

2 The Refuge



Northern pintail

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The Pathfinder Wildlife Refuge (later renamed the “Pathfinder National Wildlife Refuge”) was established by executive order (EO) in 1909. The refuge’s boundaries have been modified several times since its establishment. The present-day refuge comprises four separate units—Sweetwater Arm, Goose Bay, Deweese Creek, and Sage Creek—totaling 16,806 acres (figure 5).

2.1 ESTABLISHMENT, ACQUISITION, AND MANAGEMENT HISTORY

The origins of present-day Pathfinder NWR can be traced to June 17, 1902, when Congress authorized the Bureau of Reclamation to build the Pathfinder Dam and Reservoir in central Wyoming. When dam construction was completed in 1909, the refuge was established on the reservoir as an overlay refuge on Reclamation lands. As such, lands and waters are under the primary jurisdiction of Reclamation, and the refuge purpose is superimposed as a secondary interest in the property. Primary administration is retained by Reclamation, the host agency. Wildlife management must be compatible with those uses for which the primary agency acquired the land.

Below is a summary of the legislation that has shaped the refuge over the years:

- ❑ EO 1032 (February 25, 1909)—established Pathfinder Wildlife Refuge on the Pathfinder Reservoir site “as a preserve and breeding ground for native birds.”
- ❑ EO 3725 (August 18, 1922)—revoked that part of EO 1032 reserving the Pathfinder Reservoir site for use “as a preserve and breeding ground for native birds.”
- ❑ EO 4860 (April 19, 1928)—reestablished the area created by EO 1032 “as a preserve and breeding ground for native birds.”
- ❑ EO 7425 (August 1, 1936)—established the present refuge and designated it “as a refuge and breeding ground for birds and other wildlife.”
- ❑ EO 8296 (November 30, 1939)—changed the refuge name from “Pathfinder Wildlife Refuge” to “Pathfinder National Wildlife Refuge.”

Primary jurisdiction of most of the refuge lands remains under Reclamation’s authority. Reclamation administers lands within the Pathfinder Project boundary for North Platte Project purposes including flood control, irrigation, and hydroelectric power generation. A memorandum of understanding (MOU) specifies the management responsibilities of the Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife (BSFW),

the Service's predecessor, while preserving the autonomy of Reclamation to manage Pathfinder Dam and Reservoir (see appendix D).

The North Platte Project is a 111-mile irrigation project stretching along the North Platte River Valley from Guernsey, Wyoming, to Bridgeport, Nebraska (U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Reclamation [USBR]). The project provides full-service irrigation for about 226,000 acres and supplemental irrigation service for a combined area of roughly 109,000 acres. The project includes five storage dams, four diversion dams, a pumping plant, and a power plant, as well as about 2,000 miles of canals, laterals, and drains.

Many mountain streams rising in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado and Wyoming feed the North Platte River. Its waters are stored and used for irrigation and power development for the North Platte Project and related projects. These projects' storage structures require close operational coordination, which is further complicated by various agreements and laws governing water rights.

Before reaching the Pathfinder Reservoir, the North Platte River waters pass through the Seminole and Kortez dams, where they are joined by waters from the Sweetwater River. Pathfinder Reservoir holds much of the North Platte Project water, with a storage capacity of 1,016,000 acre-feet. A small amount of water is released during the nonirrigation season to satisfy other water rights, enhance fish and wildlife, and operate power plants downstream, and during the irrigation season, water is released as required.

Pathfinder Dam is located about 3 miles below the North Platte River's junction with the Sweetwater River.

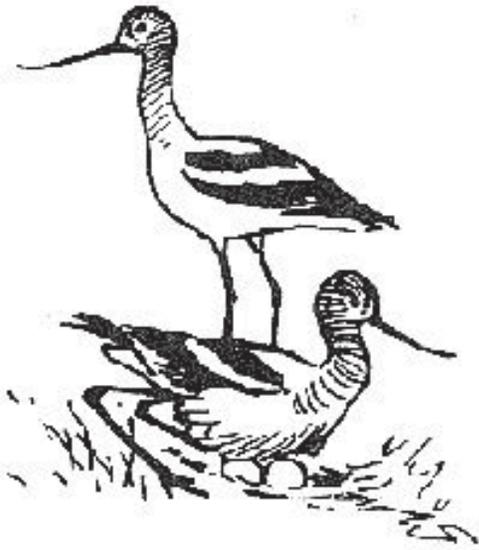
In the 1960s, the BSWF became increasingly concerned with the decline in waterfowl use of the reservoir. This decline was attributed to various ecological changes resulting from Reclamation activities, particularly water manipulation. Recreational activities were also increasing, and the trend was expected to continue. The BSWF concluded that developing and intensively managing only areas that had existing and potential waterfowl attraction would better benefit wildlife than continuing extensive management of the entire area. To this effect, various memorandums of agreement and understanding were signed with Reclamation and other agencies that oversee lands on the Pathfinder Reservoir:

- February 12, 1963—a proposal was made to limit the boundary of Pathfinder NWR to include only the Sweetwater Arm Unit and three small areas (Goose Bay, Deweese Creek, and Sage Creek units) designated for waterfowl production on the main body of the reservoir.

