

I. Introduction / Background

Purpose of a Comprehensive Conservation Plan

The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 requires that Comprehensive Conservation Plans (CCP) be prepared for each unit of the National Wildlife Refuge System, and that the public be involved in preparing and revising these plans.

Comprehensive planning creates an opportunity to meet with neighbors, customers, and other agencies to identify and discuss natural resource issues and help ensure the plan meets the changing needs of wildlife and people. This Plan discusses history, goals and objectives, and the general direction refuge management will take over the next 15 years. For a complete discussion of the planning process, refer to the “Draft Planning Policy Pursuant to the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997” (copies available at the Refuge Headquarters).

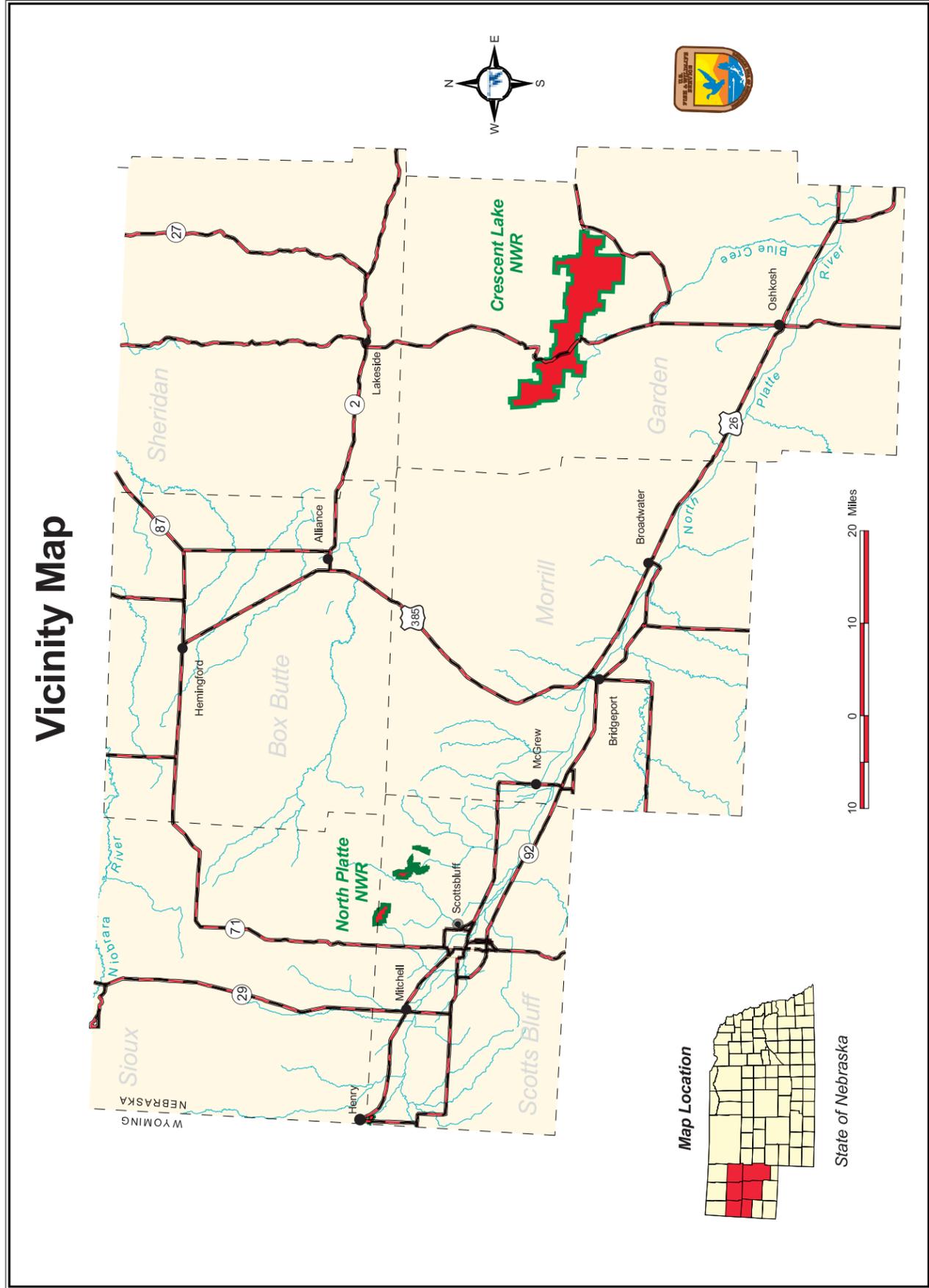
Refuge History - an Overview

Establishment and Administration

The 45,849-acre Crescent Lake National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge), established in 1931, is located 28 miles north of Oshkosh, Nebraska in Garden County at the southwestern end of the Nebraska Sandhills (Map 1). It is administered by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (Service) as part of the Crescent Lake/North Platte National Wildlife Refuge Complex, and is within the Central Flyway. The Complex headquarters is 100 miles to the west in the City of Scottsbluff.

The initial Refuge was 36,920 acres, acquired primarily from one large ranch. Additional lands were acquired between 1932 and 1937. Most lands were acquired or exchanged under the authority of the Migratory Bird Conservation Act (45 Stat. 1222). About 2,566 acres were acquired under the Resettlement Administration (Executive Order 7027, April 30, 1935), a drought and depression relief program.

The Nebraska Sandhills were settled largely as a result of the Kincaid Act of 1904, a modification of the Homestead Act to allow settlers 640 acres in “less productive” areas. As a result, a homestead existed in almost every meadow. However, 640 acres was not a viable farm/ranch unit in the Sandhills, and land was soon consolidated into larger units. Today, the Sandhills are home to some of the largest ranches in the country. Because of the large acreage required to support economically viable units, Garden County is among the least densely populated areas in the continental United States. Most of the Refuge location names originated from the early homesteaders.



Map 1 - Vicinity Map

The earliest government actions on the Refuge were tree plantings and small construction projects by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and the Works Projects Administration (WPA). The CCC built several buildings still in use today at the Refuge headquarters. The WPA built roads, fences, and other facilities, such as the fire tower and buildings, at the headquarters site.

