRSA mandates the Secretary of the Interior in administering the Refuge System to (16 U.S. Code 668dd[a][4]):

- provide for the conservation of fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats within the Refuge System;
- ensure that the biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health of the Refuge System are supported for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans;
- ensure that the mission of the Refuge System described at 16 U.S. Code 668dd(a)(2) and the purposes of each refuge are carried out;
- ensure effective coordination, interaction, and cooperation with owners of land adjoining refuges and the fish and wildlife agency of the states in which the units of the Refuge System are located;
- assist in the maintenance of adequate water quantity and water quality to fulfill the mission of the Refuge System and the purposes of each refuge;
- recognize compatible wildlife-dependent recreational uses as the priority public uses of the Refuge System through which the American public can develop an appreciation for fish and wildlife;

- ensure that opportunities are provided within the Refuge System for compatible wildlife-dependent recreational uses;
- check the status and trends of fish, wildlife, and plants in each refuge.

Therefore, it is a priority of the Service to provide for wildlife-dependent recreation opportunities, including hunting and fishing, when those opportunities are compatible with the purposes for which the refuge was established and the mission of the Refuge System.

This hunting and fishing plan reassesses the existing refuge hunting program, which was authorized in 2007. Prior to 2007, hunting was not allowed on the refuge.

We, the Service, are proposing to expand youth hunting opportunities to better align with state regulations. The number of acres open for youth hunting opportunities will be increased. We proposed to open new youth hunting opportunities for more species, including turkey, porcupine, and prairie dog. 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 will be extended through October 31.

The refuge 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. Expanding hunting date ranges from October 15 to October 31 will allow youth hunters to participate in the Nebraska youth pheasant season in late October.

We propose to extend archery deer hunting and youth hunting on Lake Alice unit through October 31. This will allow youth hunters to participate in the Nebraska youth pheasant season in late October. We propose to open new youth hunting for turkey, porcupine, and prairie dog at Lake Alice unit to better align with State of Nebraska youth opportunities. Nebraska youth turkey season occurs in late April. We also propose to open youth hunting opportunities for turkey and deer 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. We propose to expand these hunting opportunities through October 31. We also propose to open youth hunting opportunities for porcupine and prairie dog. These hunting opportunities will be conducted in accordance with state and federal regulations.

While small local populations for some of the target species exist, the Lake Alice unit is not known for an overabundance of such small and upland game and furbearer species. For this reason, we propose to keep youth-only hunting of these species, providing an opportunity for adult mentors to introduce youngsters to hunting. All hunters will be allowed to hunt deer prior to the November 1 closure.

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

We also propose 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 will be administered in coordination

with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission (NGPC) to limit the number of youth hunters to better ensure a safe hunting environment.

Grasslands: The refuge has approximately 1,625 acres of grassland, mostly native prairie. The primary native grasses are blue grama, needle and thread, western wheatgrass, and prairie sandreed.

Nonnative species or species not typically found in mixed-grass prairie are interspersed throughout all refuge units. The most widespread are smooth brome and Kentucky bluegrass.

The Lake Alice unit is made up of approximately 760 acres of grasslands.

Woodlands and Shrub: Refuge reservoirs are surrounded with bands of large, naturally established cottonwoods; the bands range in thickness from one or two trees to 100 yards or more. The cottonwoods are very even-aged, in the range of 70 to 80 years old. At Lake Minatare, peach-leaf willow grows in relatively undisturbed areas at the high-water mark. In the 1930s, the Veterans Civil Conservation Corps planted American elm, green ash, and fruit-bearing shrubs such as chokecherry, among the cottonwoods. At Lake Alice and Lake Minatare, green ash is established in the understory.

Stateline Island is heavily forested with cottonwood, ash, willow, and honey locust. Besides native grasses, the understory has shrubs (peach-leaf willow and serviceberry) and forbs, such as wild licorice, ground plum, and prickly pear cactus.

