

Comprehensive Conservation Plan

Arapaho National Wildlife Refuge

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Prepared by:

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Arapaho National Wildlife Refuge
PO Box 457
953 Jackson County Road #32
Walden, Colorado 80480-0457

and

Division of Refuge Planning
Region 6
PO Box 25486 DFC
Lakewood, CO 80225

Approved by:

for 

Ralph O. Morgenweck
Regional Director, Region 6
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Denver, Colorado

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Date

Comprehensive Conservation Plan Approval

Arapaho National Wildlife Refuge

Submitted by:

Ann Timberman

Ann Timberman
Project Leader
Arapaho National Wildlife Refuge
Region 6, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Walden, Colorado

9-15-04

Date

Concurred with:

Steve Berend

Dave Wiseman
Refuge Program Supervisor
Colorado, Kansas, and Nebraska
Region 6, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Denver, Colorado

9/16/04

Date

and

Richard A. Coleman

Richard A. Coleman, Ph.D.
Assistant Regional Director
National Wildlife Refuge System
Region 6, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Denver, Colorado

9/16/04

Date

Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| <i>Summary</i> | ix |
| 1 Introduction | 1 |
| Area Description | 3 |
| The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service | 9 |
| Purpose of and Need for the Plan | 9 |
| Platte/Kansas Rivers Ecosystem | 10 |
| Refuge Overview | 10 |
| Refuge Vision Statement | 13 |
| Legal and Policy Guidance | 14 |
| 2 Planning Process | 17 |
| Public Involvement | 19 |
| Planning Issues | 19 |
| 3 Refuge and Resource Descriptions | 27 |
| Physical Resources | 29 |
| Biological Resources | 31 |
| Cultural Resources | 40 |
| Special Management Areas | 40 |
| Public Use | 41 |
| 4 Management Direction | 45 |
| Riparian Habitats | 48 |
| Wetland Habitats | 50 |
| Meadow Habitats | 52 |
| Upland Habitats | 55 |
| Cultural Resources | 56 |
| Public Use | 57 |
| Research | 61 |
| Partnerships | 62 |
| 5 Implementation and Monitoring | 65 |
| Personnel | 67 |
| Funding | 68 |
| Step-down Management Plans | 68 |
| Partnerships | 68 |
| Monitoring and Evaluation | 69 |
| Plan Amendment and Revision | 70 |
| 6 Socioeconomic Analysis | 71 |
| Socioeconomic Setting | 74 |
| Expected Economic Impacts | 75 |
| <i>Glossary</i> | 79 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| Appendix A. Key Legislation and Policies | 89 |
| Appendix B. Compatibility Determination | 91 |
| Appendix C. Planning Team | 100 |
| Appendix D. Environmental Compliance | 101 |
| Appendix E. Section 7 Biological Evaluation | 103 |
| Appendix F. Consultation and Coordination | 116 |
| Appendix G. Mailing List | 121 |
| Appendix H. Habitat Rationale | 123 |
| Appendix I. Water Rights | 156 |
| Appendix J. Species List | 158 |
| Appendix K. Refuge Operating Needs | 166 |
| Appendix L. Maintenance Management Projects | 167 |
| <i>Bibliography</i> | 169 |

List of Figures and Tables

Figures

| | |
|---|----|
| 1. Vicinity map for Arapaho National Wildlife Refuge, Colorado | 4 |
| 2. North Park area of Colorado | 5 |
| 3. Physical features of North Park, Colorado | 6 |
| 4. Platte River watershed of Colorado | 7 |
| 5. Platte/Kansas Rivers ecosystem | 11 |
| 6. Base map of Arapaho National Wildlife Refuge, Colorado | 12 |
| 7. Waterfowl flyways within the United States | 29 |
| 8. Eco-regions of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service | 29 |
| 9. Habitat management units of Arapaho National Wildlife Refuge, Colorado | 32 |
| 10. Wetland complexes of Arapaho National Wildlife Refuge, Colorado | 34 |
| 11. Public use of Arapaho National Wildlife Refuge, Colorado | 42 |

Tables

| | |
|--|----|
| 1. Existing partnerships, Arapaho National Wildlife Refuge, Colorado | 14 |
| 2. Private lands within Arapaho National Wildlife Refuge, Colorado | 24 |
| 3. Private lands outside Arapaho National Wildlife Refuge, Colorado | 24 |
| 4. Special-status wildlife, fish, plant, and amphibian species potentially occurring on Arapaho National Wildlife Refuge, Colorado | 39 |
| 5. Estimated annual visitors to Arapaho National Wildlife Refuge, Colorado | 43 |
| 6. Current and target staff for Arapaho National Wildlife Refuge, Colorado | 67 |
| 7. Overall funding needs for Arapaho National Wildlife Refuge, Colorado | 68 |
| 8. Funding needs for facilities, equipment, and maintenance at Arapaho National Wildlife Refuge, Colorado | 68 |
| 9. Summary of the economic analysis for the comprehensive conservation plan, Arapaho National Wildlife Refuge, Colorado | 73 |
| 10. Summary of the economic effects associated with the comprehensive conservation plan, Arapaho National Wildlife Refuge, Colorado | 73 |
| 11. Employment for Jackson County and Colorado, 2000 | 74 |
| 12. Personal income for Jackson County and Colorado, 2000 | 75 |
| 13. Annual expenditures for Arapaho National Wildlife Refuge, Colorado | 75 |
| 14. Combined refuge personnel and non-salary expenditures in Jackson County, Colorado | 76 |
| 15. Land area management in Jackson County and Colorado | 77 |
| 16. Estimated annual visitors and daily expenditures, Arapaho National Wildlife Refuge, Colorado | 77 |