- May 20, 1963—the proposal was approved in a memorandum to the BSWF's regional director of the division of technical services.
- May 19, 1964—the proposal was carried out through partial revocation of EO 7425, which deleted 31,545 acres from the refuge.
- May 26, 1964—an MOU was signed between Reclamation and the BSWF (contract #14-06-700-4605), allowing the latter to manage land and water areas, including grazing, recreation, and related uses, for the conservation of wildlife resources (appendix D).
- September 10, 1964—the BSWF submitted an application to the BLM for the withdrawal of lands from the BLM to add 1,971.97 acres to Pathfinder NWR. The withdrawal of 1,574.84 acres of land was completed November 4, 1964, and serial number Wyoming 0311814 was assigned.
- May 7, 1965—Public Land Order 3657 placed 2,554 acres of public land under the primary responsibility of the BSWF through a realignment of the refuge boundary.
- November 16, 1965—an MOA (contract #14-06-700-4737) between Reclamation, the BLM, and the BSWF transferred administration of the grazing program to the BLM.
- May 19, 1966—an MOU (contract #14-06-700-4749) between Reclamation, the Natrona County Commissioners, and the BSWF was established concerning the administration and development of land and facilities at Alcova, Pathfinder, and Grays Reef reservoirs for recreational purposes.
- May 19, 1991—an MOU (contract # 1-AG-60-01340) between Reclamation and Natrona County replaced the MOU dated May 19, 1966. The area at Pathfinder NWR covered by this MOU is the Bishops Point Recreation Area in the Sweetwater Arm Unit. These recreational lands are currently within the refuge's boundary and therefore are subject to the Service's appropriate use and compatibility policies.

2.2 SPECIAL VALUES OF THE REFUGE

Early in the planning process, the planning team and public identified the outstanding qualities of Pathfinder NWR, the characteristics and features that make it special to people, valuable for wildlife, and worthy of refuge status. Identifying these values at the outset helps ensure they will be preserved, protected, and enhanced throughout the planning process. Refuge qualities can range from providing a unique biological habitat for wildlife to offering visitors a quiet place to observe a variety of birds and enjoy nature. The following summarizes the qualities that make portions of the refuge unique and valued.



Avocets

Bob Himes/USFWS

Wildlife and Habitat

- ❑ Forty species of waterfowl, wading birds, and shorebirds use the refuge for migration and nesting including mountain plover, phalarope, avocet, redhead duck, and scaup.
- ❑ The Steamboat Lake area of the Sweetwater Arm Unit provides important feeding and nesting habitat for waterfowl and other migratory bird species.
- ❑ The refuge contains a large body of water in a semiarid environment that provides resting habitat for migratory birds.
- ❑ Uplands sagebrush habitat on the refuge supports sage-grouse, antelope, and other sage-obligate species.
- ❑ The Sweetwater Arm Unit contains at least one sage-grouse lek, and likely early brood-rearing habitat.
- ❑ The refuge is designated an “Important Bird Area” (Audubon Wyoming).
- ❑ A state-listed rare plant, slender spiderflower, is present in the Sweetwater Arm Unit of the refuge.
- ❑ The potential exists to form partnerships with other agencies and with private landowners in the area who are interested in maintaining and improving the refuge’s natural resources.
- ❑ Currently, there is little pressure for development near the refuge.

Public Use

- ❑ The refuge provides a variety of public recreation including the six priority public uses of the Refuge System (hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation).

- ❑ The Steamboat Lake area of the refuge provides excellent wildlife observation and interpretation opportunities.
- ❑ The Oregon Trail and Independence Rock offer opportunities to showcase the refuge to the public.
- ❑ The refuge offers visitors open space and the opportunity to experience solitude in an aesthetically pleasing environment.

2.3 PURPOSE

Every refuge is established for a purpose. This purpose is the foundation upon which to build all refuge programs, from biology and public use to maintenance and facilities. No action that the Service or public takes may conflict with this refuge purpose. The refuge purpose is found in the legislative acts or administrative orders, which are the authorities to either transfer or acquire a piece of land for a refuge. Over time an individual refuge may contain lands that have been acquired under a variety of transfer and acquisition authorities, giving it more than one purpose. The goals, objectives, and strategies identified in the CCP are intended to support the individual purpose for which the refuge was established.

