

Planning Update

Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Assessment

North Dakota National Wildlife Refuges

Issue 2, September 2008



USFWS

Canvasback duck.

This planning update describes the process the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) has made in development of a comprehensive conservation plan for 12 national wildlife refuges in North Dakota:

- Audubon
- Chase Lake
- Kellys Slough
- Lake Alice
- Lake Ilo
- Lake Nettie
- Lake Zahl
- McLean
- Shell Lake
- Stewart Lake
- Stump Lake
- White Lake

North Dakota Refuges

Eleven of the 12 national wildlife refuges were established as a breeding ground for migratory birds and other wildlife under an executive order by President Theodore Roosevelt. Lake Alice National Wildlife Refuge was established under the authority of the Migratory Bird Conservation Act.

The United States Congress funds the 12 refuges through the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund to provide northern staging and habitat for migrating waterfowl and other migratory birds. The refuges protect habitat with primarily two tools: fee-title ownership and conservation easements.

The prairie of North Dakota has become an ecological treasure because of its biological importance for waterfowl and other migratory birds. The prairie potholes of North Dakota support a wide variety of wildlife, but are most famous for their role in waterfowl production.

Comprehensive Conservation Plan

The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 requires the Service to develop a comprehensive conservation plan by 2012 for each national wildlife refuge. The act provides clear guidance for management of the National Wildlife Refuge System. The Service has been preparing a comprehensive conservation plan for the 12 national wildlife refuges. The plan will guide management for all refuge programs and is a "living" document that the Service will update every 15 years.

Draft Plan Available for Public Review

The Service has completed a draft comprehensive conservation plan for public review. The draft plan for the refuges sets out a draft vision statement and six supporting goals.



Draft Vision Statement

This collection of unique and diverse refuges encompasses a broad range of North Dakota habitat types and landscapes.

These refuges provide vital resting and breeding habitat for waterfowl, other migratory birds, and resident fish and wildlife species.

Visitors to these prairie refuges experience wide open spaces, skies filled with migratory birds, places to learn, and welcome solitude.

The responsible management of these special places requires adequate funding, dedicated personnel, and successful partnerships.

Achievement of this vision ensures that the American people retain a legacy of wildlife and prairie habitats for future generations.

An environmental assessment, required by the National Environmental Policy Act, accompanies the draft plan. The assessment includes management alternatives for the refuges and the effects of those alternatives on the environment.

To achieve the vision and goals for the refuges, the Service considered three alternatives. The Service identified alternative B as its "proposed action." For this proposed action, the Service developed objectives and strategies that represent the draft plan.

Draft Goals

The Service developed the following goals to achieve the vision for the refuges.

Habitat and Wildlife Goal

Conserve, restore, and enhance the ecological diversity of grasslands and wetlands of the North Dakota prairie to support healthy populations of ducks and geese, other migratory birds, native species, and other wildlife.

Monitoring and Research Goal

Use science, monitoring, and applied research to advance the understanding of natural resources and management within the North Dakota national wildlife refuges.

Cultural Resources Goal

Identify and evaluate cultural resources that are on Service-owned lands or are affected by Service undertakings. Protect resources determined to be significant and, when appropriate, interpret resources to connect staff, visitors, and communities to the area's past.

Visitor Services Goal

Provide visitors with opportunities to enjoy wildlife-dependent recreation where compatible and expand their knowledge and appreciation of the prairie landscape and the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Partnerships Goal

A diverse network of partners join with the North Dakota national wildlife refuges to support research, accomplish habitat conservation, and foster awareness and appreciation of the prairie landscape.

Operations Goal

Efficiently employ staff, partnerships, and volunteers and secure funding in support of the Refuge System's mission.

Alternatives Considered

Alternatives A, B, and C present different ways to achieve the draft vision and goals for the refuges.

Alternative A (No Action)

Under alternative A, management activities conducted by the Service throughout all 12 refuges would not change.

The Service sets priorities for refuge habitats and only high-priority habitats are managed. Native species restoration continues at its current level. Invasive species management is limited to legally listed species and those of ecological concern that occur on high-priority tracts.

Refuge staffs document and protect new cultural resources as they are opportunistically found. Staffs protect known resources from vandalism, theft,

and destruction. The Service maintains and preserves historical sites.

The current level of visitor services includes environmental education, interpretation, and hunting and fishing access for those refuges with permitted use.