Summary

Birth of a Plan

This is a summary of the comprehensive conservation plan for the Arapaho National Wildlife Refuge in Jackson County, Colorado. This plan, approved in 2004, will guide management of the refuge for the next 15 years.

The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act requires the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to develop a comprehensive conservation plan by 2012 for each national wildlife refuge in the system.

The Need

The plan is needed to address problems that could negatively affect fish, wildlife, plants, and habitats.

The plan determines opportunities for people to use the refuge in ways that are compatible with resource conservation and refuge purposes.

The Purpose

The purpose of the plan is to

- provide a clear statement of desired conditions
- provide guidance for management decisions
- ensure management is consistent with laws, policies, and plans
- provide an opportunity for the public to help shape the future of the refuge
- provide a clear understanding of management actions and priorities
- provide a sound basis for budget requests

Purposes of the Refuge

The Arapaho National Wildlife Refuge was established in 1967, primarily to provide suitable nesting and rearing habitat for migratory birds. It was created, in part, to offset losses of nesting habitats in the prairie wetland region of the Midwest.

A national wildlife refuge is different from multiple-use public land—it is closed to the public unless specific uses are determined compatible with the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System and purposes of the refuge.



Virginia Heitman

Born of the need to protect habitat for migratory birds, the refuge has grown from a 4,400-acre ranch in the 1960s to an area today of quality riparian and upland habitats. [Gadwall with brood pictured.]

Headwaters of the North Platte

The breathtaking, windswept basin known as North Park forms the headwaters of the North Platte River. At the heart of North Park in north-central Colorado, lies the Arapaho National Wildlife Refuge.

The Illinois River crosses and irrigates the refuge, which is situated at an elevation of 8,200 feet. This water sustains the wetlands, meadows, and riparian areas and the migratory birds and native wildlife that depend on these habitats.

A Wealth of Resources

As snow-capped mountains towering over North Park shed their wintry blankets and flow water to the lowlands, refuge habitats welcome wild travelers and sustain local plants and animals.

The refuge hosts more than 300 different animals, and annually produces 6,000–8,000 ducks.

Irrigated hay meadows furnish nesting habitat for waterfowl, shorebirds, and songbirds. Brood-rearing habitat for waterfowl has been created or enhanced in 72 wetlands.

History of the “Bullpen”

Ute and Arapaho peoples shared North Park’s wealth of natural resources. The large numbers of bison that grazed the basin led Native Americans to refer to this area as the “bullpen.”

Abundant furbearers and waterfowl seized the attention of European trappers and hunters. Prospectors were attracted by the likelihood of a wealth of minerals. These activities spearheaded exploration, leading to settlement.

A ranching heritage was established, and it continues to dominate the area's culture. Beef cattle and nationally renowned mountain hay are major sources of income for today's ranchers in North Park.

Government naturalists studied the area's resources during the 1920s–60s and urged the establishment of a national wildlife refuge. This happened at a time when migratory birds, especially waterfowl and other water birds, were suffering enormous habitat and population declines nationwide.

Engaging the Community

With the refuge at the core, but the health of the entire North Park area as the thrust, refuge staff engaged the Colorado community, government agencies, Native American tribes, organizations, and congressional representatives.

The vision and goals can only be met through close coordination with the local community, partners, and volunteers.



Refuge staff listens to the public.

The regional director for Region 6 of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service sent letters inviting participation in development of the plan to agencies and tribal governments.

Representatives from the Colorado Division of Wildlife, Bureau of Land Management, and U.S. Geological Survey responded to the invitation and joined the planning team.

Vision for a Future Landscape

Wildlife and their habitats come first in management of the refuge, before all other uses.

The plan places great importance on the role the refuge has in the North Park ecosystem—for the environment and the residents of North Park.

Vision Statement

Arapaho National Wildlife Refuge is managed to benefit the diversity of plants and wildlife found in this high mountain valley of the southern Rocky Mountains.

The refuge and its resources are also managed for the benefit of the citizens of the United States.

The refuge includes wetland, meadow, sagebrush uplands, and riparian communities that provide habitat for large mammals, Neotropical migratory birds, nesting waterfowl, fishes, and species of concern from national and regional conservation plans.

In particular, efforts by refuge staff to restore the Illinois River channel hydrology and areas of sagebrush uplands, and to effectively manage wetlands and meadows, contribute to the ecological integrity of the refuge, North Park, and the overall North Platte River system.

Through wildlife-dependent recreation and education, people have opportunities to learn of the wonder and significance of North Park's fauna and flora.

