

# 3 Refuge Resources and Description



*Sage Thrasher*

Dave Menke/USFWS

Located in central Wyoming in a high plains basin near the headwaters of the Platte–Kansas Rivers ecosystem, Pathfinder NWR lies approximately 47 miles southwest of the city of Casper. Since the refuge was established on the Pathfinder Reservoir in 1909, many other reservoirs have been created, including Alcova to the north and Seminoe to the south, and the refuge no longer offers a unique environment for wildlife in this semiarid region of Wyoming.

This chapter describes the refuge’s setting, as follows:

- ❑ physical environment
- ❑ biological resources
- ❑ cultural resources
- ❑ special management areas
- ❑ visitor services
- ❑ partnerships
- ❑ socioeconomic environment
- ❑ operations

## PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

This section describes global warming as well as the climate, soils, water resources, and air quality at the refuge.

### *GLOBAL WARMING*

The U.S. Department of the Interior issued an order in January 2001 requiring federal agencies under its direction that have land management responsibilities to consider potential climate change effects as part of long-range planning endeavors.

The U.S. Department of Energy’s 1999 report, “Carbon Sequestration Research and Development,” concluded that ecosystem protection is important to carbon sequestration and may reduce or prevent loss of carbon currently stored in the terrestrial biosphere. The report defines carbon sequestration as “the capture and secure storage of carbon that would otherwise be emitted to or remain in the atmosphere.”

The increase of carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) within the earth's atmosphere has been linked to the gradual rise in surface temperature commonly referred to as "global warming." In relation to comprehensive conservation planning for Refuge System units, carbon sequestration constitutes the primary climate-related effect to be considered in planning.

## **CLIMATE**

The annual precipitation as recorded at Pathfinder Dam averages 9.55 inches (Western Regional Climate Center [WRCC]). The average maximum temperature is 58.3°F, average minimum temperature is 33.4°F, and extremes range from a summer high of approximately 100°F to a winter low of approximately -40°F (WRCC). High winds buffet the area in all seasons, creating ground blizzard conditions in winter and windblown deposition of soils in the spring through fall.

## **PHYSIOGRAPHY**

The Pathfinder Reservoir area consists almost entirely of Miocene age tertiary sediments with outcrops of Precambrian granite. A small area of quaternary alluvial bedrock is found on the west end of the Sweetwater Arm Unit, as well as small deposits of dune sand or loess (loamy deposits) on the Deweese Creek Unit (Larson and Letts 2003). There is little indication of geologic influence from glaciation, and the North Platte River primarily cuts through the granite in the area, creating spectacular canyons but little in the way of flood plains. The Sweetwater River, when reservoir conditions reveal it, seems to have had some history of meandering, and the formation of a flood plain with it. Shifting sand areas (dunes) occur on the western shore of the reservoir and farther to the southwest. The high water mark of the reservoir is 5,850 feet, but lands are regularly exposed below this elevation. The highest point on the refuge is a 6,360-foot rock outcrop on the northwest portion of the Sweetwater Arm Unit.

## **SOILS**

Soils in the Sweetwater Arm Unit, located in Natrona County, are comprised of 13 different soil types. Soils found in the eastern half of the unit include Bosler-Alcova, Haverdad-Clarkelen, Delphill-Blazon, Bronsto-Lupinto, and McFadden-Edin-Blackhall. Soils found in the western half of the unit include Zeomont-Ryan Park, Rock River-Ryan Park, Havermom, and Aquic Ustifluvents.

The west and east portions of the Sweetwater Arm Unit share four common soil types including Rawlings-Rock River, Rock Outcrop, Ryan Park, and the Typic Fluvaquents found in the Horse Creek area. The soil range includes saline subirrigated, loamy, shallow loamy, shallow sandy, sandy, and very shallow.



Mark Ely/USFWS

*Soils at Pathfinder NWR, Wyoming*

The three most common soil types across the Sweetwater Arm Unit are Ryan Park (in the eastern half) and Typic Fluvaquents and Aquic Ustifluvents (in the western half). Ryan Park is a sandy soil, which creates blowing, sandy conditions depicted in the photograph of the eastern half of the Sweetwater Arm Unit in chapter 4 on page 38. The more common soils in the western half of the unit, including Havermom, are subirrigated soils, which provide better growing conditions for vegetation. The sandy soil types (Rawlings-Rock River and Rock River-Ryan Park) in the western half of the unit are less impacted by reservoir operations. One area of Ryan Park in the western half of the unit abuts the reservoir on the south side of the water body.

## **WATER RESOURCES, HYDROLOGY, AND WATER RIGHTS**

The refuge is situated on portions of the Bureau of Reclamation's Pathfinder Reservoir. The reservoir's dam, located on the North Platte River and backing water flowing in from the Sweetwater River, impounds 1,016,000 acre-feet. The reservoir serves as part of the North Platte Project, explained in chapter 2.

Water on the refuge's four units—the main Sweetwater Arm Unit and the satellite Goose Bay, Deweese Creek, and Sage Creek units—flows into the North Platte River. Reclamation retains ownership of all appurtenant state-based

water rights. All of the state-based water rights appurtenant to the formerly ranched lands withdrawn for the reservoir are North Platte Project water and part of the reservoir pool, which is maintained on behalf of the downstream water users who entered into repayment contracts for the construction of the project. The Service cannot obtain or purchase state-based water rights for this refuge, due to the lack of enabling legislation.

Four perennial streams on the Sweetwater Arm Unit empty into the reservoir: the Sweetwater River, Dry Creek, Arkansas Creek, and Horse Creek. Upstream of the reservoir pool, all of these streams are relatively free-flowing, with only small on-stream irrigation reservoirs. The largest of the four streams is the Sweetwater River, which has a watershed area of 2,338 square miles upstream of a USGS gauge, located 7 miles upstream of the reservoir. The station has been in operation from 1914 to 1924 and from 1939 to the present. A gauging station (USGS 06639500) was operated on Horse Creek near the dam from 1915 to 1924. The drainage area of Horse Creek at the gauging station was 117 square miles.

Stream discharge generally peaks from snowmelt and precipitation runoff in May and is at its lowest levels in September. Former oxbows of the Sweetwater River receive spring flood flows and serve as seasonal marshes. USGS gauging station records indicate the mean annual production is approximately 91,200 acre-feet for the Sweetwater River and approximately 2,400 acre-feet for Horse Creek.

The Sweetwater Arm Unit contains former ranchland that had several irrigation ditches. The Bothwell ditches divert water from the Sweetwater River, and the Smith ditches divert water from Horse Creek. The lands these ditches irrigated were designated to be inundated by Pathfinder Reservoir. However, over the years, the reservoir's storage obligations have decreased and some of the lands are not underwater. These state-based water rights were adjudicated and have not been abandoned. Table 2 shows the irrigation rights held by Reclamation for the Sweetwater River and Horse Creek.

The Soda Lakes area contains a series of small, seep-fed alkali ponds. The ponds are shallow, and some dry up in the summer. Several of the ponds are connected by ditches; some have dams that allow water to impound to deeper levels. The structures are in poor condition. All of these lands were withdrawn from the public domain for Reclamation purposes.

