

2 The Refuge



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View of lower forest surrounding Sweetwater Lake.

This chapter discusses the history, purpose, and special values of Sullys Hill National Game Preserve, the proposed vision and goals, and planning issues.

2.1 ESTABLISHMENT, ACQUISITION, AND MANAGEMENT HISTORY

The establishment of Sullys Hill National Game Preserve was first addressed in April 27, 1904, by the Fifty-Eighth Congress of the United States. The Senate and House of Representatives enacted bill H.R.11128, known as Public Law No. 179, which authorized President Theodore Roosevelt to reserve a tract of land embracing Sullys Hill as a public park. It stated that a portion of unallotted lands within the Devils Lake Indian Reservation, including the unallotted tract of land known as the Fort Totten Military Reservation, would be set aside for this purpose. Much of the remaining unallotted lands would be disposed under the general provisions of the homestead and town site laws of the United States and opened to settlement by proclamation of the President. The final Proclamation, No. 32, was signed on June 2, 1904, by President Roosevelt, officially establishing Sullys Hill Park as part of the National Park Service system. Ten years later, on June 30, 1914, appropriations were made for the creation of a big-game preserve within the park.

On December 22, 1921, President Warren Harding, by Executive Order 3596, ordered that all lands

within the boundaries of Sullys Hill National Park Game Preserve be reserved and set apart as a refuge and breeding grounds for birds.

In the Act of March 3, 1931, President Herbert Hoover transferred the preserve from the National Park Service to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and renamed it Sullys Hill National Game Preserve. This transfer became law by the Seventy-First Congress where it was stated that the refuge should be administered “as a big game preserve, refuge and breeding grounds for wild animals and birds.” Sullys Hill National Game Preserve is administered as part of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Sullys Hill National Game Preserve has a rich history of management, primarily centered on the purposes of migratory birds, big game, and visitor service. Refuge management history indicates that regular timber management occurred throughout the woodlands by cutting and coppice regeneration (growth of new shoots from stumps). Defoliation of grasslands primarily occurred because of grazing and haying activities associated with the management of the herds of bison, elk, and deer. Extensive visitor use continues to be a major component of the refuge.

Historical records show that through 1943, the refuge used the services of Works Project Administration personnel, a depression-era program that was used for many public projects. A shortage of material and human resources caused by World War II (1939–1945) made refuge management very difficult.

Historical data from the manager's log indicates that staff did not have time to serve the public so they did their "work" during the daytime shift and then worked off-the-clock in the evenings to service visitors and maintain the facilities. Much of the historical visitation to the refuge was for wildlife viewing and social gatherings. Visitation during this broader public or "park" use was up to 90,000 visitors annually.

Current management of the refuge reflects its original purposes, and specifically supports the National Refuge System's vision of putting wildlife first. As an example, managing habitat for migratory birds is a major focus in managing the forest and prairie areas. Bison management has recently evolved to center upon Service-wide metapopulation management, focusing on the genetic conservation of this species. Visitor service is based on wildlife-dependent interpretative activities and education programs. The goal has been to use the refuge as a regional conservation learning center, keeping the refuge habitats and associated wildlife at the core. Approximately 5,000 students are taught each year in the indoor and outdoor classrooms, and there are 60,000 visitors annually.

2.2 SPECIAL VALUES OF THE REFUGE

Qualities are defined as the characteristics and features that make the areas special and worthy of refuge status. The planning team and the public identified the following outstanding qualities of Sullys Hill National Game Preserve:

- The refuge contains shallow wetland, deep lake, woodland, and grassland habitats. Together they provide for a wide variety of migratory birds; unique small mammals and furbearers; and large ungulates, such as bison and elk.
- The refuge protects an important piece of native woodland, a habitat type found only in 2% of North Dakota. This woodland likely includes the most western range of American basswood.
- The refuge attracts a diversity of woodland bird species, such as warblers, that are absent from the surrounding grassland ecosystem.
- Several unique plant species thrive on the undisturbed hills across the refuge, including ball cactus, downy paintbrush, Indian pipe, and marsh marigold.
- The woodlands of Sullys Hill National Game Preserve provide a significant acreage to support over 250 species of nesting and staging migratory birds unique to North Dakota.
- Sullys Hill National Game Preserve is 1 of only 19 designated natural areas in North Dakota of which only 4 are national wildlife refuges.
- Interactions with both flora and fauna are available to refuge visitors.

- At the station's education and visitor center, the Service has a tremendous opportunity to educate the visiting public about the value of wetlands and grasslands, and about the refuges and wetland management districts in North Dakota and throughout the nation. There is no other place in this region of the country where the Service has this type of facility to accomplish its mission of outreach and environmental education.
- The education and visitor center has numerous outreach displays, tools, and techniques available to Service personnel, teachers, and other educators to conduct both student and adult environmental education and interpretation.
- The refuge is a great education and learning destination for both indoor and outdoor environmental education with a focus on the sciences, biodiversity, and human dimensions in the natural environment.
- Special events educate visitors from the surrounding areas and the nation on the values of the Refuge System for the purpose of garnering support for the Service's mission.
- The refuge is the Service's link to the local community. The outreach conducted through the refuge is instrumental in educating the public and garnering support for the work carried out by the Devils Lake Wetland Management District Complex, especially for the protection of wetlands and grasslands.
- The "friends group" at Sullys Hill National Game Preserve was the first formed in North Dakota and has been an active supporter of both the refuge and the conservation activities conducted by the staff at Devils Lake Wetland Management District Complex.
- The refuge has several archaeological sites that reflect thousands of years of human occupation and use.