Firsthand experiences with the refuge encourage people to participate as stewards, not only of the refuge, but also of the natural resources in their own communities.

Working in collaboration with the local community and other agencies and organizations helps the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service manage the refuge as a contributing ecological, cultural, and economic component of the unique mountain valley within which it sits.

An Ideal and Steps to Get There

The refuge seeks to be a conservation force that promotes sound resource management and helps in the preservation of North Park's historical heritage.

The plan looks at the role of the refuge and its partners to provide the residents of North Park—along with its wildlife and plants—with diverse and productive habitats.

Goals

The plan sets the following goals for the Arapaho National Wildlife Refuge.

Riparian Habitats. Provide a riparian community representative of historic flora and fauna in a high valley of the southern Rocky Mountains to provide habitat for migratory birds, mammals, and river-dependent species.

Wetland Habitats. Provide and manage natural and constructed permanent and semipermanent wetlands (in three wetland complexes) to provide habitat for migratory waterfowl, shorebirds, wading birds, and associated wetland-dependent wildlife.

Meadow Habitats. Provide and manage irrigated grass-dominated meadows, historically developed for hay production, to support sage grouse broods, waterfowl nesting, and meadow-dependent migratory birds.

Upland Habitats. Provide an upland community representative of the historical flora and fauna in a high valley of the southern Rocky Mountains to provide habitat for sage grouse, large mammals, and other shrub-associated species.

Cultural Resources. The cultural resources of the refuge are preserved, protected, and interpreted for the benefit of present and future generations.

Public Use. Through wildlife-dependent recreation and education, people of a range of abilities and interests are able to learn of, and appreciate, the natural resources of this unique high mountain park. Thereby, citizens become better stewards of nature in their own communities and stronger supporters of the refuge specifically and the National Wildlife Refuge System generally.

Research. The refuge is a learning platform for compatible research that assists management and science of high mountain park sage-steppe communities.

Partnerships. A wide range of partners joins with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in promoting and implementing the refuge vision.

Strategies

Habitat management tools are used to maintain and enhance habitat for waterfowl, as well as other wildlife. These include a variety of grazing and non-grazing strategies, prescribed fire, invasive plant control, and the most important tool for refuge wetlands—water management.

Management techniques such as adjusting grazing and prescribed fire levels, and water manipulation will benefit wildlife by providing seasonal life-cycle requirements.

Monitoring will show progress on meeting the plan's goals. The plan can be revised after 5 years if unexpected effects or situations happen, or to take into consideration new information, guidance, and technology.



Red-winged Blackbirds
© Cindie Brunner

Outcomes of the Plan

Meeting the plan's goals will create an ecologically functional system of habitats.

Wildlife and plants will prosper alongside ranching practices, preserving the natural and cultural heritage of this unique area of the Rocky Mountains.

The refuge will become

- an area where people can enjoy and learn from wildlife-related recreation and where cultural resources are protected and cherished
- a place where people, partners, and refuge staff work together for the welfare of human and wildlife communities

Habitats and Wildlife

The refuge will improve habitats that are in poor condition.

- restoration of riparian habitats
- study of uplands

Restored riparian and meadow habitats will benefit more wildlife species than at present—not only waterfowl, but also Neotropical migratory birds, shorebirds, and a large variety of insects and mammals.

North Park will benefit from partnerships with the refuge that promote sound habitat and wildlife management.

Cultural Resources

The refuge will identify, evaluate, and protect cultural resources. Interpretation of cultural resources and their importance to North Park's wildlife will be encouraged.



USFWS/Rhoda Lewis

The historic Case Barn was modeled after a New Zealand sheep barn.

Air and Water Quality

Increased visitation and road travel is not expected to have long-term impacts on the quality of the air in North Park.

There will be marked improvement in water quality. Habitat restoration efforts should create conditions to better trap sediments and create shade that will improve water quality. This will improve the overall habitat quality for a variety of wildlife.

Public Use

Hunting will be promoted as a sound wildlife management activity to achieve refuge goals. Related facilities will be improved.

As stream habitat and fisheries are restored, the refuge will promote fishing activities.

The refuge will provide, and encourage development of, resources to improve wildlife photography and observation.



Recreational activities such as fishing, hunting, wildlife observation, and hiking can be enjoyed on the refuge.

Environmental education will focus on how and why the refuge intensively manages habitats to achieve goals. The education program will address not only the ecology of the refuge, but of the entire North Park area.

Interpretive facilities will be used to promote sound wildlife management. Interpretation will explain the role that agriculture and ranching have had in the conservation of habitats and wildlife.

Socioeconomics

Socioeconomic conditions of North Park, especially in Walden, are expected to improve as refuge activities lead to increased visitation throughout North Park.

Public use activities will not only promote appreciation of wildlife, but will also encourage visitors to return to North Park. The sale of items and services such as equipment, lodging, and meals will contribute to the economy.

The plan will have some negative economic effects due to decreases in cattle grazing needed to meet habitat goals. The reductions from current grazing levels may be from 10–64 percent, depending on habitat conditions.