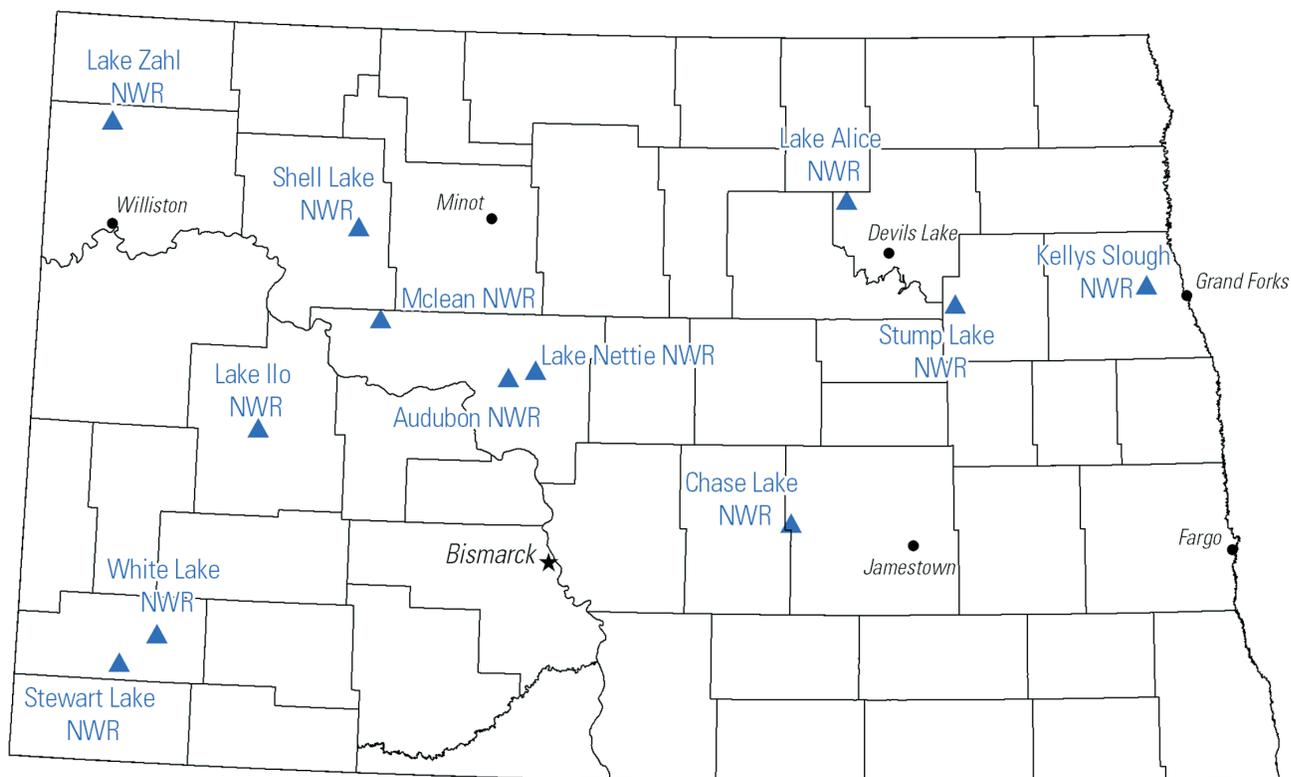
Refuge staffs preserve existing partnerships that address resource information needs, protect and enhance habitat, and promote wildlife-dependent recreational use.

Refuge staffs use volunteers to help with environmental and education programs. Operations consist of maintenance of vehicles and equipment.

Alternative B (Proposed Action)

Under alternative B, wildlife habitat management would enhance wetlands and uplands, where warranted, on refuge lands.

Management objectives for habitat types would be based on habitat preferences of groups of target species such as waterfowl, migratory shorebirds, grassland birds, and priority species. The Service would set priorities for refuge habitats; high- and medium-priority habitats would be managed. Additional degraded habitat tracts would be identified and restored to native species. Invasive species management would be limited to legally listed species and those



NWR=national wildlife refuge.

of ecological concern that occur on high- and medium-priority tracts. Refuge staffs and partners would expand biological surveys such as colonial bird counts and biweekly waterfowl counts and baseline monitoring on high- and medium-priority tracts.



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Canada geese with their brood of goslings.

The Service would document and protect cultural resources. Educational programs and partner research and inventories would be conducted on a limited basis. Refuge staffs would protect known resources from vandalism, theft, and destruction. The Service would maintain and preserve historical sites.

Refuge staffs would improve and expand programs for youth and conservation groups. These programs and events such as waterfowl identification workshops would be done on a 3-year rotation among refuges. Staffs would develop "friends groups." The Service would start or expand environmental education programs for Kellys Slough and Lake Alice national wildlife refuges. A new environmental learning center is planned for Audubon National Wildlife Refuge.

The Service would expand existing partnerships to address migratory bird habitat improvement. Refuge staffs would work with local, state, and federal agencies to promote and protect migratory bird habitat within the refuges.

Alternative C

Under alternative C, management by the refuge staffs would be more intensive and widespread to target native prairie and wetland complexes.

The Service would intensively manage refuge habitats with an emphasis on migratory birds. Refuge staffs would manage all refuge habitats (high-, medium-, and low-priority tracts). Staffs would do restoration that expands and returns native grasslands to quality native prairie. In addition to waterfowl

surveys, the Service would do surveys of other migratory birds such as grassland birds. The Service would conduct baseline surveys of all refuge habitats. The Service would seek graduate students to do research and monitoring of refuge projects.

The Service would document and protect cultural resources. Educational programs and partner research and inventories would be conducted on a limited basis. Refuge staffs would protect known resources from vandalism, theft, and destruction. The Service would maintain and preserve historical sites.

