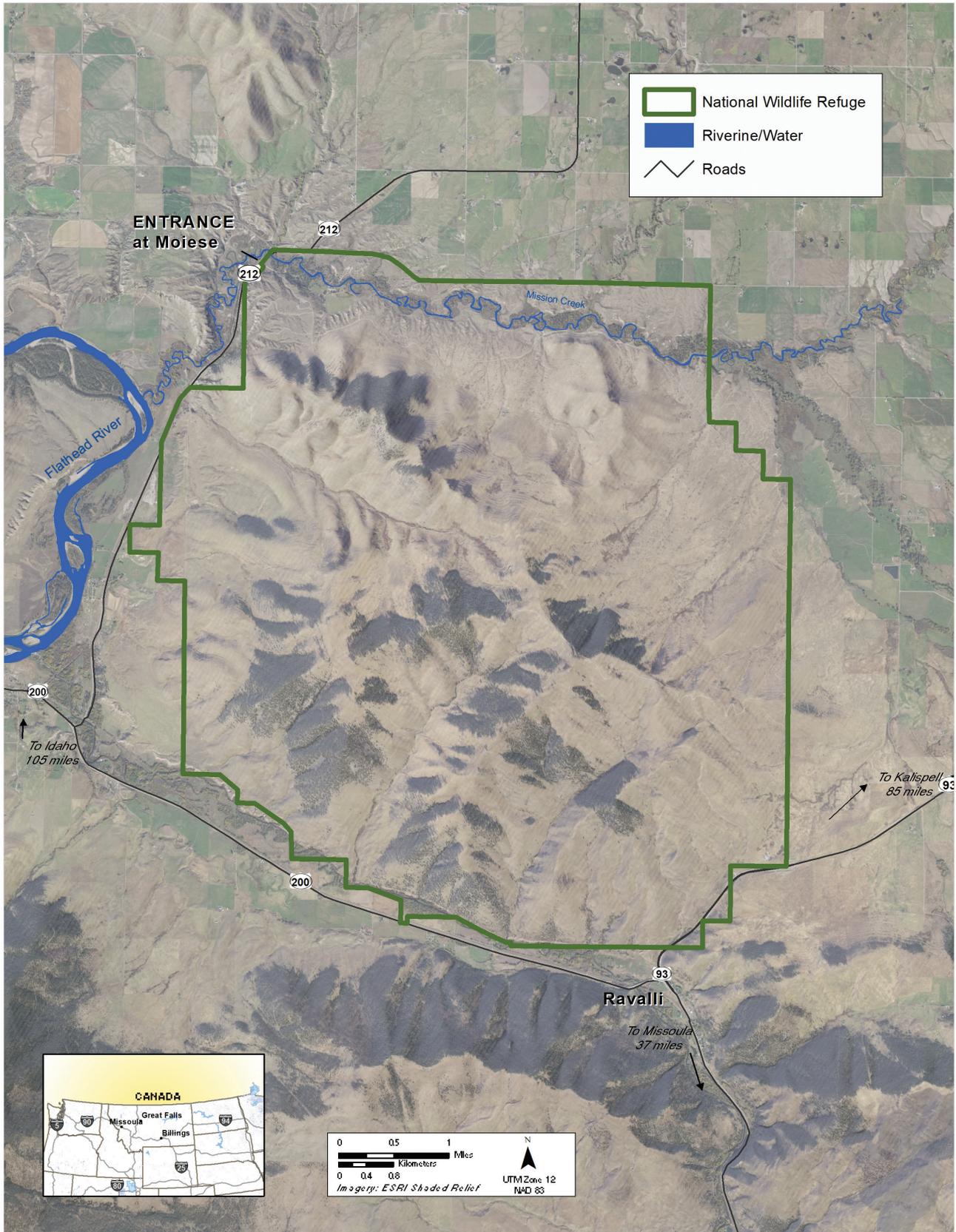


# Summary of the Comprehensive Conservation Plan

*National Bison Range*





**Map of the National Bison Range, Montana**

*This is a summary of the comprehensive conservation plan for the National Bison Range in northwestern Montana.*

*Approved in 2019, the plan guides 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 for each unit in the Refuge System.

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 refuges in ways that are compatible with resource conservation and refuge purposes.

*Cover photograph of bison on the National Bison Range with the Mission Valley and Mission Mountains, Montana*

All photographs Dave Fitzpatrick/USFWS unless noted otherwise.

*Bison herd with calves*

## **The Plan**

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service completed a comprehensive conservation plan for the National Bison Range in Montana (NBR, refuge). After reviewing a wide range of public comments and management needs, the Service developed alternatives for management of the refuge, ultimately recommending one alternative as the Service's preferred alternative. These alternatives were evaluated in the "Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Impact Statement, National Bison Range", published in April 2019. Public comments on the draft plan were then evaluated and the Service published the "Final Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Impact Statement" in September 2019. In December 2019, the Service approved the final plan, which will guide management of the refuge for the next 15 years.

