

# Comprehensive Conservation Plan

## *Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge*

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# Summary



*Angler on Odell Creek.*

The following summary provides a brief overview of this final comprehensive conservation plan for Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge, including (1) a general description, (2) purposes of the refuge, (3) vision and goals, (4) the planning process, and (5) outcomes of the plan.

## THE REFUGE

On April 22, 1935, President Franklin D. Roosevelt established Red Rock Lakes Migratory Waterfowl Refuge (later named Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge on July 19, 1961). During the 74 years since the executive boundary was established, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has continued to acquire lands by purchase from willing landowners and acceptance of donations. The Service currently owns 48,955 acres.

This refuge is one of the most remote in the contiguous United States. It is located in the Centennial Valley in southwestern Montana in Beaverhead County, 47 miles west of West Yellowstone and 38 miles east of the town of Lima. This 48,955-acre refuge sits at 6,670–9,400 feet above sea level and lies east of the Continental Divide near the uppermost reach of the Missouri drainage.

Historically, management focused on protecting and enhancing the trumpeter swan population at the refuge. In the 1930s, the refuge and surrounding area was their last known breeding location.

Service efforts to protect and expand the population included winter feeding, transferring swans to other suitable habitats, managing wetland habitats for breeding swans, and minimizing illegal harvest and disturbance (especially during breeding). Today, swans actively breed and nest on the refuge. Intensive population enhancement efforts such as winter feeding and translocations are no longer necessary or appropriate for species conservation, and have been phased out. The refuge continues to focus on providing quality wetland habitats for nesting swans. This has resulted in a steady increase in the number of trumpeter swans in the Centennial Valley since the mid-1990s. The important role these magnificent birds played in establishing this refuge is outlined in greater detail within this document.

The refuge has some of the most naturally diverse habitats in the National Wildlife Refuge System. The refuge boasts the largest wetland complex within the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, as well as expansive tracts of grassland and sagebrush-steppe habitats, and a small amount of midelevation forested areas. These habitats support over 230 species of birds, including peregrine falcons, bald eagles, short-eared owls, sandhill cranes, sage grouse, and numerous species of waterfowl and waterbirds. Common mammals include Shiras moose, Rocky Mountain elk, mule and white-tailed deer, badger, coyote, and red fox. In addition, wolves and grizzly bears have been documented using the refuge in recent years. There is also a remnant population of endemic adfluvial (a

population that lives in a lake and breeds in a river) Arctic grayling that occur on the refuge.

A full-time staff of five employees and various temporary employees manage and study the refuge habitats and maintain visitor facilities. Domestic livestock grazing and prescribed fire are the primary management tools used to maintain and enhance upland habitats. Currently, four grazing cooperators are using refuge lands. Water level manipulation occurs in some areas of the refuge to improve wetland habitats.

Approximately 12,000 people visit the refuge annually. Two refuge roads and three county roads that pass through the refuge account for the majority of visitor use. The refuge is open to limited fishing, with the majority of fishing occurring on Red Rock Creek. In addition, the refuge is open to limited hunting of ducks, geese, coots, elk, pronghorn, moose, and mule and white-tailed deer.

## REFUGE PURPOSES

Every refuge has a purpose for which it was established. The purpose is the foundation upon which to build all refuge programs, from biology and visitor services, to maintenance and facilities. No uses of a refuge may be allowed if they are determined to materially detract from or interfere with the purposes for which the refuge was established or the mission of the Refuge System. The refuge purpose is found in the legislative acts or administrative orders that provide 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 a refuge more than one purpose. The goals, objectives, and strategies identified in this final comprehensive conservation plan are intended to support individual purposes for which the refuge was established.