A portion of the Goose Bay Unit is underwater when reservoir levels are high. In low-water conditions, it is dry. The unit's water derives either from reservoir storage or from surface moisture from high water tables resulting from reservoir storage.

Approximately 320 acres of the unit were reserved for refuge purposes.

The Deweese Creek Unit has small dams and water-spreader ditches, most of which are dilapidated. Some water from the creek is diverted and spread into small impoundments and moist areas that offer protection for waterfowl broods and afford growth of aquatic plants and grass. Because the soil has hardpan clay under it, the diverted water returns to the creek, which has a fairly constant flow. A gauging station (USGS 06637000) was operated on Deweese Creek from 1917 to 1924. The drainage area above the gauging station was 16.4 square miles. The mean annual production during the period of record was 1,960 acre-feet. Approximately 440 acres of the Deweese Creek Unit were reserved for refuge purposes.

Sage Creek and the North Platte River run through the Sage Creek Unit. Sage Creek has a watershed of approximately 190 square miles, which produces flashy, torrential flows filled with silt and sediment. A gauging station (USGS 06636500) was operated on Sage Creek from 1915 to 1925. The mean production during the period of record was 13,800 acre-feet per year.

## AIR QUALITY

Air quality receives protection under several provisions of the Clean Air Act, including the national ambient air quality standards (NAAQS) and



*Pricklypear*

Gary Eslinger/USFWS

**Table 2. Bureau of Reclamation irrigation rights for the Sweetwater River and Horse Creek, Wyoming.**

<i>Permit No.</i>	<i>Territorial Right</i>	<i>Priority Date</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Use</i>	<i>Source</i>	<i>CFS</i>	<i>Acreage</i>
	A.J. Bothwell	9/1/1886	Bothwell-Sweetwater No. 2 Ditch	Irrigation	Sweetwater River	6.77	474
	State of Wyoming et al.	9/1/1886	Bothwell-Sweetwater No. 2 Ditch	Irrigation	Sweetwater River	2.99	209
	A.J. Bothwell	6/1/1888	Bothwell-Sweetwater No. 3 Ditch	Irrigation and domestic	Sweetwater River	9.55	669
397-E	A.J. Bothwell	12/22/1898	Bothwell-Sweetwater No. 2 Ditch Enlargement	Stock and domestic	Sweetwater River	2.79	195
397-E	State of Wyoming	12/22/1898	Bothwell-Sweetwater No. 2 Ditch Enlargement	Stock and domestic	Sweetwater River	1.01	71
397-E	A.J. Bothwell	12/22/1898	Bothwell-Sweetwater No. 2 Ditch Enlargement	Stock and domestic	Sweetwater River	.79	55
1384	A.J. Bothwell	2/6/1897	Supplement of Bothwell No. 2 Ditch	Irrigation and domestic	A spring or seep supplements the Sweetwater River Bothwell-Sweetwater No. 2 Ditch rights in case they are not whole	8.8	
	A.J. Bothwell	6/17/1885	Smith No. 1 Ditch	Irrigation and domestic	Horse Creek	2.8	190
	A.J. Bothwell	6/17/1885	Smith No. 2 Ditch	Irrigation	Horse Creek	1.14	80

the prevention of significant deterioration program. NAAQS include maximum allowable pollution levels for particulate matter, ozone, sulfur dioxide, nitrogen dioxide, lead, and carbon dioxide.

Based on the Wyoming's most current data, the state has relatively clean air. In the area of the refuge (Carbon and Natrona counties), the levels of carbon monoxide, nitrogen dioxide, ozone, sulfur dioxide, particulate matter (diameter <2.5 micrometers), particulate matter (diameter <10 micrometers), and lead did not exceed federal standards at any monitoring site in 2006 (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency [EPA] 2007a).

The air quality index (AQI) is an approximate indicator of overall air quality, because it takes into account all of the criteria air pollutants measured within a geographic area. Air quality in Carbon and Natrona counties is considered to be generally good, with no reported days of unhealthy air quality (EPA 2007b).

Prescribed burning is the refuge management activity that has the greatest effect on air quality (find more information in the description of the fire management program in appendix I). The management of smoke is incorporated into planning prescribed burns and, to the extent possible,

in suppression of wildfires. Sensitive areas are identified and precautions are taken to safeguard visitors and local residents. Smoke dispersal is a consideration in determining whether a prescribed burn is within prescription. Generally, the fine-grass fuels and small burn size (80–600 acres) generate low volumes of smoke for short durations (4–5 hours). Prescribed burning activities have not yet occurred at Pathfinder NWR.

## BIOLOGICAL RESOURCES

This section describes the existing habitat and wildlife at Pathfinder NWR. Appendixes J–M list species that occur or potentially occur on the refuge for plants (appendix J), birds (appendix K), amphibians and reptiles (appendix L), and mammals (appendix M).

### HABITAT

Major habitat types of Pathfinder NWR include open water wetlands, uplands consisting of shrub and grasslands, and alkali flats. The location and distribution of the major habitat types for the refuge is shown in figure 6.

### OPEN WATER WETLANDS

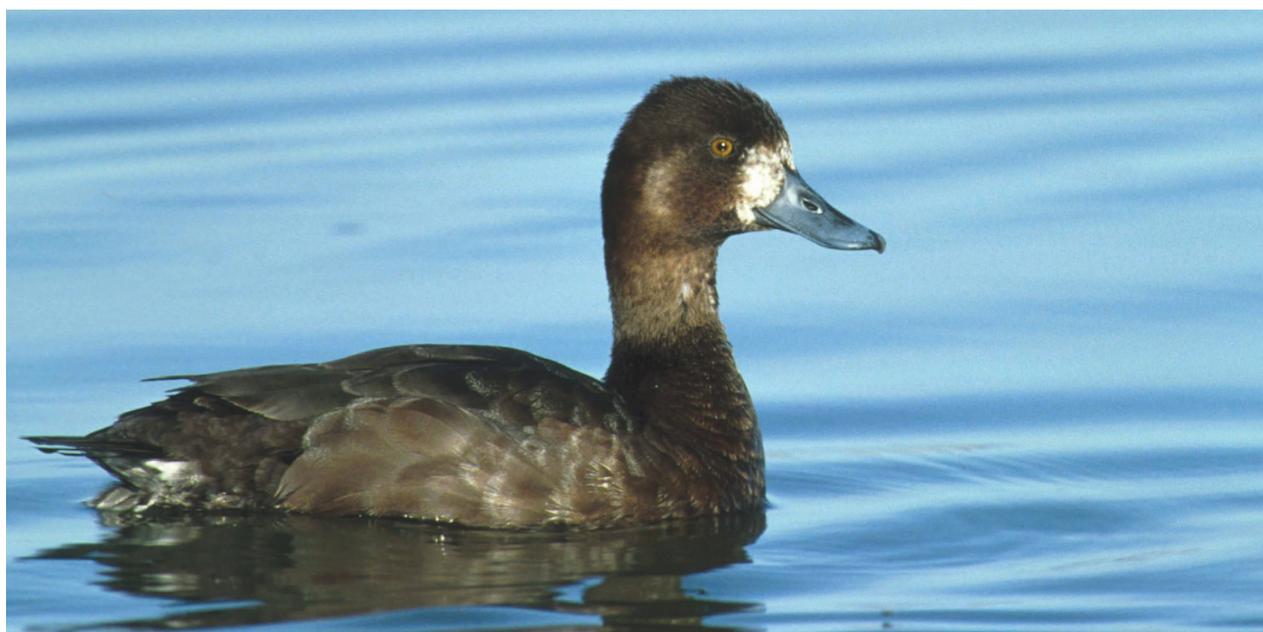
Water rights throughout Wyoming are tightly regulated by the Wyoming State Engineer's Office. Central Wyoming is characterized by dry, arid uplands and unpredictable water runoff events. Due to these conditions, Pathfinder Reservoir was constructed to control flooding and to provide for irrigation water to ranches. Over time, the purposes of Pathfinder Reservoir expanded, and it now is used to provide water for hydropower and to deliver water to other downstream reservoirs.

