

INTRODUCTION

PLANNING PROCESS

The Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge Comprehensive Management Plan is guided by the established purposes of the Refuge, the goals of the National Wildlife Refuge System, Fish and Wildlife Service compatibility standards, and other Service policies, plans, and laws directly related to refuge management. This plan establishes the vision, goals, objectives, management guidelines and strategies, and monitoring and evaluation for the Refuge.

This plan will be used to prepare step down management plans, performance standards and budgets which describe specific actions to be taken by the Refuge. Management or operational planning will be conducted annually and specific management actions adjusted based on monitoring results, fiscal constraints, and policy changes. The effects of major management actions will be documented to provide information to future managers and managers of other refuges as to the effects of managements actions. The following operational plans will identify the specific actions to be taken to achieve Refuge objectives within the next 15 years: water management, grassland management, hunting, predator management, fire management, integrated pest management, swan management, and fishery management.

Public involvement was obtained through two public meetings and comment periods while writing the Environmental Assessment entitled Restoration and Enhancement of the Refuge. A Hunt Plan EA was written which provided numerous opportunities for written and verbal comments.

DESCRIPTION OF THE AREA

The Refuge was established in 1928 and encompasses most of the valley floor between the Wellsville Range on the east to the Promontory Range on the west. The Refuge is in Box Elder County, Utah on the north end of the Great Salt Lake at the mouth of the Bear River, immediately west of Brigham City (see vicinity map, page 4). The Refuge presently contains 65,000 acres, but land purchases as approved by the 1991 Environmental Assessment are presently underway and will increase the size of the Refuge to 103,200 acres. This increase will consist of 16,891 acres in fee title and 21,309 acres protected under easement agreements. These wetlands will provide excellent waterbird habitat.

The Bear River delta has long been considered one of the most valuable waterbird and wetland areas in the state. Migratory waterfowl, shorebirds, and other waterbirds, as well as resident wildlife depend on the Refuge as a production, feeding, resting/wintering, or staging area. The Refuge serves a vital role in the Bear River delta ecosystem by protecting, developing, and managing over 41,000 acres of wetlands. Various other privately and state-managed marshes surrounding the Refuge further enhance wetland habitats and wildlife values. Habitat quality on the Refuge directly affects wildlife use and production throughout the delta, and vice versa.

Topography is flat, with a gradient fall of approximately one foot per mile to the south. Refuge lands are part of the floor of ancient Lake Bonneville. Maximum natural elevation on the Refuge occurs in the northwest corner where knolls raise to an elevation of about 4,215 feet above sea level. Most of the Refuge is near the 4,202-foot level. Mounds, or knolls are common in the northwest portion of the Refuge.

The climate is typified by moderate spring and fall seasons, short, cold winters, and hot, dry summers. Temperature extremes vary from minus 20° to 103°F. Humidity is generally low.

Annual precipitation at the west end of the Refuge is approximately 12.2 inches, while the average at the eastern end is 19.4 inches. Snowfall is generally light on the Refuge, averaging 35 inches. Winds are moderate with strong gusty winds present during summer thunderstorms. The average growing season is 160 days. Snowfall in the surrounding mountains is the source of the Bear River which provides the water not only for the Refuge but for the agricultural operations in the surrounding valleys.

WILDLIFE

The Refuge and surrounding areas are used by large numbers of shorebirds, ducks, geese, swans, ibis, and numerous other species of birds. It has long been recognized as an area of prime importance to the nation's waterbirds and in 1991 was designated, along with other Great Salt Lake marshes, as a Western Hemispheric Shorebird Reserve.

One endangered species, the peregrine falcon and one threatened species, the bald eagle, use the Refuge. Extremely rare sightings of single whooping cranes (endangered) have occurred during migration, but the Refuge generally does not support suitable habitat for this species. The Refuge may become important for the trumpeter swan, as its range expands in the future.

Two hundred six species of birds regularly visit the Refuge. Sixty-two nest here and another 15 species of accidental or extremely rare occurrence have been recorded. Many mammals common just outside the Refuge are rare in the marshlands habitat, with 31 species using the Refuge. The most prominent mammal species include muskrat, red fox, badger, striped skunk and various rodents. Only five species of reptiles and amphibians have been documented on the Refuge. The fishery associated with the Refuge is warm water with low numbers of game fish.

LEGAL RESPONSIBILITIES

The Refuge was created by Presidential Proclamation, Public Law 304 of the 70th Congress as "a suitable Refuge and feeding, and breeding grounds for migratory wildfowl." The establishment of the Refuge was approved by the State of Utah.

Several Public Land Orders withdrew public lands for inclusion in the Refuge. The orders withdrew these lands from all forms of appropriation under public land laws, including mineral laws. However, mineral leasing laws pertaining to drilling are applicable if known geological resources, such as oil and gas exist.

The Refuge is guided by a number of laws, which include the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918, the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966, the Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956, the Endangered Species Act of 1973, the Refuge Recreation Act of 1962, and the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Appendix A).

The Greasewood Knolls Research Natural Area is registered as a saltbrush-greasewood community, and was managed to maintain the area in this condition. Much of the vegetation was destroyed by the flooding of the Great Salt Lake from 1983 through 1987. Therefore the Greasewood Knolls Research Natural Area is being disestablished because it no longer serves the purposes for which it was originally established.

The Utah Division of State History lists 43 archeological sites on the Refuge. Twenty-seven of these sites have been described and five sites have been excavated. The lower Bear River area is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, due to cultural remains.

Use of water and protection of water rights is necessary for all management. Water rights claims for the Bear River are currently being adjudicated by the State of Utah. Refuge claims are being negotiated.

There are outstanding easements for power lines, roads, telephone lines and natural gas pipelines. The Service owns a 150 foot right-of-way for Whistler Canal from the Bear River Silt Land Company. If land purchases are completed the Service will purchase the land upon which this easement is listed. There are no outstanding mineral reservations on any of the Refuge lands.