The legislative purposes for Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge include the following:

1. "As a refuge and breeding ground for wild birds and animals." (Executive Order 7023, dated April 22, 1935)
2. "For use as an inviolate sanctuary, or for any other management purpose, for migratory birds." (Migratory Bird Conservation Act 1929)
3. "Suitable for (a) incidental fish and wildlife-oriented recreational development, (b) the protection of natural resources, (c) the conservation of endangered species or threatened species ... the Secretary ... may accept and use ... real ... property. Such acceptance may be accomplished under the terms and conditions of restrictive covenants imposed by donors." (Refuge Recreation Act 1962)

4. "The conservation of the wetlands of the nation in order to maintain the public benefits they provide and to help fulfill international obligations contained in various migratory bird treaties and conventions." (Emergency Wetlands Resources Act 1986)
5. "For the development, advancement, management, conservation, and protection of fish and wildlife resources ... for the benefit of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, in performing its activities and services. Such acceptance may be subject to the terms of any restrictive or affirmative covenant, or condition of servitude." (Fish and Wildlife Act 1956)
6. "Wilderness areas ... shall be administered for the use and enjoyment of the American people in such manner as will leave them unimpaired for future use and enjoyment as wilderness, and so as to provide for the protection of these areas, the preservation of their wilderness character, and for the gathering and dissemination of information regarding their use and enjoyment as wilderness." (Wilderness Act 1964)

## VISION STATEMENT

The vision for Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge is based on the establishing purposes of the refuge, resource conditions and potential, and the issues identified during the planning process (see Section 2.2).

*The majestic Centennial Valley of southwest Montana is an expansive mosaic of high-elevation wetlands, grasslands, shrublands, and forests framed by dramatic mountain peaks. Through partnerships and conservation programs, the valley has maintained its biological integrity and is a working landscape that remains largely undeveloped.*

*To this end, Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge is a conservation leader in the valley working to maintain, mimic, and where appropriate, restore natural processes to create and sustain native habitat for migratory and resident fish and wildlife. Visitors have a sense of solitude and wildness that lifts their spirits and stirs their souls. This first-hand experience with the refuge encourages people to participate as stewards, not only of the refuge, but also of the natural resources in their own communities.*

## GOALS

The goals described below help the staff achieve the vision for Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge.

### **LAKE, POND, AND MARSH HABITAT GOAL**

Provide habitat for breeding and staging migratory birds, native fishes, and resident wildlife that maintains the biological diversity and integrity of montane wetland systems.

### **RIPARIAN HABITAT GOAL**

Maintain the processes necessary to sustain the biological diversity and integrity of native riparian vegetation for migratory breeding birds, native fishes, and wintering ungulates.

### **WET MEADOW, GRASSLAND, AND SHRUB-STEPPE HABITAT GOAL**

Provide structurally complex native meadow, grassland, and shrub-steppe habitats, within a watershed context, for upland-nesting migratory birds, sagebrush-dependent species, rare plant species, and other resident wildlife.

### **ASPEN FOREST, MIXED CONIFEROUS FOREST, AND WOODLAND HABITAT GOAL**

Create and maintain aspen stands of various age classes within a mosaic of coniferous forest and shrubland for cavity-nesting birds and other migratory and resident wildlife.

### **VISITOR SERVICES AND CULTURAL RESOURCES GOAL**

Provide quality wildlife-dependent recreation, environmental education, interpretation, and outreach opportunities that nurture an appreciation and understanding of the unique natural and cultural resources of the Centennial Valley, for visitors and local community members of all abilities, while maintaining the primitive and remote experience unique to the refuge.

### **REFUGE OPERATIONS GOAL**

Prioritize for wildlife first and emphasize the protection of trust resources in the utilization of staff, funding, and volunteer programs.