Initially, the staff at Crescent Lake Refuge was also responsible for the 2,909-acre North Platte Refuge, 100 miles to the west. The latter was not staffed until 1990 when the Crescent Lake/North Platte National Wildlife Refuge Complex was officially formed. The Complex headquarters was moved to Scottsbluff in 1993.

All lands around the Refuge are in private ownership except for a small ranch on the west boundary, purchased in 1984 by The Nature Conservancy for preservation of the blowout penstemon (an endangered plant). The only other public land in Garden County is Ash Hollow State Historical Park, 50 miles to the southeast. In March 2000, media entrepreneur Ted Turner purchased a large ranch adjacent to the east boundary of the Refuge; plans for this area are not yet known, although Mr. Turner has placed bison on holdings in Nebraska, Montana, and other states.

Because of its remote location, the Refuge must provide housing for employees. Currently, housing is available for five permanent and four temporary employees. Four service and equipment storage buildings, together with the residences, are clustered in a compact headquarters area (Map 2). Additional equipment storage and two buildings are located across the county road about one-half mile to the east.

Wildlife and Habitat Management

Special Places In 1972, a 24,502-acre area was proposed for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System (Map 2). Although Congress has not acted on the proposal, no development has occurred in the area since 1972.

Two Research Natural Areas were established in 1955 by a Director's Order and included on the National List of Research Areas (Map 2). The Goose Lake RNA (940 acres) has not been grazed, hayed, or intentionally burned since 1948. The Hackberry Lake RNA (172 acres) has not been disturbed since 1951, except for a 60-acre spring burn in 1983 and a short duration spring graze in 1988.

Populations Management Direct populations management consisted primarily of providing sanctuary and controlling predators. Predator control was a significant management activity until 1994, when it was suspended due to staffing limitations and modest results. Public trapping has occurred sporadically. It ended in 1954 when it became economically unfeasible, was revived in the 1980s, but again faded out with low fur prices.

Wetland Management The Refuge has about 8,250 acres of wetlands; there are no permanent natural streams. Manipulation of water levels is possible only on nine lakes and has been used to control shoreline vegetation and create open shoreline for migratory birds. Pothole blasting occurred in the late 1960s to create additional waterfowl breeding habitat; results were limited and the effort was discontinued after a few years. Natural filling of wetlands and invasion of phragmites, an exotic plant, are emerging problems.