Plant Species of Management Concern: Three plants officially listed as species of management concern by NGPC occur on the refuge: wild onion, perennial bursage, and strict sage. The amounts and distribution of these plants are largely unknown.

Exotic and Invading Vegetation: Several species on the Nebraska noxious plant list are found on the refuge. The most widespread is Canada thistle, which is common on the many disturbed sites within and next to the refuge. Other invasive, nonnative plants include salt cedar, musk thistle, Kentucky bluegrass, smooth brome, downy brome, and Russian olive. The latter is very aggressive and is invading the cottonwood understory at Winters Creek, Lake Alice, and Stateline Island.

There are no official visitor counts for visitation associated with hunting on the refuge. About 4,500 people visit the refuge annually; about 90 percent are from local communities. Visitors often engage in more than one activity and an approximate breakdown by activity is: wildlife observation/interpretation (2,100); environmental education (1,400); and fishing (1,900).

II. Statement of Objectives

The Service has long recognized that hunting is an integral part of a comprehensive wildlife management program and that significant positive benefits can be attributed to a well-managed hunt. In addition, hunting is an acceptable, traditional form of wildlife-oriented recreation that is sometimes used as a management tool to effectively manipulate wildlife populations. Hunting objectives for the Refuge System are as follows:

- to provide the public with a quality wildlife-oriented recreational experience and an opportunity to utilize a renewable natural resource;
- to support wildlife populations at levels compatible with the refuge habitat.

The Service Manual, draft chapter 605 FW 2.1, defines a quality hunting experience as one that (1) considers safety for hunters and other visitors, (2) encourages the highest standards of ethical behavior, (3) is available to a broad spectrum of the hunting public, (4) contributes positively to population management of resident or migratory species, (5) reflects positively on the Refuge System, (6) provides reasonable challenge and opportunities for taking, and (7) creates minimal conflict with other priority wildlife-dependent recreational uses or refuge operations.

The mission of the Refuge System and legal purpose of the refuge are the primary references for setting refuge goals and objectives. Service ecosystem priorities are also considered. The following goals and objectives regarding the hunting program were established in the comprehensive conservation plan (CCP) process and then refined and updated based on comments from stakeholders and the review team.

The refuge was established, in part, because of the presence of wintering eagles. Numbers were never large (up to 24), but the refuge remains a consistent and important wintering area because of the large numbers of migrating and wintering mallards. One pair of bald eagles has nested on the refuge since 1993; 33 young have fledged from this single nest through 2006. This nest occurs on the Lake Alice unit.

Whooping cranes, a federally listed endangered species, have not been seen on the refuge but are occasionally sighted nearby. In 1987, a lone bird was observed east of Scottsbluff and 12 miles north of Lake Minatare. One bird was seen among a flock of sandhill cranes just west of Scottsbluff in 1999. The exposed and shallow water beaches of Lake Minatare and Lake Alice are considered potential fall roosting sites.

Nebraska has 413 bird species on its official list, 228 of which occur on the refuge.

Besides the bald eagle, other raptors common to the refuge include the great-horned owl, American kestrel, rough-legged hawk, golden eagle, red-tailed hawk, northern harrier, and osprey. Use by all raptors averages about 1,500 to 2,000 use days per year. The peregrine falcon, a recently recovered endangered species, is an occasional visitor during migrations.

The American Bird Conservancy (1998) has designated Lake Minatare “globally significant” as a wintering area for waterfowl. Although no longer part of the refuge, Lake Minatare is closed as a fall–winter sanctuary under agreement with Reclamation and NGPC. Table 2 shows the average annual waterfowl use on the refuge, about 95 percent of which occurs from mid-October through December.

A CCP for the refuge was approved on August 24, 2001. A hunting plan was approved in 2007.

Objective: 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. Expand date range for archery deer and

youth hunting of pheasant, squirrel, rabbit, coyote, raccoon, opossum, long-tailed weasel, mink, fox, badger, and striped skunk through October 31.