## **The Refuge**

The 18,800-acre NBR is located in northwestern Montana where three major geographic features merge, Mission Valley, Mission Mountain Range, and Jocko River Valley. The refuge is located in Lake and Sanders Counties and also lies within the boundaries of the Flathead Indian Reservation. President Theodore Roosevelt established the NBR on May 23, 1908 when he signed Public Law 60-136 designating the refuge as "a permanent National Bison Range for the herd of bison to be presented by the

American Bison Society". NBR is one of the oldest units of the Refuge System. Its history is closely tied to the history and survival of the plains bison and to the Native American Tribes of western Montana.

Grasslands dominate the refuge landscape at lower elevations, dotted with wetland and riparian vegetation along seasonal drainages and around seeps and springs. Mixed-conifer forest occurs at the upper elevations. The Jocko River and Mission Creek form riparian and wetland corridors along the north and south boundaries of the refuge. Invasive plant species are recognized as an important factor affecting ecosystem function and health on the refuge.

The NBR provides cover, food, water, and sufficient space for numerous native wildlife species. The NBR supports a healthy population of plains bison as well as other native ungulates and a variety of predators. The refuge also supports over 200 native bird species. In addition to the federally threatened grizzly bear and bull trout, there are forty-three Montana species of concern that occur on the refuge.

Visitors come from all over the country and other parts of the world to learn about NBR and enjoy a variety of wildlife-dependent recreational activities. In 2017, NBR welcomed approximately 180,000 visitors. Annual visitation to the NBR is most heavily concentrated during spring through fall, when the full length of the Red Sleep Mountain Drive is



## Goals for the Refuge

### *Habitat Management*

Conserve, restore, and promote biological integrity in functional and sustainable ecologically diverse habitats of the inter-montane ecosystem of western Montana.

### *Wildlife Management*

Protect, maintain, and restore healthy and diverse wildlife populations with respect to species that are endemic, migratory, and mandated species of concern.

### *Research and Science*

Encourage high-quality research and promote the use of scientifically sound management decisions.

### *Monitoring and Adaptive Management*

Through the life of this plan, we will monitor and evaluate the consequences of our actions and use adaptive management to reach desired outcomes.

### *Cultural Resources*

Preserve and value the cultural resources and history of the National Bison Range Complex (NBRC) to connect staff, visitors, and community to the area's past and continuing traditions.

### *Public Use*

Provide compatible, wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities, for persons of all abilities, to learn, enjoy, and appreciate the inter-montane landscape of western Montana, the fish and wildlife and plants.

### *Partnerships and Collaboration*

Maintain and cultivate partnerships that help achieve the vision and supporting goals and objectives of the NBRC to support wildlife and habitat conservation, encourage research, foster awareness and appreciation of natural and cultural resources of the inter-montane ecosystem of western Montana, and provide education along with all necessary infrastructure.



*Bighorn sheep*

Recognizing its importance, we will collaborate with the CSKT and other Tribal governments in a manner consistent with the Service's Native American policy and with other federal, state, and local government entities in a manner consistent with applicable Service policies.

### *Administration and Operations*

Effectively use funding, staff, partnerships, volunteers, and equipment to restore and manage Complex habitats, conduct programs, and improve and maintain all necessary infrastructure to the benefit of the Complex and the Refuge System.

open. Wildlife observation, photography, and hiking account for an estimated 94 percent of visits to the NBR.

## Substantive Issues

Substantive issues were identified from existing refuge information and through public scoping, which began in 2017. These issues included:

- Habitat Management
- Bison Management
- Wildlife Management
- Tribal Cooperation/Cultural Resources
- Visitor Services/Public Use
- Socioeconomics/Refuge Operations/Staffing
- Partnerships/Communication
- Monitoring and Research

## Management Direction

The CCP directs the management of the National Bison Range to meet the purposes of the refuge, address issues, and guide management to meet the refuge vision. The plan is a broad umbrella of general concepts and goals, with specific objectives for habitat, wildlife, research and science, monitoring, cultural resources, public use, partnerships and refuge operations for the next 15 years. As the plan is implemented, we will develop stepdown plans with details for carrying out the objectives.

### *Habitat and Wildlife*

We will conduct a robust rangeland health assessment to discern the current ecological status of vegetation and soils on NBR's 14,000 acres of bunchgrass prairie to better inform management. Invasive species, grazing management, climate change, and drought are some of the key obstacles to achieving our grassland habitat objectives. By 2021, we will complete an inventory to assess forest health, identify old growth ponderosa pine stands, and inform management how to prioritize treatments on 3,700 acres that will improve site conditions. All refuge habitats will be managed



*Western meadowlark*



*Auto Tour Route*



*Arrowleaf balsamroot*

using strategies including prescribed fire, mechanical treatments and grazing manipulation, as appropriate.