Upland Management The agreement for purchase of the original 36,920 acres allowed previous owners to continue to graze at no cost for 10 years. The only restriction was that no more than 4,000 cattle could be on the Refuge at any one time. By the end of the 10 years, most of the Refuge was seriously overgrazed. During World War II, the Refuge was leased to surrounding ranches for cattle grazing to help meet wartime needs. Although the stocking rate then was half that on surrounding commercial lands, Refuge grasslands made little recovery. After the War, grazing gradually declined.

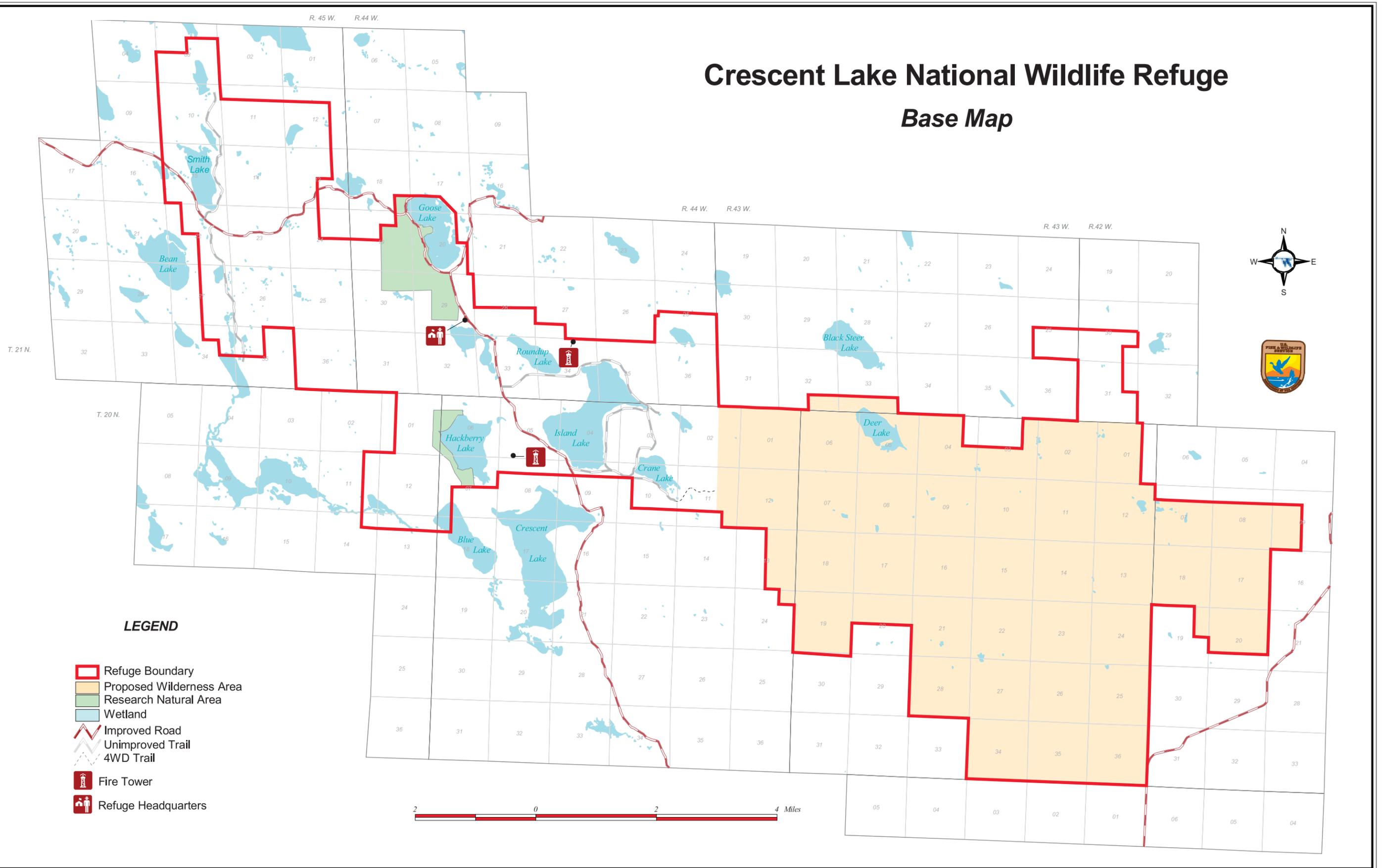
Although the Refuge has largely recovered from overgrazing in the past, grazing remains an important tool. Today, native prairie management consists of a combination of rest, grazing, and prescribed burning. Prescribed burning was first used as a management tool in 1984 and has obvious limitations in this sea of grass; about 500 acres are planned for burning annually.