### RESERVOIR (DEEPWATER)

As explained in chapter 2, Pathfinder Reservoir is part of a system of dams and reservoirs operated by the Bureau of Reclamation in the North Platte River Basin for irrigation, hydroelectric power production, and municipal and industrial water supply. As such, the Service has little to no input into reservoir level management, although a significant portion of the refuge lies below the high water line of the reservoir. As a result, the available management options and long-term benefits of management actions are limited, as reservoir fluctuations can inundate, desiccate, or destroy wildlife habitats.

The spillway elevation for the reservoir is approximately 5,850 feet, at which point the storage capacity is 1,016,507 acre-feet. From 1996 to 2005, the reservoir level saw a high of 5,849.89 feet in 1999 and a low of 5,784.84 feet in 2004. Annual variation between high and low reservoir levels during this time period ranged from 8 feet in 2005 to 26 feet in 2001 and 2002, and averaged nearly 17 feet annually (USBR).

The biological consequences of these variable water levels include a lack of reliable emergent or submergent vegetative growth; shorelines that are primarily sandy, varying from bare sand and rock to partially or fully vegetated with annuals; potentially significant weed issues in low-water years (tamarisk is currently scattered around the reservoir below the high water line); and substrates from the bottom of the reservoir being windblown and deposited on downwind uplands. With the low water levels of the past 5 years, the former floodplain of the Sweetwater River has produced some promising meadow habitat, but a relatively small rise in the reservoir elevation would inundate most of this area.



*Lesser Scaup*

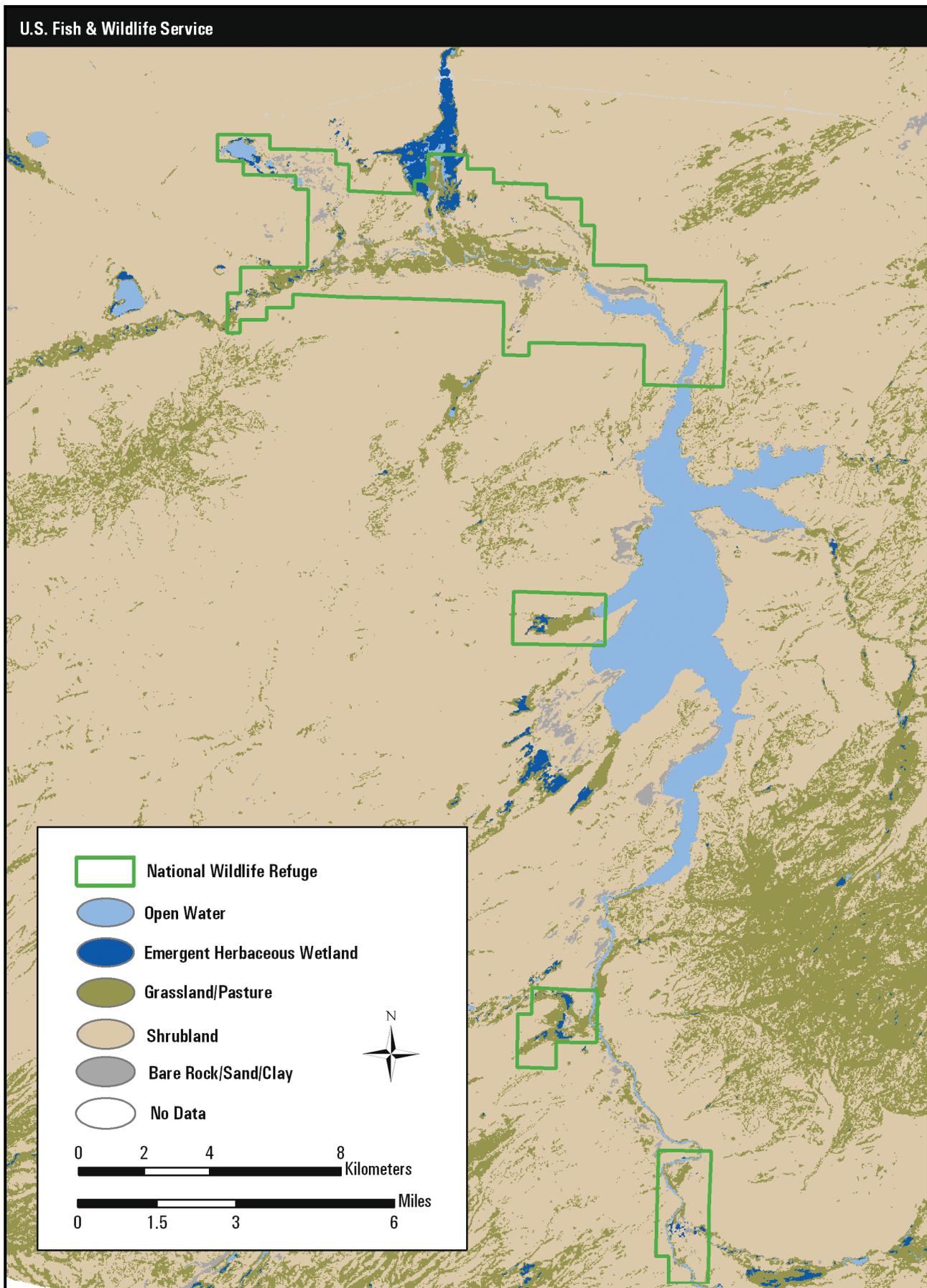


Figure 6. Habitats at Pathfinder NWR, Wyoming.

Use of the reservoir by waterbirds is minimal, likely due to poor water conditions resulting in poor food production, along with disturbance on the water and shorelines from boating, fishing, camping, and all-terrain vehicle (ATV) use.

Fluctuations in reservoir water levels create cutbank and sandy shorelines, resulting in the establishment of little emergent vegetation (i.e., cattails and rushes) for brood cover and feeding areas. The Service's inability to control reservoir water levels to manage for habitat conditions to support migratory bird species, along with a decrease in migratory bird use of the reservoir, hinder the effectiveness of managing the reservoir area as a national wildlife refuge.

