



# NEWS

from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

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Ken Burton 202-208-5634

## REFUGE SYSTEM POISED FOR PROGRESS AS IT MOVES TO THE 21st CENTURY, FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE DIRECTOR SAYS

America's National Wildlife Refuge System, invigorated by renewed congressional support and record visits by the American people, is building tremendous momentum as it moves toward its 100th birthday in 2003, the Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Jamie Rappaport Clark, said today.

"Americans have a special fondness for places that are wild and for all that lives there. Our job is to safeguard those wild places and to pass them on to new generations," Clark said. "I hope that in the future, refuges can be a place where Americans can go to learn how wildlife conservation happens, a marketplace of ideas for people who want to help. I think it's a wonderful goal for the next century."

The 93 million acres of land that comprise the refuge system stretch from Florida to Alaska and also include refuges in America's insular areas in the Caribbean and the Pacific. A national wildlife refuge is now within an hour's drive of most major American cities, and the system is visited annually by more than 30 million people. The refuge system is the largest network of public lands in the world set aside exclusively for wildlife and offers dozens of unique conservation and recreation opportunities.

Among 1998's milestones:

- *Expansion of the System.* The National Wildlife Refuge System grew in 1998 by four new units in as many states, adding a total of nearly 5,350 acres. New Refuges include the Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge in Massachusetts, the Waccamaw National Wildlife Refuge in South Carolina, the Blackfoot Valley Wildlife Management Area in Montana and Clarks River National Wildlife Refuge in Kentucky.
- *A New Emphasis on Volunteer Programs.* President Clinton signed the National Wildlife Refuge System Volunteer and Partnership Enhancement Act of 1998 in October, enabling the

Office of Public Affairs  
1849 C Street, NW  
Room 3447  
Washington, DC 20240

(202)208-5634  
FAX (202)219-2428

Service, among other things, to expand a volunteer network that already accounts for 20 percent of all work performed on refuges and is worth \$14 million. The legislation also calls for creation of a Senior Volunteer Corps and more flexible for Refuge staff to work with community partners..

- *Implementation of The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997.* The Service is moving ahead in the implementation of the landmark National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act, signed into law by President Clinton a year ago. The Act amends and builds upon the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966 in a way that provides an "organic act" for the Refuge System. It will serve to ensure that the Refuge System is managed as a national system of related lands, waters and interests for the protection and conservation of America's wildlife resources. Full implementation of the Act is expected to take a number of years, but the majority of the significant policy and regulation revisions are expected to completed in 1999.
- *The Keystone Conference.* For the first time in the refuge system's history, representatives of all 514 National Wildlife Refuges gathered under a single roof in Keystone, Colorado, in October, to refine the final draft of a document called "Fulfilling the Promise," which seeks to set a course for improved management in the areas of habitat, wildlife, people and leadership as the system approaches its centennial. The 700 delegates to the conference addressed a diverse set of subjects that included defining the relationship of the Service to the Refuge System; development of a strengthened and reaffirmed vision for the Refuge System; developing a process of accountability for long-term implementation of recommendations; increasing understanding of the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997; generation of support for the Refuge System and promotion of a heightened sense of *esprit de corps* that results in improvements to the Refuge System. The final draft of the document is expected to be completed by 1999.
- *New Outreach to Private Landowners.* Most of the wildlife habitat in the United States is on private land. "That means," said Clark, "that there is no way the Service can be the steward of America's wildlife, on its own. We need to offer a helping hand, to willing partners, when they want to join in this great stewardship effort." It is a Service goal to enlist as many private landowners as possible in a voluntary effort to expand sensible and responsible

conservation practices well beyond National Wildlife Refuge System boundaries.

"This refuge system doesn't belong to the government, it belongs to the American people," Clark said. "It's grown from a very small network of public lands dedicated to wildlife to something all the more precious and exciting. We want to keep this system as wild as we can, and we want the American people to be excited about it as well. That's what all of this work is about."

In addition to providing opportunities to view wildlife, many refuges are outdoor classrooms with environmental education programs to interpret wildlife habits and their habitat to visitors. Walking trails, visitor centers, auto tour routes and other facilities are provided on many refuges along with fishing, hunting and other outdoor activities.

President Theodore Roosevelt signed an Executive Order in 1903 -- seemingly insignificant at the time -- that set aside 3-acre Pelican Island off the east coast of Florida as a sanctuary for the birds, in decline as suppliers to the millinery trade slaughtered pelicans as well as herons and egrets for their feathers.

Roosevelt, in fact, used Executive Orders to bypass a recalcitrant Congress; after establishing a refuge on Pelican Island, dozens more followed, all created with the stroke of a presidential pen. On a single day, Roosevelt created 17 wildlife reservations throughout the Rocky Mountain region and Far West. He was still creating refuges by Executive Order two days before he left office.

Roosevelt's actions -- the first federal move to protect wildlife by safeguarding habitat -- in effect established the land management responsibility of what would later become the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Today, some National Wildlife Refuges dot the American landscape and vary in size from half-acres to areas covering thousands of square miles and encompassing some of the nation's best wildlife habitat. The system also includes thousands of waterfowl production areas and the natural areas that refuges protect as diverse and complex as the wildlife species that live there.

After the refuge system's modest beginning at Pelican Island, other parcels of land and water were soon dedicated to save America's dwindling wildlife, and many early units were designated to protect elk, antelope and bison. Much later, 53 refuges were created specifically to shelter threatened and endangered species, such as the whooping crane and Key deer.

As the Depression and Dust Bowl of the early 1930's dragged on, much of the migratory waterfowl population appeared doomed. In 1929, the Migratory Bird Conservation Act provided authority for the purchase of lands needed for migratory bird refuges, but because of the Depression, insufficient funds were appropriated for the purpose. Then, in 1934 the Migratory Bird

Hunting Stamp Act bolstered the refuge program by providing urgently needed additional funds derived from the annual sales of "duck stamps." More than \$500 million spent by hunters and other conservationists to buy the stamps has been used to purchase more than 5 million acres of migratory bird habitat.

The Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish and wildlife and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages a System that includes not only Refuges, but thousands of small wetlands, wildlife production areas and other special management areas. It also operates 66 national fish hatcheries and 78 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state wildlife agencies.

For more information about the National Wildlife Refuge System, call 1-800-334-WILD, or visit the Fish and Wildlife Service homepage at [www.fws.gov](http://www.fws.gov) on the Internet. Click on "National Wildlife Refuge System" and scroll to the information category of your choice. Or look under "Department of the Interior, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service" in the Federal Government section of your local telephone directory to find the national wildlife refuge nearest you.

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*EDITORS: The Office of Media Services, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, can help your reporters visit virtually any of the 514 National Wildlife Refuges in the system. Contact Ken Burton, 202-208-5657, or EMail a note at [Ken\\_Burton@mail.fws.gov](mailto:Ken_Burton@mail.fws.gov).*