Noxious weeds are a ubiquitous problem, and the Refuge is no exception. Fortunately, surrounding private lands are well-managed and the problem is limited to Canada thistle. Leafy spurge was eradicated from the Refuge in 1994.

There are about 80 acres of trees on the Refuge, most of which were planted by the CCC in the 1930s. Trees add diversity; however, with the exception of cottonwoods and willows, they are not a normal part of the Sandhills Prairie. There is no active management and the acreage is steadily declining through natural mortality.

Crescent Lake National Wildlife Refuge

Base Map



LEGEND

- Refuge Boundary
- Proposed Wilderness Area
- Research Natural Area
- Wetland
- Improved Road
- Unimproved Trail
- 4WD Trail
- Fire Tower
- Refuge Headquarters

Map 2 - Refuge Base Map

Cultural Resources

Historic, archaeological, and paleontological resources are protected by Federal laws. No formal, systematic cultural resource surveys have been conducted on the Refuge. The buildings constructed by the CCC or WPA are more than 50 years old and qualify for preservation.

Public Use

Recreation and Education Portions of the Refuge have always been open for hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, and general nature-oriented activities. A Special Use Permits can be used to allow the public to trap. The Refuge is isolated (Oshkosh, population 1,100, is the nearest town and 28 miles away) and accessible by few and relatively rough roads. This isolation limits the number of visitors but is an important and desirable quality for most who do come. Public use averages about 8,000 visitors per year.

Facilities were always minimal and, even today, are limited to one auto tour route, two graveled boat ramps, two fishing piers, a public rest room, modest interpretive displays at the headquarters, and kiosks at the entrances.

Originally, Refuge lakes did not contain sport fish. Today, three lakes support sport fisheries which are used by over 5,000 anglers annually. The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission (NGPC) manages sport fisheries with concurrence of the refuge manager.

Hunting has always occurred on the Refuge and has grown to about 600 visits per year.

Economic Use As mentioned above, the Refuge was heavily grazed until the mid-1940s. Since about 1970, grazing has been considered a tool for wildlife management and the amount of grazing declined as grassland improved and native prairie conditions were restored. The current practice of grazing the meadows 1 year out of 6 and the uplands 1 year out of 20 was initiated in 1993. In the past, as many as 20 permittees grazed cattle on the Refuge annually and the amount of grazing exceeded 24,000 animal unit months (AUMs). Today, only 3 to 5 permittees use the Refuge in any given year and grazing is limited to about 2,500 AUMs. Grazing fees are established through competitive bidding and are lower than those in much of the Sandhills because Refuge grazing areas are difficult to access.

The National Wildlife Refuge System

Mission and Goals and Guiding Principles

The National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System) is the world's largest collection of lands set aside specifically for wildlife. The first unit of the System, a 3-acre pelican and heron rookery in Florida, was created in 1903 by President Theodore Roosevelt. Today, the System includes nearly 540 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas encompassing more than 95 million acres and located in all 50 States and a number of U.S. Territories.

The Refuge System provides habitat for endangered species, migratory birds, species of management concern (see Glossary and Appendix H) and other "trust resources" for which the Federal government is ultimately responsible. It also provides habitat for resident wildlife and offers wildlife-dependent recreation for over 34 million visitors annually.

Fish and Wildlife Service Mission

"To work with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish and wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people."

To fulfill this mission, Congress has charged the Service with conserving and managing migratory birds, endangered species, anadromous and interjurisdictional fish, and certain marine mammals. The Service carries out these responsibilities through several functional entities, one of which is the National Wildlife Refuge System.



This goose, designed by J.N. "Ding" Darling, has become the symbol of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

National Wildlife Refuge System Mission

"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" (National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997, Public Law 105-57).