### **ARTIFICIAL PONDS**

The refuge's 1961 annual narrative (BSFW) makes reference to "pit type" ponds that were apparently in place on the Goose Bay Unit. Remnants of these ponds still exist, but only two to three appear to be functional in good water years. The 1962 annual narrative (BSFW) also notes that three dikes and ditches were constructed on Deweese Creek that year, along with one on Sage Creek. The dikes on Deweese Creek were designed to back up water that would not only create a small impoundment but also supply water for use in irrigating adjacent uplands for waterfowl nesting habitat. It appears the dikes were somewhat successful, as this area holds remnants of tame grasses that were probably planted at or near the same time. All of the dikes are currently breached, with the creek running back on its old course through them. The remnants of these ponds hold the only emergents found on the refuge.

The Sage Creek dike was reported to be 270 feet in length and included a 1,300-foot ditch for irrigation (present-day refuge staff have not seen the Sage Creek dike and ditch). Some of the area was planted to a wheatgrass mixture. The dike and ditch were apparently subject to regular damage by high waters during spring flows and thunderstorms, as damage to these structures were reported in 1962, 1963, and 1964. In 1964–65, five dams were constructed on Horse Creek; they appear to be nonfunctional today and to have had little impact on habitat development.

### **PLAYAS**

The playa lakes that make up the Steamboat Lake area of the Sweetwater Arm Unit are influenced by runoff and appear to be supplemented by springs around Steamboat Lake. This area blends in with the upland and alkali flat habitat types, as it consists of small rolling "hills" not more than 10–15 feet higher than the surrounding area with alkali areas between them. These hills and alkali areas vary in size from 100 square feet to many acres. After significant precipitation events, and/or runoff, these alkali areas hold water for a time. Typically, the smaller alkaline areas provide spring habitat but are mainly dry later

in the summer months, and the larger alkaline areas to the east of the chain of lakes hold some water most of the year. Steamboat Lake and the next lake east hold water year-round in most years, but an alkali flat generally forms around them in late summer and early fall.

The 1961 annual narrative (BSFW) noted that 1,650 linear feet of diking was constructed in the Soda Lakes area to hold early water and decrease evaporation. This construction can be seen today. Emergent vegetation is limited to the edges of the ponds and includes rushes and sedges. Steamboat Lake and Soda Lakes are used by American avocet, Wilson's phalarope, and other shorebirds for migration and breeding, as well as several duck species, Canada geese, coot, and eared grebe. The smaller, drier lakes see some use by avocet, apparently when the water is fresher, but they are minimally used otherwise.

The 1966 annual narrative (BSFW) documents the Service's unsuccessful attempts to acquire water rights for Pathfinder NWR development.

### **UPLANDS HABITAT: SHRUB AND GRASSLANDS**

Uplands consisting of shrub and grasslands are the dominant habitat type in the area. The upland areas adjacent to the reservoir in the area impacted by reservoir operations are characterized by blowing sand and dryland shrub communities. Areas farther west on the Sweetwater Arm Unit (approximately west of Horse Creek) are characterized by more gentle terrain and grassy and wet meadow areas rather than sandy cutbanks. Located in the backwaters of the reservoir, these areas are wet only if the reservoir is full or near full.

The majority of the lands above the high water line of Pathfinder Reservoir—and likely, the area below and approaching the dam—consists of shrub-dominated uplands and rock outcrops. The upland habitats on the refuge slope upward from the reservoir where the North Platte and Sweetwater River channels lie, and in some places are 150 feet above the high water line. Rock outcrops occur on the north, northwest, southwest, and southeast portions of the Sweetwater Arm Unit and in the southeast corner of the Sage Creek Unit. In addition, the western part of the Sage Creek Unit adjacent to the North Platte River contains shear cliffs that rise up from the river 150 feet to an upland bench above. A notable feature on the refuge landscape, these cliffs appear to be made of a different rock than the other Precambrian rock outcrops. These outcrops, though dominated by rock, contain within them areas of sparse grass, forbs, and sage mixes characteristic of the surrounding uplands, as well as scattered limber pine and Rocky Mountain juniper.

The upland vegetation is primarily dominated by sagebrush of various species and heights, and

probably age classes as well. The understory of grasses and forbs is sparse in general, but varies from site to site based on soil and range type. The south side of the Sweetwater Arm Unit and the upland areas of the Deweese Creek and Goose Bay units consist primarily of well-dispersed sagebrush of 15–40 percent canopy cover, with a minimal grass-and-forb understory and considerable bare ground. Some draws on the western portion of the Goose Bay Unit and the southern part of the Sweetwater Arm Unit contain small areas of sage 2–4 feet tall and have a canopy cover of nearly 100 percent. Some uplands areas on the north side of the Sweetwater Arm Unit and east of Horse Creek are almost completely covered with pricklypear. The sage component is still present, but the shrubs are further apart and the understory is dominated by cactus.

An area in the northeast corner of the Sweetwater Arm Unit is apparently impacted by sediments blowing from the reservoir bottom when it is exposed. This area was once typical of the other sage-dominated uplands, but most of the plants have died, apparently as the result of being sandblasted or choked off in the sediments, as the soil deposits are several inches deep in spots and have formed drifts. The uplands adjacent to the Steamboat Lake area and the upper end of the Sweetwater River contain more greasewood than sage, and unless they are on a bench, contain very little undergrowth and appear to have very poor soils for vegetative growth. Historic use of the uplands has been for livestock grazing. The geography and soil types in this area are such that, for the most part, no thought seems to have been given to attempting irrigation. Wildlife use of these areas includes pronghorn, mule deer, sage thrasher, horned lark, meadow lark, sage-grouse, rattlesnake, and white-tailed prairie dog.

Wyoming has more sagebrush than any other state. Two cover types, Wyoming big sagebrush (30.8 percent) and mixed grass (20.2 percent), occupied about half of the land area of the Wyoming Gap Analysis (WY-GAP) land cover map, based on the proportional area of land cover (Merrill et al. 1996). WY-GAP is part of the national Gap Analysis Program (GAP), whose goal is to keep common species common by identifying species and plant communities that are inadequately represented in existing conservation lands. Begun in 1991, WY-GAP was officially completed in November 1996. The main goal of WY-GAP was to analyze the current status of biodiversity within Wyoming, focusing on two biodiversity elements: land cover types and terrestrial vertebrate species. Land ownership and management for the state of Wyoming was combined with the data on land cover and species distributions in a geographic overlay using Geographic Information System (GIS) data to determine which biodiversity elements are inadequately protected within the current system of areas managed for conservation.



Mark Ely/USFWS

*Alkali Flats at Pathfinder NWR, Wyoming*

Wyoming sagebrush communities are as diverse as the landscape, which is covered by 13 different types of sagebrush. Sagebrush-associated vegetation types provide habitat for approximately 87 species of mammals; 297 species of birds; and 63 species of fish, reptiles, and amphibians (Wyoming Interagency Vegetation Committee 2002). These species have been influenced by historic fire intervals and both domestic and wild ungulate grazing.

Associated species occurring in saltbush and desert shrub cover type include greasewood, winterfat, galleta grass, alkali sacaton, Indian ricegrass, bottlebrush, squirreltail, foxtail barley, basin wildrye, and western wheatgrass.