2.3 PURPOSE

Every refuge has a purpose for which it was established. This purpose is the foundation upon which to build all refuge programs, from biology and visitor services, to maintenance and facilities. No action that the Service or public takes may conflict with this purpose. The refuge purposes are found in legislative acts or administrative orders, which provide the authorities to 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 the CCP are intended to support the individual purposes for which the refuge was established.

The purposes for Sullys Hill National Game Preserve are described in the following legislation and public land orders:

- “All the lands that are now reserved or may hereafter be included within the boundaries of the ... Sullys Hill National Game Preserve ... are hereby further reserved and set apart for the use ... as refuges and breeding grounds for birds.” (Executive Order 3596, December 21, 1921)
- “As a big game preserve, refuge, and breeding grounds for wild animals and birds ... provided, that the said game preserve is to be made available to the public for recreational purposes in so far as consistent with the use of this area as a game preserve ... provided further, that hunting shall not be permitted on said game preserve.” (46 Stat. 1509, Act of March 3, 1931)

2.4 VISION

A vision is a concept and includes the desired conditions for the future that the Service is trying to accomplish at the refuge. The vision for a refuge is a future-oriented statement designed to be achieved through refuge management throughout the life of a CCP and beyond. This is the vision statement developed by the planning team for the Sullys Hill National Game Preserve.

Overlooking North Dakota’s largest natural lake and riding the tops of a glacial thrust block formation, Sullys Hill National Game Preserve is dressed in undulating native woodlands and prairie. Teddy Roosevelt’s vision and broad community support are largely responsible for the successful conservation of these habitats ensuring the preservation of the refuge’s plains bison and Rocky Mountain elk while supporting migrating waves of warblers and other native bird species.

Sullys Hill National Game Preserve is renowned as a regional conservation learning center—greeting families, students, and outdoor enthusiasts of all abilities. Children are able to learn about their natural world using all their senses which fosters their own environmental ethics. Each visitor’s experience not only enriches their personal lives, but instills a unique understanding and appreciation for preserving native prairie and wetland habitats, the natural resources of the Devils Lake Basin, and the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System to preserve America’s wildlife heritage.

2.5 GOALS

The Service developed a set of goals for Sullys Hill National Game Preserve based on the Improvement Act, the refuge’s purposes, and information developed during CCP planning. The goals achieve the vision and purposes of the refuge and outline approaches for managing refuge resources. The Service established six goals for the refuge.

PRAIRIE HABITAT GOAL

Maintain prairie plant communities representative of the historical mixed-grass prairies to support healthy populations of grassland-dependent migratory birds in balance with bison, elk, and other indigenous wildlife.

WOODLAND HABITAT GOAL

Manage for healthy native woodlands of various age classes and structure to provide habitat for migratory birds, in balance with bison, elk, and other indigenous wildlife.

WILDLIFE POPULATION MANAGEMENT GOAL

Carry out management practices that ensure healthy populations of Rocky Mountain elk, plains bison, and other indigenous wildlife species that exemplify the genetic integrity of historical prairie wildlife.

ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION, INTERPRETATION, AND OUTREACH GOAL

Deliver quality, interactive environmental education programming to regional schools, communities, organizations, Spirit Lake Nation, and local governments to garner support and appreciation for Sullys Hill National Game Preserve, North Dakota’s wetland and grassland resources, and the conservation role of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

VISITOR SERVICES GOAL

Provide captivating visitor services facilities and activities for visitors of all abilities, community groups, youth groups, and the members of Spirit Lake Nation to provide enjoyment that results in a greater understanding and support of the preservation of native habitats and landscapes of North Dakota’s Prairie Pothole Region and the mission of the Refuge System.

PROTECTION AND MAINTENANCE GOAL

Refuge visitors, staff, and volunteers will have a safe, protected, and well-maintained environment in which to learn about, work with, understand, and

appreciate the importance of protecting the unique natural and cultural resources of Sullys Hill National Game Preserve.