As stated in EO 7425, the purpose of Pathfinder NWR is “as a refuge and breeding ground for birds and other wildlife.”

2.4 VISION

At the beginning of the planning process, the Service developed a vision for Pathfinder NWR. A vision describes what will be different in the future as a result of the CCP and is the essence of what the Service is trying to accomplish at the refuge. The vision is a future-oriented statement designed to be achieved through refuge management by the end of the 15-year CCP planning horizon. The vision for Pathfinder NWR is the following.

Pathfinder Reservoir and surrounding public lands supply life-cycle needs for a multitude of wildlife adapted to this semiarid region of central Wyoming. The wetland complexes, upland sagebrush habitats, and open waters of the reservoir provide feeding, breeding, staging, resting, and nesting areas for migratory birds and resident wildlife. Management decisions will be directed toward maintaining or improving wildlife habitat values. Appropriate public use opportunities will be identified, and provided where possible.

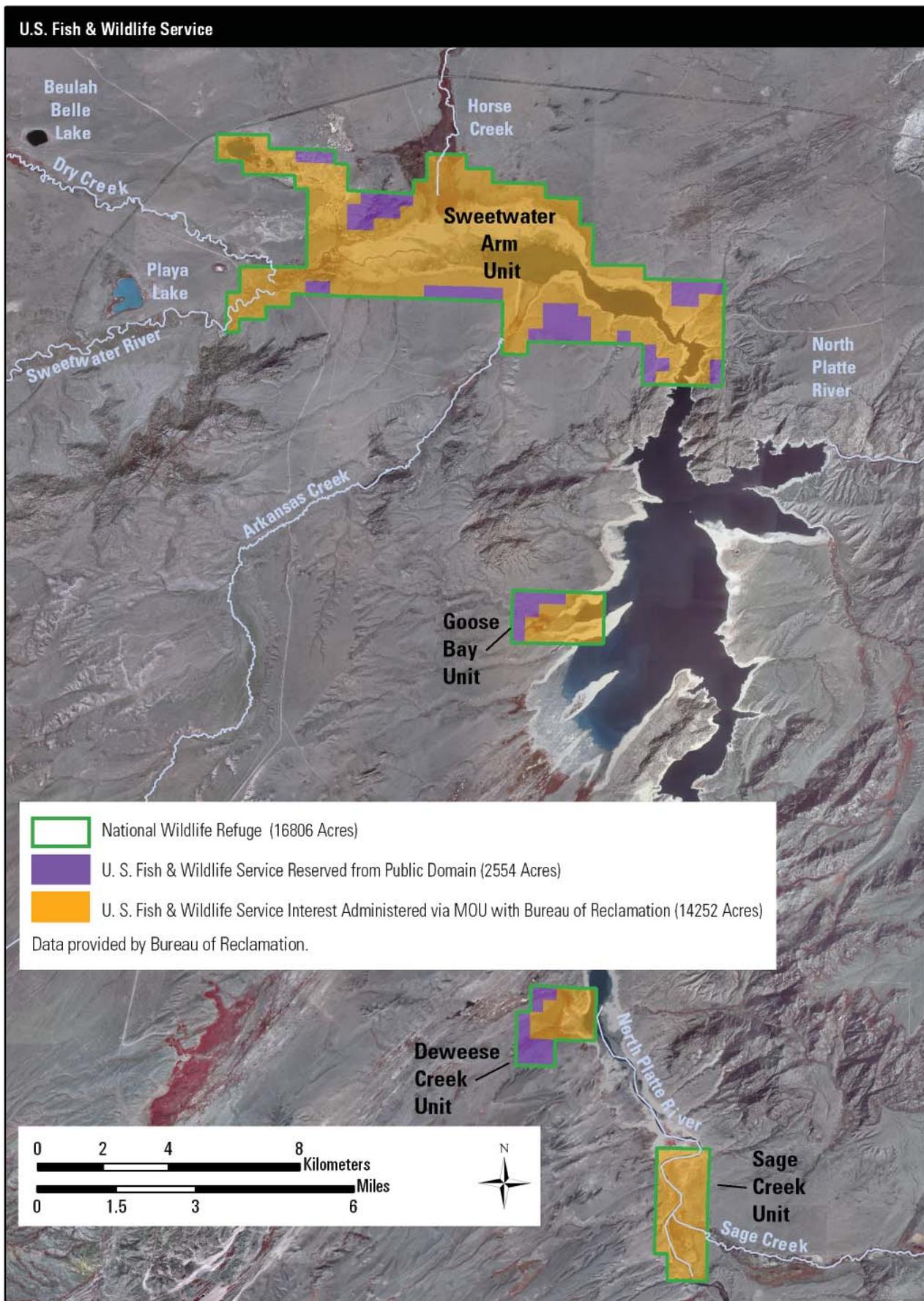


Figure 5. Base map of Pathfinder NWR, Wyoming.