## **PLANNING PROCESS**

In 2006, a planning team of refuge and other Service staff gathered to begin planning the future direction of Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge. The planning process included designing a vision for the refuge, along with goals to reach that vision. The team invited the state and various tribes to serve on the planning team. We received a commitment from Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks to participate in the process. In June 2006, a notice of intent was

published in the *Federal Register* and planning updates were mailed inviting the public to participate in the planning process and public scoping meetings. A mailing list of about 250 names was created which included private citizens; local, regional, and state government representatives and legislators; other federal agencies; tribal governments; and nonprofit organizations. Key issues (habitat, wildlife, fisheries, visitor use, and refuge operations) were identified during analysis of the topics raised by refuge staff, partners, and the public. The unique qualities and values of the refuge were also identified. The team determined which of these qualities and issues were key to achieving the vision and goals. These were addressed throughout the planning process and in the comprehensive conservation plan. Four alternatives were developed for addressing substantive issues and managing refuge programs. The draft environmental assessment and comprehensive conservation plan was released to the public in September 2008. Two public meetings were held and the public was given 60 days to review the draft plan. In addition to the public meetings, over 100 additional comments were received. Through the environmental analysis process, including internal and public reviews, the Service has selected alternative B from the draft environmental assessment and comprehensive conservation plan. Substantive public comments were addressed in the final plan, resulting in modifications to the final document. Responses to public comments are summarized in appendix A. This alternative is now the final comprehensive conservation plan. Implementation of this plan will be monitored throughout its 15-year effective period.

## **ISSUES**

Several key issues were identified during the planning process that affect the refuge such as habitat loss and fragmentation caused by residential development; inadequate monitoring of the current grazing program to determine its effectiveness as a management tool; the effect on the refuge of loss of wetlands throughout the United States; the scarcity of information on the ecology of montane (the zone below the subalpine zone) wetlands; providing suitable habitat for migratory birds, including trumpeter swans; maintaining one of the last known endemic populations of adfluvial Arctic grayling; management of fishing and hunting; management and improvements to trails, roads, and signage, while maintaining the wilderness characteristics of the refuge; the ecology of the Centennial Sandhills; stream restoration; invasive plant species; aquatic nuisance species; law enforcement; inadequate staffing; and fire management.

## EXPECTED OUTCOMES OF THE PLAN

Based on the analysis document included in the environmental assessment in the draft comprehensive conservation plan, the Service's director for region 6 (Mountain-Prairie Region) approved alternative B for implementation. The key actions for this plan are summarized in the following section. A complete description of all objectives and strategies are found in chapter 4.

Management under alternative B acknowledges the importance of naturally functioning ecological communities on the refuge. However, changes to the landscape (for example, human alterations to the landscape, created wetlands, and species in peril requiring special management actions) prevent management of the refuge solely as a naturally functioning ecological community. Because some of these changes are significant, some refuge habitats will require "hands on" management actions during the life of this plan. Visitor services programs (such as hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, environmental education, interpretation, and outreach programs) will be improved and expanded while maintaining the wilderness characteristics of the refuge.

### HABITAT AND WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT

There will be improved management of wetland habitats for trumpeter swans and other waterfowl. Management will focus on maintaining high wetland productivity through infrequent drawdowns of modified and created wetlands to benefit breeding and migrating waterfowl. The management of riparian areas will be designed to benefit migratory bird species, and moose and Arctic grayling. A riparian habitat is the area along a natural watercourse, such as a river or stream. Some modified wetlands will be restored back to free-flowing streams and associated riparian corridors. Management actions (such as prescriptive grazing and prescribed fire) will only occur on the refuge to achieve specific habitat and wildlife objectives, with increased and improved oversight, monitoring, and research (when appropriate) conducted to assess if management objectives are being met. The refuge will continue to support the "Pacific Flyway Management Plan for the Rocky Mountain Population of Trumpeter Swans" (Subcommittee on Rocky Mountain Population of Trumpeter Swans 2008).