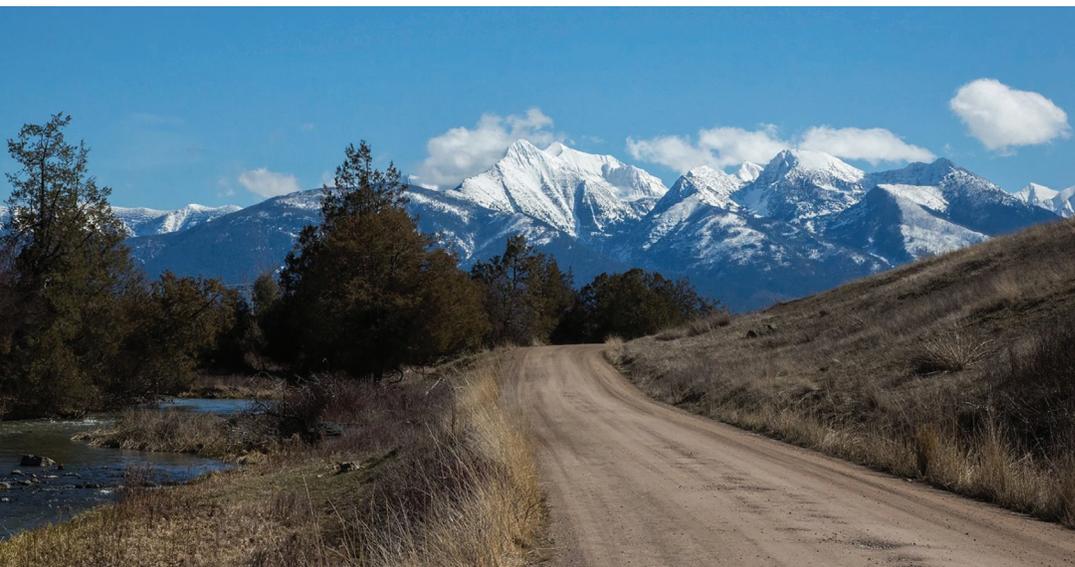
The NBR bison herd will continue to be managed to maintain and improve genetic diversity and integrity within the ecological carrying capacity of the refuge. We will continue to use science-supported management strategies to contribute to the national bison conservation goals within the Refuge System metapopulation. We will also evaluate the management of other native ungulate species relative to habitat quality, research, and species conservation needs.

We will identify and support research and monitoring that substantially informs the scientific community or the ecology and management of NBR species and habitats. We will also encourage the integration of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) as part of partner-generated research or other scientific-information gathering efforts.

#### *Cultural Resources*

We will conduct outreach to local groups regarding NBR's history and the NBR's effects on conservation, species management, and the community since its inception. We will work with CSKT

*The National Bison Range boasts majestic scenic views of the Rocky Mountains.*



and other Tribal partners in planning, producing and providing relevant materials, exhibits, signs, educational and interpretation materials about Tribal citizens and early people's use of the lands within NBR's boundary.

#### *Public Use*

We will provide opportunities for self-directed wildlife viewing and photography for at least 180,000 visitors per year. We will encourage awareness of and provide an opportunity to learn about conservation and mission of the refuge system and to highlight the unique history of bison conservation and cultural and historical significance of the NBR. All environmental education and interpretation programs will emphasize that wildlife and habitat are the priority for the management of the NBR.

#### *Partnerships and Operations*

We will seek to maintain strong and effective working relationships with existing partners and develop new partnerships to achieve our priority habitat and wildlife goals. In addition to maintaining current staff, we will prioritize hiring a visitor services specialist. Also, we will seek to strengthen biological support for refuge management by hiring a biological technician and by seeking at least 20 volunteers for various biological programs in which they have interest and skills. We will prioritize improvements and maintenance on roads, trails, facilities, and infrastructure that are critical to manage NBR for priority species and sustainability of natural habitats.

## **Vision for the Refuge**

*Relax and take a deep breath while you step back in time to reflect on what was, what is, and what is yet to come. Immerse yourself in the inter-montane valleys of northwestern Montana shaped by glacial forces and steeped in rich cultural history. This is a special landscape important to people age after age, where we pay tribute to the persons and peoples who set aside the lands, conserved the wildlife and plants, and were stewards of various components that make up the Complex.\**

*Visitors from all over the world travel to the Complex, which seeks to provide an opportunity to learn and experience varied habitats, abundant wildlife, and the natural beauty of these lands. The units of the Complex safeguard these values and preserve connectivity across the landscape, forming continuity through time for future generations to treasure. Each unit is unique, and collectively they have contributed, and will continue to contribute, to the Complex and the Refuge System.*

*Partners foster cultural and natural resources conservation where the cultural history is expressed across the landscape. Unique opportunities to work with partners benefit many of the units within the Flathead Indian Reservation and other units located within traditional homelands of the Séliš, Q̓ispé and Ksanka Tribes.*

\*At the start of this planning process, the NBR was part of the National Bison Range Complex (Complex), which also managed the Ninepipe, Pablo, and Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuges (NWRs) as well as the Flathead and Lake County Wetland Management Districts (WMDs).

**National Bison Range**  
**58355 Bison Range Road**  
**Moiese, MT 59824**

**December 2019**