The Lake Alice unit of the refuge 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 to October 31 will allow youth hunters to participate in the Nebraska youth pheasant season in late October.

Strategies: Extend archery deer hunting and youth hunting on Lake Alice unit to October 31. This will allow youth hunters to participate in the Nebraska youth pheasant season in late October. Open new youth hunting for turkey, porcupine, and prairie dog at Lake Alice unit to better align with State of Nebraska youth opportunities. Nebraska youth turkey season occurs in late April. Open youth hunting opportunities for turkey and deer at the 135-acre Stateline Island unit.

III. Description of Hunting Program

Refuge hunting is permitted in accordance with applicable state and federal regulations. Open season and bag limits have been established by NGPC and hunting on the refuge will be in accordance with those, unless otherwise stated in this hunting and fishing plan.

Other hunting regulations established or changed with this plan specific to the refuge are as follows:

- Lake Alice unit of the refuge is open to hunting from September 1 until October 31 and the Nebraska youth spring turkey season.
- Hunting is only allowed on the refuge for those species named in this hunting and fishing plan during the state-defined open seasons that fall within the period and the areas that the refuge is open to hunting.
- All hunters may enter the refuge one hour before official sunrise and must exit the refuge one hour after official sunset. Shooting hours are consistent with state-defined shooting hours.
- Target shooting is prohibited on the refuge.
- Nontoxic shot is required when hunting with a shotgun.
- Only temporary blinds and stands are allowed and must be removed at the end of each day.
- Tree stands that cause damage to the tree by penetrating into the bark and tree-climbing spikes or screw-in steps that penetrate beyond the outer bark of a tree are prohibited.
- Boats with electric motors only are allowed on Winters Creek Lake and internal combustion boat motors are prohibited.
- The use of gas-powered ice augers for ice fishing is allowed on lakes open to fishing.

- Vehicles and bicycles are restricted to roads that are open to the public. Hunters may not take vehicles off approved roads to set up blinds or decoys, retrieve game, or for any other purposes. Parking is allowed within one vehicle length of the road.
- Pets must be leashed and confined to those areas where vehicles are allowed, except dogs used for bird hunting during appropriate hunting seasons.
- Commercial guiding or the use of a commercial guide to hunt is prohibited.
- Publicly organized hunts are prohibited unless authorized under a special use permit.
- Prohibited activities are not limited to camping, open fires, swimming, and driving on frozen lakes.
- Possession of alcoholic beverages and illegal drugs is prohibited.

The following species are open to hunting on the refuge in accordance with state regulations, the refuge-specific regulations, and as defined below:

Deer (White-Tailed and Mule Deer)

Archery deer hunting opportunities will be expanded on Lake Alice unit of the refuge and will be open September 1 through October 31. Stateline Island unit will be open to youth-only deer hunting. All hunters must abide by all state and refuge-specific regulations when hunting deer on the refuge.

Open Areas: Lake Alice unit and Stateline Island unit.

Youth Hunting

We are expanding youth hunting opportunities on the Lake Alice and Stateline Island units of the refuge 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. Expand 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 October 31. Open Lake Alice and Stateline Island to youth-only spring turkey hunting.

Open Areas: Lake Alice unit and Stateline Island unit.

A. Areas To Be Opened to Hunting

During the periods of September 1 through October 31 and the youth spring turkey season, Lake Alice and Stateline Island units are open to hunting. Lake Alice unit is open to archery deer hunting and a youth-only hunt for squirrel, rabbit, pheasant, coyote, raccoon, opossum, long-tailed weasel, mink, fox, badger, striped skunk, prairie dog, porcupine, and turkey. No other species may be taken. Stateline Island unit is open to youth-only deer and turkey hunting. The Stateline Island unit's small size (135 acres) requires some safety precautions. Visitor safety and hunting access will be managed in coordination with NGPC to limit the number of youth hunters at one time. We may accomplish this by using NGPC's Passing Along the Heritage (PATH) program or something similar. The PATH program provides Nebraska youth and their mentors

access to hunt on private lands and selected public lands. Only youth under the age of 18 may hunt on this land. The mentor is there to help the youth and ensure a safe hunting experience.