### VISITOR SERVICES

Management will emphasize improving and maintaining high-quality public opportunities for wildlife-dependent recreation for visitors of all abilities. Visitors will be better oriented to the refuge through accurate brochures and limited signage. Some of the criteria for all visitor services

programs is to ensure (1) all proposed public uses are compatible, (2) visitors know that they are visiting a national wildlife refuge, (3) visitors understand the specific regulations in place to provide for their safety and protection of the refuge resources and wildlife, and (4) any additional visitor facilities and signage compliment the refuge's wilderness setting. Additional environmental education and interpretation opportunities will be provided in order to better orient the public, while fostering support for refuge programs through a better understanding and awareness of the values of the refuge and Centennial Valley. Hunting programs will continue or be modified or expanded to provide quality hunting experiences while ensuring that trumpeter swans and other priority migratory birds are provided protected nesting and resting areas. An auto tour route along roads open to the public will be developed and interpreted through a brochure and minimal signage. A blind will be provided for photographers and hunters with disabilities.

### FACILITIES AND STAFF

Refuge and visitor services facilities will continue to be maintained, including historical structures that are being used. Staff numbers and refuge housing have remained static since the 1950s. During this time, refuge visitor numbers have grown, programs and issues have become more complex, and there are greater opportunities to better understand and manage refuge resources. The refuge currently has five full-time staff members, including one biologist. To carry out this plan, additional staff will be required including a full-time wildlife biologist, range technician, temporary visitor services specialist, temporary office assistant, and permanent seasonal maintenance worker. At least three temporary biological science technicians will be recruited for the summer field season. One permanent refuge staff member will be required to maintain law enforcement credentials. Up to four residences will be needed to accommodate additional staff. These residences will complement existing refuge buildings. To accommodate additional volunteers, the refuge will construct up to three recreational vehicle concrete pads.

### STEP-DOWN MANAGEMENT PLANS

The comprehensive conservation plan is intended as a broad umbrella plan that provides general concepts and specific wildlife, habitat, visitor services, and partnership objectives over the next 15 years. When the plan is implemented, additional step-down management plans will be developed. The purpose of the step-down management plans is to provide greater detail to managers and employees for carrying out specific actions and strategies authorized by the comprehensive conservation plan. Table 9 (chapter 4) presents the plans needed for the refuge, their status, and the next revision date.

# Abbreviations

<b>ARM</b>	adaptive resource management
<b>Administration Act</b>	National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act
<b>ATV</b>	all-terrain vehicle
<b>AUM</b>	animal unit months
<b>BP</b>	before present
<b>BLM</b>	Bureau of Land Management
<b>CCP</b>	comprehensive conservation plan
<b>CFR</b>	Code of Federal Regulations
<b>CO<sub>2</sub></b>	carbon dioxide
<b>compact</b>	Water Rights Compact
<b>°F</b>	degrees Fahrenheit
<b>districts</b>	wetland management districts
<b>DNRC</b>	Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation
<b>EA</b>	environmental assessment
<b>FMP</b>	fire management plan
<b>FONSI</b>	finding of No Significant Impact
<b>GS</b>	general pay schedule
<b>GYE</b>	Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem
<b>IBA</b>	Important Bird Area
<b>Improvement Act</b>	National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997
<b>IWJV</b>	Intermountain West Joint Venture
<b>MFWP</b>	Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks
<b>msl</b>	mean sea level
<b>MTNHP</b>	Montana Natural Heritage Program
<b>NEPA</b>	National Environmental Policy Act
<b>NOI</b>	notice of intent
<b>PL</b>	public law
<b>PM</b>	particulate matter
<b>refuge</b>	Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge
<b>Refuge System</b>	National Wildlife Refuge System
<b>sandhills</b>	Centennial Sandhills
<b>SAV</b>	submerged aquatic vegetation
<b>Service</b>	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
<b>U.S.</b>	United States
<b>USDA</b>	U.S. Department of Agriculture
<b>USFWS</b>	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
<b>USGS</b>	U.S. Geological Survey
<b>WCS</b>	water control structure
<b>WG</b>	wage grade pay schedule
<b>WMD</b>	wetland management district
<b>WPA</b>	Works Progress (or Project) Administration
<b>WUI</b>	wildland-urban interface
<b>YNP</b>	Yellowstone National Park

*Definitions of these and other terms are in the glossary, located after Chapter 4.*

