

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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THREE NEW NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGES SLATED FOR SOUTH:
ONE AREA RESULT OF INTERIOR-ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS AGREEMENT

Three important Southern wildlife habitats notable for abundant fish and game, endangered wildlife, and vital migratory bird resting sites, are slated for inclusion in the National Wildlife Refuge System.

President Carter has signed legislation authorizing the establishment of Bon Secour Refuge near the mouth of Mobile Bay, Alabama, which encompasses several large tracts of barrier island habitat; Tensas River Refuge in northeast Louisiana, which will be purchased jointly by the Departments of the Army and the Interior; and Bogue Chitto Refuge, a popular hunting and fishing area north of New Orleans that stretches into Mississippi. The Department of the Army has agreed to purchase 80 percent of the proposed Tensas River refuge lands to compensate for impacts on fish and wildlife caused by nearby Corps of Engineers projects.

The refuges will be managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to ensure abundant fish and wildlife populations, opportunities for environmental education, and ecological research. Plans are being developed to provide various types of wildlife-oriented recreation, including hunting and fishing programs where appropriate.

These areas, which provide habitat for at least a dozen endangered species, have been vulnerable to agricultural and residential development. Construction of summer homes on the Alabama Gulf Coast has increased markedly in recent years, and little undisturbed coastal land remains. Forested wetlands along the Mississippi River Delta are being steadily drained, mainly for soybean production.

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Tensas River and Bogue Chitto are both primarily bottomland hardwood forest habitat, one of the most productive types of wildlife habitat in North America. Of the 24 million acres of bottomland forests thought to have once existed along the Mississippi River from Illinois to coastal Louisiana, fewer than 5 million acres exist today. The remaining forested wetlands are being cleared at the rate of up to 300,000 acres annually.

The 50,000-acre Tensas Refuge in Tensas, Madison, and Franklin Parishes, Louisiana, is slated for joint purchase by the Department of the Interior (10,000 acres) and the Army Corps of Engineers (40,000 acres) in keeping with the objectives of the Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act. That law provides that fish and wildlife resources shall receive equal consideration with other project concerns in planning water resource development programs. Federal agencies are required to consult with the Fish and Wildlife Service whenever any modification to a river, stream, or other body of water is proposed. The Service, in turn, makes recommendations to prevent or mitigate adverse impacts to fish and wildlife resources. Quite often, the Service recommends the acquisition and management of land for wildlife to partly offset habitat lost to a project.

A number of Corps projects are authorized for construction or study in the Tensas, Boeuf, Ouachita, and Red River Basins, all in the vicinity of the proposed Tensas River Refuge. Land purchased by the Army for the refuge will meet the mitigation requirements for some of these projects.

The Tensas River area abounds in both common and endangered species of wildlife. The area is capable of supporting the highest deer population for its size of any wildlife habitat in Louisiana. The last confirmed observation of the endangered ivory-billed woodpecker in the State occurred within Tensas's boundaries. The endangered American alligator, endangered bald eagle, and the locally scarce black bear populate the area.

Bogue Chitto, 30 miles north of New Orleans, is an unusual backwater ecosystem in the heart of the Bogue Chitto River Swamp in St. Tammany and Washington Parishes, Louisiana, and Pearl County, Mississippi. The 40,000-acre area features an abundance of flora and fauna, including 150 species of breeding and wintering birds, 47 species of mammals, 131 reptile and amphibian species, and 140 species of fish.

The river swamp supports large populations of such game species as white-tailed deer, gray and fox squirrels, and wild turkey. A number of species of waterfowl winter in the area, which is also prime nesting habitat for resident wood duck. American alligators and bald eagles are often seen, and endangered Florida panthers may still roam in the swamp's recesses. Two endangered bird species, the Arctic peregrine falcon and Bachman's warbler, are seasonal visitors. Bogue Chitto's 3,000 acres of permanent water--streams, sloughs, bayous, lakes, and oxbow cutoffs--also support a substantial fishery resource.

Alabama's Bon Secour Refuge will preserve a dynamic but fragile barrier island habitat. The 4-unit refuge will total nearly 10,000 acres of beach/dune and back-shore wildlife habitats in Mobile and Baldwin Counties. The Perdue and Little Point Clear units on Ft. Morgan peninsula, a unique barrier spit, contain some 5,600 acres of beach, dunes, uplands, wetlands, salt marsh, and open water. The Little Dauphin Island unit encompasses about 300 acres of beach, marsh, and upland habitats. The 4,000-acre Skunk Bayou unit on the mainland is mostly wetland habitat.

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The Bon Secour area is the last major landfall for at least 90 species of migratory birds which gather there in the fall to rest and feed before crossing the Gulf of Mexico to Central and South America. The area is also the birds' first landfall on their return across the Gulf in the spring. Few such areas remain where these birds can rest and feed, restoring energy reserves severely depleted after their trans-Gulf flights. The area also supports some 125 wintering, 100 resident, and 40 non-resident nesting species, with over 2 million birds using the habitat at certain times.

Bon Secour lies within the range of 10 endangered or threatened species, including 5 endangered species observed there: the American alligator, brown pelican, bald eagle, American peregrine falcon, and red-cockaded woodpecker. The area also has historical and archaeological value with evidence of a 12,000-year-old village site.

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