The Service would develop and expand the level and quality of environmental education and interpretation opportunities to meet a wide range of target audiences. There would be outdoor classroom activities, interpretive exhibits and displays. The focus on waterfowl and other migratory bird species would increase wildlife-viewing opportunities for the public. Refuge staffs would improve and expand programs for youth and conservation groups. These programs and events such as waterfowl identification workshops would be done on a 3-year rotation among refuges. The Service would start or expand environmental education programs for Kellys Slough and Lake Alice national wildlife refuges. A new environmental learning center is planned for Audubon National Wildlife Refuge.



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Students learn about refuge resources.

The Service would seek new partners to develop and accomplish collaborative programs. Refuge staffs would expand partnerships with universities, develop "friends groups," and develop partnerships with communities and neighbors to enhance appreciation of and interest in the refuges.

There would be increased staffs, equipment, and funding to accomplish the actions in this alternative.

How to Provide Comments

We invite you to share your comments about the draft plan (the proposed action) and environmental assessment. We will accept letters, faxes, and emails. To be considered, all written comments must be emailed or postmarked by September 29, 2008.

Email: john_esperance@fws.gov

Postal Mail:

John Esperance
Planning Team Leader
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Division of Refuge Planning
PO Box 25486-DCF
Denver, CO 80225

Fax: 303/236 4792, Attn: John Esperance

Public Meetings

You may wish to participate in our public meetings. At a public meeting, you will be able to discuss the elements of the plan with staff from a refuge. The staff will record any comments you provide.

Audubon, Lake Ilo, Lake Nettie,
McLean, Stewart Lake, and
White Lake NWRs

September 9, 2008 / 6:30-7:30 p.m.
Refuge Complex Headquarters
3275 11th Street NW
Coleharbor, ND

Chase Lake NWR

September 10, 2008 / 5-7 p.m.
Chase Lake District
Headquarters
5924 19th Street SE
Woodworth, ND

Lake Zahl NWR

September 11, 2008 / 1-6 p.m.
District Headquarters
10100 Highway 42 NW
Crosby, ND

Kellys Slough, Lake Alice, and
Stump Lake NWRs

September 9, 2008 / 7-9 p.m.
Devils Lake Armory Meeting
Room (south entrance)
524 4th Avenue NE
Devils Lake, ND

Shell Lake NWR

September 10, 2008 / 1-6 p.m.
Lostwood Refuge Headquarters
8315 Highway 8
Kenmare, ND

Final Steps in the Planning Process

1. There is a 30-day public review of the draft comprehensive conservation plan and environmental assessment, including public meetings.
2. The Service revises the draft plan as needed based on public comments. The regional director selects the preferred alternative, which guides development of the final plan.
3. A “notice of availability” published in the *Federal Register* lets the public know that the Service has completed and approved the final comprehensive conservation plan. The Service makes copies of the final plan available.
4. The Service implements the approved, final plan.



Contact Information

Audubon NWR
3275 11th Street NW
Coleharbor, ND 58531
audubon@fws.gov
www.fws.gov/audubon
701/442 5474

Chase Lake NWR
5924 19th Street SE
Woodworth, ND 58496
chaselake@fws.gov
www.fws.gov/arrowwood/
chase_lake_nwr
701/752 4218

Kellys Slough NWR
221 2nd Street West
Devils Lake, ND 58301
devilslake@fws.gov
www.fws.gov/devilslake/
kellys_slough
701/662 8611

Lake Alice NWR
221 2nd Street West
Devils Lake, ND 58301
devilslake@fws.gov
www.fws.gov/lakealice
701/662 8611

Lake Ilo NWR
3275 11th Street NW
Coleharbor, ND 58531
lakeilo@fws.gov
www.fws.gov/lakeilo
701/442 5474

Lake Nettie NWR
3275 11th Street NW
Coleharbor, ND 58531
audubon@fws.gov
www.fws.gov/audubon
701/442 5474

Lake Zahl NWR
10100 Highway 42 NW
Crosby, ND 58730
crosbywetlands@fws.gov
www.fws.gov/jclarksalyer/
deslacs/lakezahl.htm
701/965 6488

McLean NWR
3275 11th Street NW
Coleharbor, ND 58531
audubon@fws.gov
www.fws.gov/audubon
701/442 5474

Shell Lake NWR
8315 Highway 8
Kenmare, ND 58746
lostwoodwetlands@fws.gov
www.fws.gov/lostwood
701/848 2466

Stewart Lake NWR
3275 11th Street NW
Coleharbor, ND 58531
audubon@fws.gov
www.fws.gov/audubon
701/442 5474

Stump Lake NWR
221 2nd Street West
Devils Lake, ND 58301
devilslake@fws.gov
www.fws.gov/devilslake/
refuges.html
701/662 8611

White Lake NWR
3275 11th Street NW
Coleharbor, ND 58531
audubon@fws.gov
www.fws.gov/audubon
701/442 5474

RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Division of Refuge Planning
P.O. Box 25486—DCF
Denver, CO 80225



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