## **GRAZING MANAGEMENT HISTORY**

As noted in chapter 2, in 1965, the Service signed an MOA (contract #14-06-700-4737) with the BLM that transferred grazing management at Pathfinder NWR to the BLM. Since that time, the BLM has administered the grazing in conjunction with BLM allotment grazing. Section 202 of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (FLPMA) requires the development and maintenance of land use plans for public lands. BLM land use plans are designed to provide guidance for future management actions and the development of subsequent, more detailed and limited-scope plans for resources and uses. Land use plans are developed under the multiple-use and sustained-yield mandate of FLPMA.

Land use plans identify lands that are available for livestock grazing and the parameters under which grazing is to occur. BLM issues grazing permits or leases for available grazing lands. Grazing permits and leases specify the portion of the landscape BLM

authorizes to the permittee or lessee for grazing (i.e., one or more allotments) and establish the terms and conditions of grazing use. Terms and conditions include, at a minimum, the number and class of livestock, when and where they are allowed to graze, and for how long. Grazing use must conform to any applicable allotment management plans, the terms and conditions of the permit or lease, land use plan decisions, the grazing regulations, and other applicable laws.

### **ALKALI FLATS**

Alkali flats are predominately flat lands and seasonally dried-up wetland basins with strongly saline soils. These areas are associated with or adjacent to playas or intermittent lakes. The alkaline/saline soils appear to severely restrict plant growth, as vegetation is very spotty throughout much of this area. Vegetation includes saltgrass, alkali sacaton, and greasewood. Wildlife use by killdeer and American avocet (likely in association with water nearby) is similarly sparse. The Steamboat Lake area supports alkali wetlands and associated vegetation and wildlife uses.

The soil characteristic of this area is Aquic Ustifluvents (saline), 0–3 percent slopes, and includes the playas mentioned in the open water wetlands section above. When there is no water in the basins of the playas, the soils have an alkaline cover. The alkali flats also include the “hilly” areas of the playas, which occur mainly in the northeast portion of the unit and between the larger playas. The dominant vegetation includes greasewood and saltgrass on the hilly areas, and sedges, rushes, slender spiderflower (a state species of concern), and other salt-tolerant species on the edges of some of the playas. The bottoms of the playa basins do not appear to support vegetation.

### **MEADOWS**

The refuge does not contain irrigated meadows. Meadow areas exist in a limited capacity and vary with the reservoir level, as much of the meadowland is underwater in high water conditions.

On the Deweese Creek Unit, the Service constructed a series of dikes and ditches in 1962 on the creek with the hope of irrigating the land to improve waterfowl-nesting habitat and create brood-rearing habitat with the ponds. The dikes blocked the creek and were constructed to continue into the adjoining upland area to serve as a ditch bank carrying water to irrigate these lands. When the Service realized, in 1966, that no water rights were available to support such projects, all construction and maintenance efforts were abandoned. Available historical documents do not indicate that these irrigated meadows were seeded, but the remnant stand of tame grasses, as well as documentation of planting

efforts in the 1960s on the Sage Creek Unit, indicate seeding could have been attempted on the Deweese Creek Unit as well. The meadow area on this unit is estimated to be less than 100 acres.

The Goose Bay Unit holds some meadow habitat that fluctuates based on water conditions. It is likely nonexistent at full reservoir pool, but may return when the pool is low. The meadows slope down the bay to the east toward the reservoir and are likely influenced by surface and subsurface water flows, presumably spring fed. In extremely low water years (such as 2006), the meadow at Goose Bay is estimated at 100–150 acres. In high water years, the area is likely less than 20 acres.

Another low reservoir phenomenon is the emergence of meadow habitat, which usually occurs after a few successive dry years, along the old floodplain of the Sweetwater River in the Sweetwater Arm Unit. This floodplain is some of the flattest terrain on the refuge when not inundated by the reservoir, and this aspect, combined with water flowing from the Sweetwater River and also likely influenced by Horse Creek, probably raises the water table enough to create fairly lush meadows and emergents over time. The growth of this area was apparent in 2006 and was also noted in the 1966 annual narrative (BSFW). No vegetative surveys have been completed of these areas, but sedges, rushes, and unidentified taller grass species have been observed. Although the aforementioned narrative noted the lush vegetative growth in the meadows of the Sweetwater Arm Unit, it also noted that use of the area by waterfowl, especially nesting birds, appeared to be light.

With the dikes blown out at the Deweese Creek Unit, the pit ponds at the Goose Bay Unit functioning minimally, and no ponds along the Sweetwater River, the brooding areas may be limiting what waterfowl nesting occurs. Pronghorn heavily use the Sweetwater Arm Unit meadows. Snipe, Wilson’s phalarope, meadowlark, and willet have been noted.

### **CONTAMINANT ASSESSMENT**

A contaminant assessment completed by the ecological services division of the Service (Ramirez, Dickerson, and Jennings 1995) did not find any major trace element problems at the Sweetwater Arm Unit, with the possible exception of arsenic and chromium in brine shrimp. Although elevated, arsenic and chromium concentrations do not pose a threat to aquatic birds. Major cations and anions (positively and negatively charged ions, respectively), specific conductance, and total alkalinity are typical of shallow alkaline wetlands in the semiarid western United States.

The assessment did not find any evidence of sodium toxicity in ducklings or goslings; however,

management recommendations state that waterfowl nesting should not be encouraged at these ponds due to the potential for sodium toxicity. Nesting enhancement measures could be carried out at the southeast ponds closest to the Sweetwater Arm Unit of the reservoir where freshwater is available. Refuge managers should consider water-quality analysis at these ponds before intensive management for waterfowl production. The alkaline ponds provide good nesting habitat for American avocet. If possible, aquatic bird surveys should be conducted during the breeding season to determine productivity and use (Ramirez, Dickerson, and Jennings 1995).

### ***THREATENED AND ENDANGERED SPECIES***

Federally listed threatened and endangered species for Carbon County include black-footed ferret and blowout beardtongue. Although Canada lynx and yellow-billed cuckoo are potentially found in the county, the refuge does not contain habitat for either species. Currently, no known federally listed threatened or endangered species occur in Natrona County or at the refuge (Wyoming Natural Diversity Database [WYNDD] 2006).

### ***SPECIES OF CONCERN***

Table 3 indicates documented occurrences of vertebrate species of concern within Pathfinder NWR (WYNDD 2006). Observations were in the Steamboat Lake area of the Sweetwater Arm Unit.



Gary Kramer/USFWS

*Black-crowned Night-heron*

**Table 3. Documented occurrences of vertebrate species of concern within Pathfinder NWR, Wyoming.**

<i>Bird Species</i>	<i>Most Recent Observation</i>
American white pelican	2003
Black-crowned night-heron	2002
Brewer's sparrow	2007
Franklin's gull	2007
Great blue heron	2007
Greater sandhill crane	2006
Lark bunting	2007
Lesser scaup	2006
McCown's longspur	2006
Mountain plover	2006
Northern pintail	2007
Redhead	2005
Sage thrasher	2007
Western grebe	2005
White-faced ibis	2005

## CULTURAL RESOURCES

The Service is responsible for managing archaeological and historical sites found on refuge lands.