B. Species To Be Taken, Hunting Periods, Hunting Access

Youth Hunting:

- Lake Alice unit, youth only. Open to youth-only hunting for squirrel, rabbit, pheasant, coyote, raccoon, opossum, long-tailed weasel, mink, fox, badger, striped skunk, prairie dog, porcupine, and turkey. September 1 to October 31 and Spring Youth turkey season.
- Stateline Island unit, youth only. Open to youth-only hunting for deer and turkey. Access coordinated with NGPC.

Big Game Hunting:

- Lake Alice unit only. Open to archery hunting only for mule deer and white-tailed deer. September 1 to October 31.

Youth Big Game Hunting:

- Stateline Island unit, youth only.

Migratory Game Bird Hunting:

- All refuge units closed.

The refuge is closed to public use from sunset to sunrise; however, archery deer hunters can enter the Lake Alice unit 1 hour prior to sunrise and remain on the unit until 1 hour after sunset. Youth hunters can also enter the Lake Alice and Stateline Island units 1 hour prior to sunrise and must leave 1 hour after sunset. Hunting dogs are allowed on the refuge only during the youth-only hunt. Otherwise, all dogs (and other pets) must be confined to vehicles. Archery deer hunting is open as per state hunting regulations. Archery deer hunters can use portable tree stands and portable hunting blinds. Tree stands can be installed not more than seven days prior to the season and must be removed not later than October 31. Tree stands must be installed without injuring trees. Screw-in steps, bolts, nails, wire, or other objects than penetrate the bark of the tree cannot be used. Portable hunting blinds must be removed daily.

Youth hunters must be 15 years of age or younger. Resident youth hunters do not need a license, but those ages 12 to 15 are required to carry a hunter education certification card while hunting. Nonresident youth are required to have a current Nebraska hunting permit and habitat stamp. Youth hunters must be accompanied by a licensed hunter 19 years old or older. Adults accompanying youth hunters are not allowed to hunt or to carry firearms. The accompanying adult is responsible for ensuring the youth hunter does not violate federal or state regulations.

Nontoxic ammunition is required for all hunting on the refuge with the following exceptions: Lead ammunition is permitted for taking deer. Possession of toxic shot while hunting other species is prohibited. Target shooting, camping, and campfires are prohibited on the refuge. No motorized vehicles are allowed off road within the refuge unless authorized through a special use permit issued by refuge management.

C. Hunter Permit Requirements

For general hunting activities, no special application or registration process is required. Access to Stateline Island unit will be coordinated with NGPC using the PATH program or similar limited access program.

D. Consultation and Coordination with the State

Since 2007, the refuge and NGPC have worked together to provide a public hunting and fishing program on the refuge and adjacent state property. Throughout the revision of this plan, various NGPC staff have been consulted on the inclusion of new species, land, and revisions to regulations. Refuge staff will coordinate with NGPC staff in using the PATH program for youth hunting access to the Stateline Island unit. Refuge management consulted various staff members of the commission to discuss proposed expansions to the refuge hunting and fishing plan. Refuge staff will continue to coordinate with NGPC staff to address annual implementation of hunting activities and ensure safe and enjoyable hunting opportunities.

E. Law Enforcement

Law enforcement of refuge and state hunting regulations, trespassing, and other public use violations associated with management of the refuge is the responsibility of a commissioned refuge law enforcement officer. In absence of a full-time refuge officer, law enforcement assistance is provided by the Service zone officer and NGPC conservation officers. Ongoing coordination and communication are conducted throughout the year.