2.6 PLANNING ISSUES

Although Sullys Hill National Game Preserve is well established, celebrating its 100th birthday on June 4, 2004, it is not without challenges or management issues that need to be addressed. These challenges include areas such as staffing, funding, visitor use and opportunities, accessibility, flooding, refuge support, biology, disease, and overall habitat and wildlife management. The following summarizes these issues and some of their effects:

STAFFING ISSUES

- Serving as a conservation learning center is an important designation and direction for this refuge. Inadequate staff for conservation education has created a roadblock to the refuge reaching its full potential. Numerous opportunities have been lost to instill a greater understanding and appreciation for the important conservation role of the Refuge System here in the Devils Lake Basin and abroad.
 - The refuge struggles to remain open in the winter season due to lack of staff to keep roads clear.
 - This refuge has historically had only one full-time person dedicated to its management. The refuge hosts more than 60,000 students and guests annually. Providing a safe and educational experience for these visitors is very important but leaves little time for wildlife and habitat management. The minimal staffing also prevents the expansion of programs into the surrounding schools and communities.
 - Wildlife management needs at the refuge include herd management, disease prevention, genetics, population dynamics, and trust species needs.
 - Given the small staff-size and budget, numerous habitat needs have not been addressed, including promoting forest regeneration, determining native prairie carrying capacities, plant inventories, habitat health, invasive species, and disease management.
 - There is no administrative staff located at the refuge.
 - Even though the refuge hosts 60,000 visitors annually, there is minimal law enforcement presence. There has been some vandalism, including fires set on refuge lands.
- ### VISITOR SERVICES PROGRAM ISSUES
- The refuge is part of the Devils Lake Wetland Management District Complex, responsible for protecting and restoring grassland and wetland habitats in the Devils Lake Basin. There has been some confusion and mistrust as to the role of the Service in protecting these dwindling habitats. The refuge could serve as a resource to the community to provide a clearer understanding of the importance of protecting these resources, as well as acquiring rights from willing landowners.
 - Improved communication is needed with the members of Spirit Lake Nation, along with assistance in development of education curriculum, technical help, fire training opportunities, cultural and religious needs, and overall marketing and outreach of our joint landscapes and resources.
 - There is potential to significantly increase the number of students educated, but the current staff of one person limits the ability to reach these additional students.
 - Approximately 20 different schools visit the refuge annually to participate in environmental education programs. The success of this program has relied on initiative from the schools due to lack of Service staff to facilitate visits, conduct programs, and conduct outreach to surrounding schools. This has resulted in a less structured program which does not provide a consistent message of wetland and grassland protection, and there have been missed opportunities to ensure students are aware of the Refuge System. There is much more potential to actively pursue partnerships with other schools within North Dakota if there were resources and a dedicated staff member.
 - Because of the flooding that has occurred throughout the last 10–15 years, there have been many impacts to the accessible trails, hiking trails, amphitheater, outdoor classroom clearings, and remote classrooms.
 - There is also a need for additional accessible trails.
 - The Sullys Hill education and visitor center building has been completed, but the interpretive displays have not been addressed.
 - Curriculum needs to complement the state and local schools' standards and education goals. Nature education could be used to improve math and science scores, while generating an overall understanding and support for the conservation role of the Refuge System.
 - Part of the refuge's auto tour route needs to be resurfaced.

- The possibility of using funds from the sale of refuge elk for developing education and visitor services programs should be explored.
- The refuge staff and Spirit Lake Nation members should discuss how to complement and support each other's roles and activities and develop partnerships when possible.
- The auto tour route goes through the big game unit where bison and elk roam freely. Although there are signs warning visitors not to approach wildlife, there is always concern for the safety of both visitors and wildlife.

WILDLIFE AND HABITAT ISSUES

- There needs to be a better understanding of the carrying capacity of the area to support the populations of bison, elk, and white-tailed deer to ensure that forest and prairie management can improve migratory bird production.
- There is no complete plant inventory at the refuge.
- Invasive species such as brome and bluegrass need to be reduced and native species restored.
- There needs to be a feral dog and prairie dog management plan.
- Habitat management plans need to be developed and implemented.
- There is a lack of forest regeneration as a result of grazing ungulates.
- Chronic wasting disease (CWD) continues to be a disease issue among cervids. This and other disease issues such as brainworm, lungworm, and parasites all need to be part of an overall management plan.
- There is a need for cross fencing, enclosures, and water development for better herd distribution and forest regeneration. Currently, the refuge land receives year-round grazing.
- The refuge should be part of the Service's program to maintain genetically pure bison in the nation. The Service needs to define the refuge's role and then a plan needs to be developed to ensure the success of this program.
- A review needs to be completed on winter feeding operations and its efficacy to determine if it can be eliminated, reduced, or better managed.

PROTECTION AND FACILITIES MAINTENANCE ISSUES

- There are known occurrences of drug and alcohol use and vandalism on the refuge. The potential poses a danger to the visiting public and facilities. Without consistent patrols, the refuge will continue to serve as a place for unlawful activities, putting wildlife, staff, and visitors at risk.
- Recreation fee compliance is based on a voluntary honor system with an estimated compliance rate of 40%, resulting in a loss of revenue for refuge programs.
- There is no on-site maintenance staff. Refuge facilities are maintained on an "as needed" basis if staff is available.
- There is no comprehensive survey of historical and cultural resources on the refuge, only sporadic documentation as sites are discovered.
- Due to minimal law enforcement resources, big game animals are vulnerable to illegal activities such as poaching and harassment.

Challenges abound in the refuge, and these issues will be dynamic over the years and will have to be reviewed, changed, and added to as management actions are put into place, and as environmental and social issues interact with refuge purposes and plans.



Dragonfly on lead plant.

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