Existing agreements have shifted management responsibilities for some refuge programs to other agencies, and coordination between the managing agencies is important to prevent negative effects to cultural resources. The grazing program is currently managed by the BLM, while reservoir water levels are managed by Reclamation. These programs may have effects on cultural resources.

The likelihood of archaeological sites near the reservoir shoreline is high. Reservoir water levels fluctuate an average of 20 feet per year, and shoreline erosion may expose archaeological materials. During low water periods, the collecting of artifacts likely occurs without the Service's knowledge.

### PREHISTORIC BACKGROUND

Although structured searches have been minimal in number, archaeological surveys on and near refuge lands have found numerous indications of substantial use of the area by prehistoric cultures. Ten prehistoric sites have been recorded on the refuge and 142 near refuge lands. They consist of chipped stone, hearths, stone circles, stone raw material procurement areas, rock shelters, and lithic scatters. The presence of the North Platte and Sweetwater rivers in this semiarid land were likely influential on prehistoric human use (Larson and Letts 2003). Arapaho, Cheyenne, Sioux, and Shoshone tribes were probably the most common users of the area.

### EARLY EXPLORATION

Although trappers and traders traversed and used the area in the early nineteenth century, by far the largest push of humans through the region came as a result of the Oregon Trail. The remnants of the trail can clearly be seen in numerous locations on the Steamboat Lake area of the refuge, as well as numerous off-refuge locations nearby. Over 200,000 people are estimated to have traveled the Oregon Trail between 1840 and 1870, many leaving a record of their passing at Independence Rock just 3 miles west of the refuge (Larson and Letts 2003). In addition to travelers to the west coast, the Oregon Trail was used briefly by the Pony Express in the 1860s, and the discovery of gold in 1868 near South Pass City, Wyoming, brought opportunistic travelers.

### EARLY SETTLEMENT

European settlement of the refuge area was hindered by a combination of limited natural resources, the absence of major travel corridors (with the exception of the defunct Oregon Trail) and railways, and

harsh environmental conditions. Indeed, even today very few people live in the vicinity of the refuge and reservoir. Settlement was almost exclusively dependent upon ranching. Some shepherding occurred, but cattle ranching was preferred. Because the area is very dry, expanses of land were required to take advantage of what grass was available; ranches were large and included what is now BLM ground for grazing. As in much of the West, water was a critical commodity. At the base of the large rock outcrop on the north side of the Sweetwater Arm Unit is the gravesite of Ella Watson, better known as "Cattle Kate," and James Averal. They were reported to have been hung in 1889 just off the southwest portion of the Sweetwater Arm Unit over a water dispute.

### HISTORY OF DEVELOPMENT

One of the biggest signs of development in the region is the reservoir created by Pathfinder Dam. The dam was constructed between 1905 and 1909, and later modified, on a stretch of the North Platte River. Numerous pipelines for oil and natural gas traverse the area, but successful mineral exploration has been minimal. The nearest communities to the refuge are Alcova, located to the east, which currently caters to recreationists on Alcova and Pathfinder reservoirs, and Jeffrey City, a classic mining boom-and-bust town approximately 40 miles west of the refuge.

## SPECIAL MANAGEMENT AREAS

There are no special management areas related to the refuge.

### WILDERNESS

Due to human development in the area and current and past land use patterns, the refuge does not appear to meet the criteria for wilderness. As outlined in the Wilderness Act of 1994, a wilderness area:

- ❑ generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the human imprint substantially unnoticeable;
- ❑ offers outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation;
- ❑ has at least 5,000 acres of land or is of sufficient size as to make practicable its preservation and use in an unimpaired condition;
- ❑ may contain ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value.

## VISITOR SERVICES

Refuge infrastructure (roads) and public use facilities (wildlife viewing area, county park) are shown in figure 7.



*Bishops Point, Pathfinder NWR, Wyoming*

The distance of the refuge from the complex headquarters at Arapaho NWR, combined with little boundary fencing and the fact that part of the reservoir is refuge land and part is not, create a situation that allows for unrestricted public use on the refuge.

A developed campground and boat ramp are located at Bishops Point in the Sweetwater Arm Unit and is administered by the Natrona County Roads, Bridges, and Parks Department. Hunting of ducks, coots, mergansers, deer, and pronghorn is permitted throughout the refuge in accordance with state seasons.

An interpretive overlook located along Highway 220 above Steamboat Lake interprets the refuge and likely receives several visits a day from the spring through the fall. Opportunities specific to wildlife observation and photography are minimal, as there are no formal tour routes, hiking trails, or signs.

Several non-wildlife-dependent uses presently occur or are assumed to occur on the refuge, including off-road vehicle use (as the reservoir level fluctuates vehicles follow the shoreline); dispersed camping; water skiing, jet skiing, and pleasure boating; ATV use; Bishops Point campground and boat ramp use; rock climbing; and arrowhead hunting. Although refuge staff have known about these incompatible refuge uses for years, the lack of human and fiscal resources has made addressing them a low priority.

Refuge staff believe that most public use occurs on the refuge's largest unit, the Sweetwater Arm, due to its size and location close to a main highway and the city of Casper. The Sage Creek Unit is fairly small and remote. Goose Bay and Deweese Creek are small, extremely remote units surrounded by BLM lands that probably only see occasional use by hunters and jet skiers or boaters in high water conditions.

### **Hunting**

Hunting is allowed per state seasons. Because the refuge boundary is not appropriately posted or

fenced, Service law enforcement officers cannot enforce hunting regulations. The number of hunters using the refuge is unknown but is predicted to be low due to the remote access to most of the refuge.

### **Fishing**

Fishing will continue to be allowed on the main reservoir and in stream areas leading to it. Fishing is allowed per state seasons. The Service does not have control over fishing limits or seasonal closures.

### **Wildlife Observation, Photography, Environmental Education, and Interpretation**

Although wildlife viewing and photography probably occur on other areas of the refuge, the only known uses occur at the Steamboat Lake area, which offers the best opportunities for these activities. An interpretive overlook can be found off Highway 220 above Steamboat Lake.

## **PARTNERSHIPS**

Refuge staff work with Audubon Wyoming to conduct annual breeding bird surveys. Audubon Wyoming conducts annual waterfowl and shorebird surveys at the Steamboat Lake area.

## **SOCIOECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT**

The local and regional demographics (statistical data about the population) are described below for the communities in the five-county study area pertaining to Pathfinder NWR.