National Wildlife Refuge System Goals

1. *To fulfill our statutory duty to achieve refuge purpose(s) and further the System mission.*
2. *Conserve, restore where appropriate, and enhance all species of fish, wildlife, and plants that are endangered or threatened with becoming endangered.*
3. *Perpetuate migratory bird, interjurisdictional fish, and marine mammal populations.*
4. *Conserve a diversity of fish, wildlife, and plants.*
5. *Conserve and restore, where appropriate, representative ecosystems of the United States, including the ecological processes characteristic of those ecosystems.*
6. *To foster understanding and instill appreciation of fish, wildlife, and plants, and their conservation, by providing the public with safe, high-quality, and compatible wildlife-dependent public use. Such use includes hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation.*

While individual refuges are important in and of themselves, they are even more important for their collective benefits as a network. Together, national wildlife refuges form a network of lands spanning the entire continent - supporting birds migrating from Alaska and Canada to the southern States and points south, preserving trust resources, and providing enjoyment for people throughout the United States and neighboring countries. Together, they help prevent species from becoming threatened or endangered by securing habitat in all or portions of a species range. Thus, the network is critical - a deficiency in one location may affect wildlife in other locations.

Legal and Policy Guidance

National wildlife refuges are guided by: The mission and goals of the National Wildlife Refuge System; the legal purpose of the specific refuge unit as described in the establishing legislation or executive orders; International Treaties; Federal laws and regulations; and Service policies. Key concepts and guidance for the System are included in the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966, The Refuge Recreation Act of 1962, Title 50 of the Code of Federal Regulations, the Fish and Wildlife Service Manual, Executive Order 12996 (March 23, 1996) and, most recently, the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997. Appendix C contains a partial list of Federal laws governing administration of the System.

Crescent Lake Refuge is also guided by a number of agreements with other agencies and by the conditions presented in the Environmental Assessment (published with the Draft CCP) and Compatibility Determinations (Appendix E).

Important Concepts for Management of National Wildlife Refuges

Compatibility. “Compatibility” is an important legal concept. The National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966 allowed public use of any area within the System, provided that such use was “compatible” with the major purposes for which such areas were established. The concept was further defined and strengthened by the National Wildlife Refuge System Act of 1997. Thus, by law, all uses of national wildlife refuges, including land management activities and wildlife-dependent recreation, must be formally determined to be “compatible.” A compatible use is defined as one that, in the professional judgement of the refuge manager, will not materially interfere with or detract from the fulfillment of the mission of the System or the purposes of the refuge. Professional judgement is further defined as a determination that is consistent with sound fish and wildlife management and administration practices, available science, available resources (including funding, personnel, facilities, and other infrastructure), and adherence with applicable laws. See Appendix E for a synopsis of compatibility determinations for the major uses allowed on Crescent Lake Refuge.

Wildlife as Priority. The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 states that wildlife conservation is the priority of the System. It amends the Refuge System Administration Act by including a unifying mission for the System, a formal process for determining compatible uses, and a requirement that each refuge will be managed under a Comprehensive Conservation Plan. Further, the Act defines wildlife-dependent recreational uses as: hunting and fishing, wildlife observation and photography, environmental education and interpretation. (Specific details regarding these and other amendments are available through the Refuge or Regional Office.)

Partnerships and Public Involvement. Executive Order 12996 (March 23, 1996) also provides important guidance. Among other things it: stresses the importance of partnerships with Federal and State agencies, Tribes, organizations, industry, and the general public; and, mandates public involvement in decisions on acquisition and management of refuges.

Existing Partnerships

Partnerships with local, State and Federal Agencies, private conservation organizations, and landowners are important not only for achieving and sustaining Refuge objectives but to assure the Refuge is an active member of the community and contributes to the broader objectives of that community. Existing partnerships include:

- Nebraska Game and Parks Commission - Fisheries and wildlife management/Law enforcement
- University of Nebraska - Blowout penstemon recovery
- Earlham University - Reptile and amphibian research
- Central Panhandle Mutual Aid Association - Fire suppression and other emergencies
- The Nature Conservancy - Blowout penstemon recovery
- North Platte Valley Sportmans Association - National Fishing Day activities
- Natural Resource Conservation Service - Wetland Reserve Program
- National Weather Service - Weather station data
- Nebraska National Forest - Interagency Fire Agreement
- U.S. Geological Survey - Water resources management
- Local landowners - FWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program