2.5 GOALS

The Service also developed a set of goals for the refuge based on the Improvement Act, the refuge purpose, and information developed during project planning. The goals direct work toward achieving the vision and purpose of the refuge and outline approaches for managing refuge resources. The following five goals were identified for Pathfinder NWR.

Natural Resources Goal

Conserve the ecological diversity of uplands and wetlands to support healthy populations of native wildlife, with an emphasis on migratory birds.

Visitor Services Goal

Provide wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities to a diverse audience when the administration of these programs does not adversely affect habitat management objectives.

Partnerships Goal

Work with partners to support healthy populations of native wildlife and to increase the understanding of wildlife needs as well as the benefits wildlife offer to local communities.

Cultural Resources Goal

Identify and evaluate the cultural resources on the refuge and protect those that are determined to be significant.

Administrative Goal

Obtain administrative capabilities that will result in efficient strategies to manage the landscape to achieve habitat and public management goals.

2.6 PLANNING ISSUES

Several key issues were identified following the analysis of comments collected from refuge staff and the public, as well as a review of the requirements of the Improvement Act and the NEPA. Substantive comments (those that could be addressed within the authority and management capabilities of the Service) were considered during the formulation of the alternatives for future management. These key issues for Pathfinder NWR are summarized below.

Refuge Management

Pathfinder NWR is part of the Arapaho NWR Complex. Refuge staff are headquartered near Walden, Colorado, approximately a four-hour drive from the refuge. The complex's small staff size (four full-time employees), limited resources, and remote headquarters create management challenges for the refuge, including a lack of day-to-day oversight and minimal opportunities for law enforcement. Degrading infrastructure (specifically, roads, fences,

and signs) and litter occur on the refuge due to lack of active management.

Management of Pathfinder Reservoir and refuge lands by multiple agencies creates additional management challenges. The Service currently has memorandums of agreement and understanding with a number of agencies in the Casper region including Reclamation, BLM, WGFD, and Natrona County. Reclamation has a withdrawal on Pathfinder Reservoir project lands to support project purposes (i.e., flood control, irrigation, and hydroelectric power generation). The Service has a withdrawal on refuge lands for wildlife management purposes. The roles and responsibilities of each agency should be clearly defined, evaluated, and simplified where possible during the CCP planning process.

Refuge Uses

Refuge uses (grazing and recreation) need to be evaluated to ensure existing and proposed uses are compatible with the purpose of the refuge and mission of the Refuge System. Refuge uses have not been actively evaluated over time due to minimal staff presence. Through the development of this CCP, refuge uses and management activities will be evaluated to ensure the best, most informed decisions are made for proper management of refuge lands. For a use to be deemed compatible, appropriate staff and resources must be available to manage the use.

Water Resources

Water and water availability are vital in semiarid regions. The Service does not own water rights for the refuge, which can result in poor wildlife habitat for trust species.

Water Level Fluctuation

During the past 20 years the average fluctuation of the reservoir water level was 20 feet per year with a range of 8–40 feet, resulting in a lack of shoreline vegetation and food source for migratory birds and nesting cover for waterfowl. The Bureau of Reclamation is responsible for managing reservoir water levels.

Separated Land Parcels

The refuge consists of four separate units. Separated land parcels are generally more difficult to access and manage than contiguous parcels of land, and generally of less value to wildlife.

Invasive Species

Invasive species are a threat to quality habitat. If not contained early, they can also drain resources. Tamarisk and Canada thistle have been identified on the refuge. An increase in monitoring, management, and control of these and other invasive species is needed.

Research and Science

The Service needs to obtain good baseline data for the refuge. Monitoring programs need to be implemented for species that use the refuge. Audubon Wyoming could be a partner in gathering quality research data on the refuge.

Partnerships

Cooperation with other agencies is needed to address issues of common concern. Opportunities for the public to assist in the protection and management of the refuge should be identified and provided. Local conservation groups could help raise funds for the refuge either directly or by lobbying state and federal representatives.

Staffing

The refuge should be managed by Service staff stationed in Wyoming. This issue was raised frequently in public meetings. The managing staff is currently headquartered at Arapaho NWR in Walden, Colorado, a four-hour drive from the refuge. The remote location of staff prevents active, consistent oversight of the refuge.