### ***SOCIOECONOMIC CONDITIONS***

The following section illustrates the current socioeconomic conditions found within the study area, which is comprised of Albany, Carbon, Converse, Fremont, and Natrona counties. Pathfinder NWR is located within Carbon and Natrona counties; however, the remaining three counties included in the study area are located in

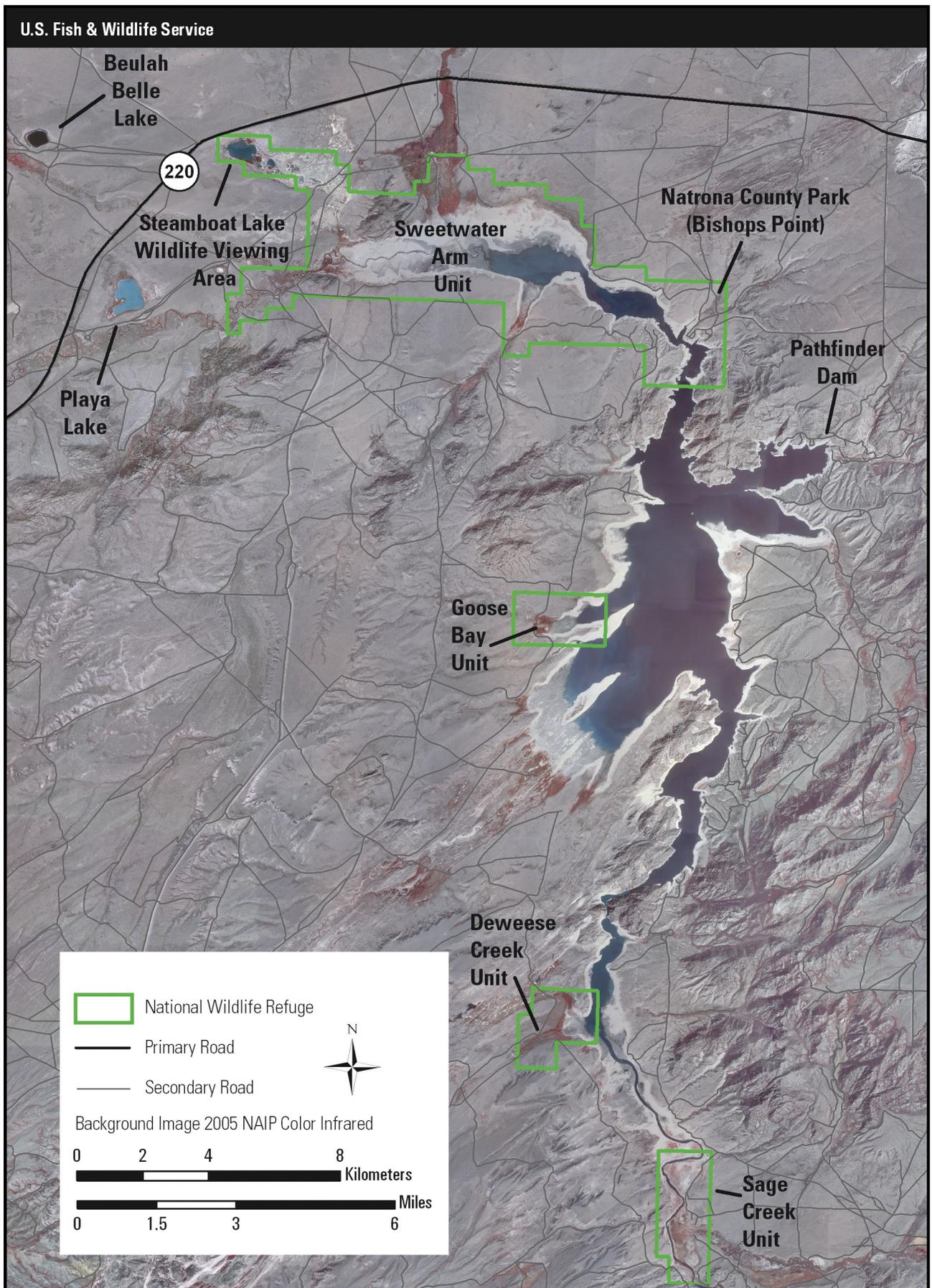
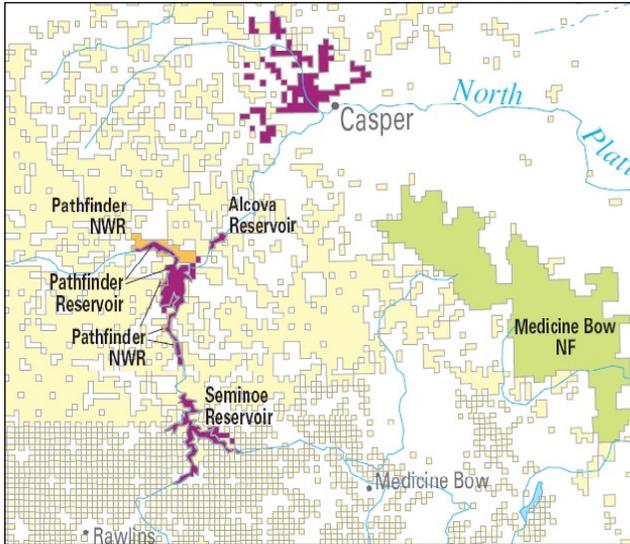


Figure 7. Infrastructure and public use areas at Pathfinder NWR, Wyoming.

close proximity to the refuge and could be affected by refuge management decisions.

Figure 8 shows the location of Pathfinder NWR in relation to nearby population centers. The refuge is located in central Wyoming near the cities of Casper, Rawlins, and Medicine Bow.



**Figure 8. Location of Pathfinder NWR.**  
(Source: Nationalatlas.gov and BBC Research & Consulting)

**POPULATION**

The 2006 census shows the population of the study area has slowly increased since 2000, and total population was about 165,300 as of 2005 (U.S. Census Bureau 2006). Over the same period, the population of Wyoming decreased slightly (figure 9). The study

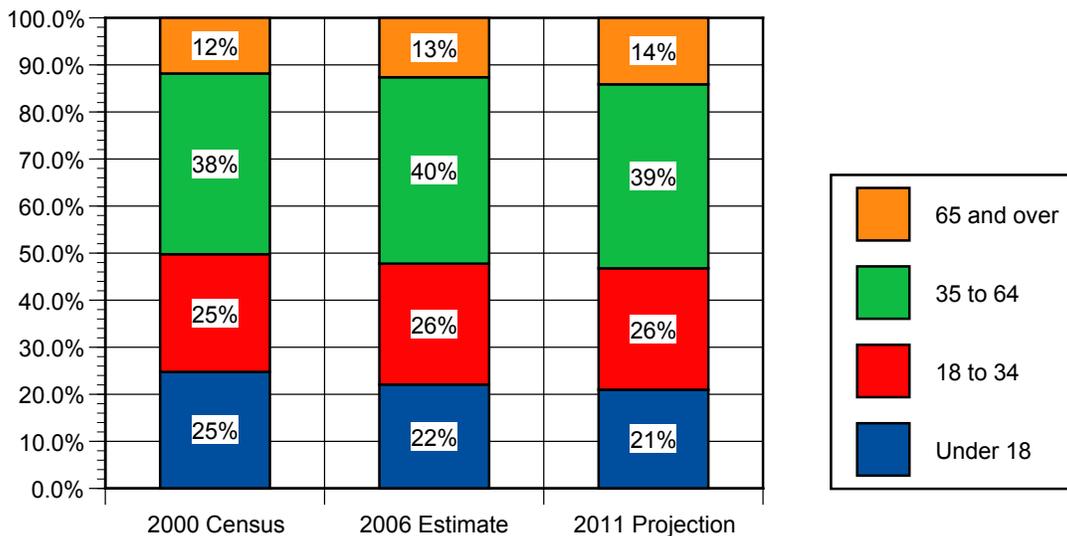
area contained 33 percent of Wyoming’s population in 2005. The city of Casper (2000 census population 49,644) is located within the study area and provides an ample tourist base for the refuge (U.S. Census Bureau 2006).