The following methods are used to control and enforce hunting regulations:

- Refuge and hunt area boundaries will be clearly posted.
- The refuge will provide a brochure that shows hunt areas and explains refuge-specific regulations. The brochure will be made available at the refuge office, the refuge's website, and kiosks located at parking lots and other access points on the refuge.
- Refuge law enforcement staff will randomly check hunters for compliance with federal and state laws.

F. Funding and Staffing Requirements

The hunting program is designed to be administered with minimal refuge resources. The costs of administering and enforcing the refuge hunting program comes out of the refuge's annual budget. Expenses cover program management, staff resources, boundary posting, signage, brochures, parking lot construction, facility maintenance, gate installation, and other hunting-specific activities.

IV. Conducting the Hunting Program

A. Hunter Permit Application, Selection, and Registration Procedures

Refuge staff will coordinate with NGPC staff to determine youth hunting access to the Stateline Island unit. NGPC's PATH program will be assessed as a method for potential hunters to sign up for limited access to the 135-acre unit. Hunting at Lake Alice unit will not be limited.

B. Refuge-Specific Hunting Regulations

Listed in the following sections are refuge-specific regulations that pertain to hunting on the refuge as of the date of this plan. These regulations may be revised as conditions change or if refuge expansion continues/occurs.

C. Relevant State Regulations

Hunting on the refuge is conducted in accordance with NGPC hunting regulations unless noted in Title 50 of the CFR as refuge-specific regulations.

D. Other Refuge Rules and Regulations for Hunting

Hunting is in accordance with state regulations subject to refuge-specific regulations listed above, in addition to the following activities that are not permitted on the refuge:

- use or possession of alcoholic beverages;
- camping, overnight parking, and open campfires;
- cutting vegetation (trees);
- target practice;
- marking trails with paint, flagging, reflectors, tacks, or other man-made materials
- spotlighting for wildlife;
- searching for or removing any object of antiquity including arrowheads, pottery, or other artifacts;
- blocking gates or roadways with vehicles;
- inserting a screw, nail, spike, or other metal object into a tree or to hunt from any tree in which such an object has been driven;
- using climbing spikes;
- using ATVs except by disabled persons possessing a refuge special use permit. For more information on obtaining a special use permit, please visit our permits page.

V. Public Engagement

A. Outreach for Announcing and Publicizing the Hunting Program

The refuge keeps a mailing list comprised of local newspapers, radio stations, and websites for communication purposes. Special announcements and articles may be released in conjunction with hunting seasons. A public notice will be sent to local newspapers in Oshkosh, Alliance, Scottsbluff, Sidney, Ogallala, and North Platte. Information will also be posted at local businesses and on the Crescent Lake NWR and North Platte NWR websites. Upon completion, this plan will be available for public review for 30 days.

B. Anticipated Public Reaction to the Hunting Program

Hunting has been an accepted and popular activity in the local vicinity. The refuge completed the CCP process in August 2001. Through this process, working with stakeholders and the public, there was overall support for expanding the hunting program on the refuge. More hunting opportunities were opened with the 2007 hunting plan with favorable reaction from hunters. Overall, public hunting on the refuge is viewed as a positive and accepted use of refuge lands. All measures will be taken to coordinate the implementation of this hunting plan with input from NGPC and the public.

C. How Hunters Will Be Informed of Relevant Rules and Regulations

General information regarding hunting and other wildlife-dependent public uses can be obtained at Crescent Lake NWR office at 10630 Road 181, Ellsworth, NE 69340 or by calling 308 / 762-4893. Dates, forms, hunting unit directions, and maps will be available on the Crescent Lake NWR website at: www.fws.gov/refuge/Crescent_Lake/visit/rules_and_regulations.html. Regulations pertaining to hunting on all national wildlife refuges are found in 50 CFR 32.2. Copies of the CFR can be found online and in area libraries; in addition, refuge-specific regulations are available on the refuge's website.

VI. Compatibility Determination

Hunting and all associated program activities proposed in this plan are compatible with the purposes of the refuge. See the compatibility determination by visiting www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/huntfish.php#.

VII. References

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