**AGE**

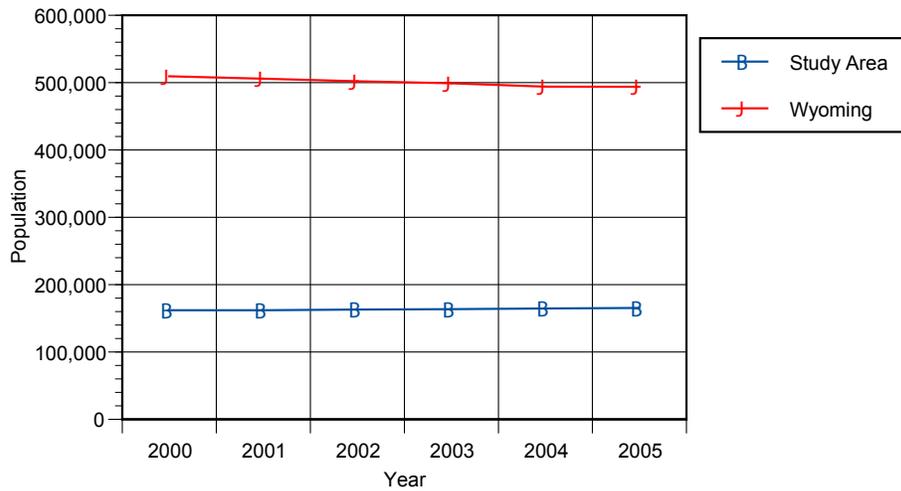
Figure 10 illustrates the aging population of the study area. In 1990, 25 percent of the study area’s population was under the age of 18. By 2011, this age group will only constitute about 21 percent of the population. It should also be noted that the percentage of residents aged 65 and older has steadily increased since 2000. This increase can possibly be attributed to the aging of the baby boom generation. The median age of the study area was about 36.9 years as of 2006.

**EMPLOYMENT**

The civilian workforce for the study area has increased by about 760 workers per year since 2000. As of 2006, the workforce consisted of 84,278 workers. The unemployment rate for 2006 was estimated at 4.0 percent, which is slightly higher than the state’s 3.5 percent unemployment rate. Both the study area and the state have a lower unemployment rate than the nation, which was 4.4 percent as of October 2006 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2006).



**Figure 9. Wyoming and study area population.**  
(Source: State of Wyoming, Administration and Information, Economic Analysis Division)



**Figure 10. Study area age composition.**  
(Source: PCensus)

**LOCAL INDUSTRY**

A wide range of occupations are represented in the study area; sales and office occupations is the largest sector at 26 percent (figure 11). Professional and related occupations employ 19 percent, while farming, fishing, and forestry occupations employ 1 percent of the population.

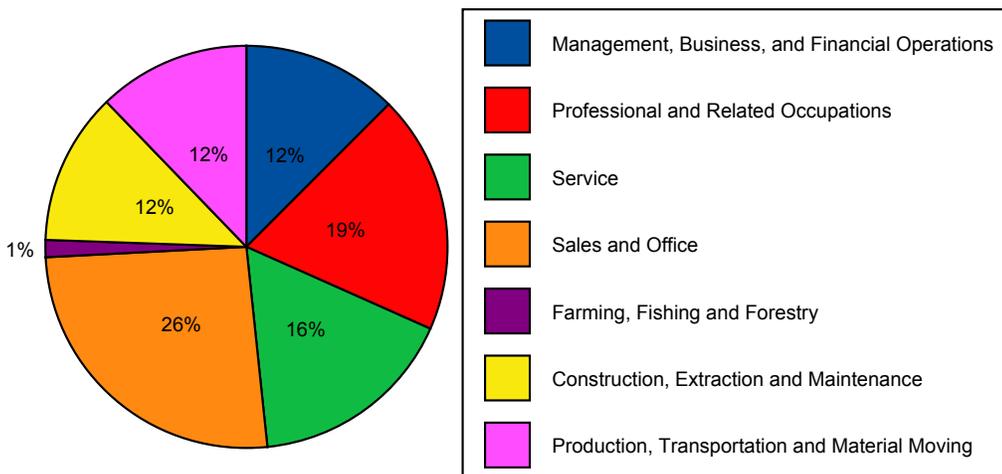
**VISITATION LEVELS**

Pathfinder Reservoir receives approximately 170,000 visitors annually, but very little data exists on actual visitation to the refuge. Service officials estimate that more than half of the 170,000 reservoir visitors visit the refuge, due to the Sweetwater Arm Unit's accessible location along the primary road entering

the reservoir area. They also estimate that a high percentage of those who visit the refuge are locals, with the majority residing in nearby Casper.

**VISITOR SPENDING**

Off-site spending by visitors helps support local lodging and retail establishments in surrounding towns such as Casper and Medicine Bow. Approximately 10 percent of refuge visitor days, or about 8,500 visitor days, are from nonlocal visitors. On average nonlocal visitors spend \$60 per day for lodging, food, and supplies. If half of these guests spend the night locally in commercial lodging or campgrounds, then refuge activity may currently spur about \$255,000 of new annual spending in the regional economy.



**Figure 11. Study area employment distribution, 2006.**  
(Source: PCensus)

## OPERATIONS

The Steamboat Lake area of the refuge has received some management and public use improvements. Surveys conducted demonstrate waterfowl and shorebird use at this very western end of Sweetwater Arm Unit. This area and the backwater reservoir areas are not impacted by the reservoir fluctuations that create sandy cutbank areas along the eastern half of the unit. As such, they have a higher potential for developing, protecting, and preserving quality trust resource habitats and quality wildlife-dependent public use opportunities.

## STAFFING

Since 1967, Pathfinder NWR has been managed by Service staff headquartered at the Arapaho NWR in Walden, Colorado. The Arapaho NWR Complex includes Arapaho NWR, Pathfinder

NWR, and three refuges located near Laramie known collectively as the “Laramie Plains refuges” (Bamforth, Hutton Lake, and Mortenson Lake). The complex’s staff of four full-time equivalent (FTE) employees and three to four seasonal employees are responsible for management activities on six refuges totaling 46,673 acres. Refuge staff travel approximately 240 miles to conduct management activities at Pathfinder NWR. Table 4 indicates the current staff for the complex.

The complex is also supported by Refuge System staff as part of a developing business unit concept. Contracting, budget tracking, travel, and payroll are supported remotely by Service staff stationed in Colorado and Kansas.

## FACILITIES

The refuge has no operations facilities.

**Table 4. Current staff for the Arapaho NWR Complex, Colorado.**

<i>Staff Group</i>	<i>Current Positions</i>
Management	Project leader, GS-12 Refuge operations specialist, GS-11
Biology	Wildlife biologist, GS-9
Maintenance	Maintenance worker, WG-8

*GS=General Schedule Positions*

*WG=Wage Grade Positions*

