

# Canaan Valley National Wildlife Refuge

## *Developing a Conservation Plan for the Future*

### Refuge Setting

The Canaan Valley National Wildlife Refuge was established on August 11, 1994 with the purchase of 86 acres. Over the last 12 years, with further acquisitions, the refuge has grown to 15,912 acres in size. The refuge was established to conserve and protect fish and wildlife resources, including endangered and threatened species, in the unique wetlands and uplands of this high elevation, moist valley. The approved acquisition boundary is 24,000 acres. It's the largest wetland complex in the state of West Virginia. The refuge encompasses the headwaters of the Little Blackwater River, 13 miles of the Blackwater River, as well as many miles of other tributaries.

Three federally-listed threatened or endangered species may be found within the refuge's boundary, including the Cheat Mountain salamander, West Virginia northern flying squirrel, and the Indiana bat. The refuge is West Virginia's largest single location for breeding snipe and migratory woodcock. Shorebirds, interior forest songbirds, raptors, and marsh birds rely on the wetlands of the refuge during spring and fall migration periods. The cool, moist climate of the refuge supports 109 plant species that have distinctly northern ranges but are able to persist in Canaan Valley. Balsam fir, easily seen on the Freeland tract, is one such plant. In addition, 73 plant species in Canaan Valley are listed by the State of West Virginia Division of Natural Resources as Species of Concern, like Jacob's ladder. With help from our partners and volunteers, we are restoring the wetlands and uplands within the refuge to provide additional habitat for these important species.

Excellent wildlife observation, photography, fishing, environmental education, interpretation, and hunting opportunities can also be enjoyed on the refuge. Check the schedule of events on our website, <http://www.fws.gov/canaanvalley> to see what programs are available during your visit. Our visitor center features



*The Freeland tract at Canaan Valley National Wildlife Refuge.*

interactive displays and videos which provide information about the refuge and the Canaan Valley. There are 31 miles of roads and trails to help visitors explore the plants and animals in the varied habitats of the refuge.

### Comprehensive Conservation Planning

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service is continuing work on a comprehensive conservation plan (CCP) for the Canaan Valley National Wildlife Refuge. The plan will establish management goals and objectives for all refuge programs over the next 15 years. For example, refuge wildlife, habitat, land protection and visitor services programs will all be evaluated during the planning process.

The managers and staff of the Canaan Valley National Wildlife Refuge, headquartered in Davis, WV, are leading this planning project, with the assistance of planners, biologists, and other natural resource specialists from the Service, the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources (WVDNR). Canaan Valley Institute, the U. S. Forest Service and The Nature Conservancy, West Virginia University and others have also been consulted during the planning process.

Our planning team is using the draft refuge vision statement and is developing management goals (listed below) for developing a range of refuge management alternatives, each with a different theme. Then we will develop detailed objectives in each alternative that are consistent with its theme for managing habitats, wildlife species of concern and visitor uses. During the next few months, we will finalize those alternatives and objectives, and will publish their details in a fall 2008 newsletter. We plan to publish the draft CCP this fall, and the final CCP in 2009.

### Canaan Valley NWR Draft Goals

*Goal 1:* Maintain and perpetuate the ecological integrity of the Canaan Valley wetland complex to ensure a healthy and diverse wetland ecosystem providing a full range of natural processes, community types, and native floral and faunal diversity.

*Goal 2:* Maintain, and where appropriate restore historic red spruce and mixed spruce-hardwood forests to perpetuate the biological diversity and integrity of upland conifer forest ecosystem, especially for threatened and endangered species and migratory birds.

## Draft Vision Statement

*“Canaan Valley National Wildlife Refuge showcases the largest contiguous, high elevation wetland complex in West Virginia and harbors a vast assemblage of rare plants and animals normally associated with more northern latitudes. The refuge conserves, protects, and manages a mosaic of wetlands, grasslands, and forested habitats that support migratory birds and threatened and endangered species. As stewards of a significant portion of the headwaters, the Refuge ensures the integrity of the natural resources of the upper Blackwater River watershed. Refuge habitats and wildlife are conserved and managed through research and collaboration with federal, state, and local conservation partners.*

*“As an integral part of the surrounding community, the Refuge provides high quality, safe, wholesome and diverse opportunities for education and recreation, especially hunting and wildlife observation. The Refuge experience fosters public interest in the beauty and unique character of Canaan Valley, an appreciation of fish and wildlife ecology, and stewardship of the natural world. Visitors develop a greater understanding and appreciation for the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System and refuge management programs and for the importance of protecting lands for wildlife conservation.”*

**Goal 3:** Provide a diversity of successional habitats in upland and wetland-edge shrubland, old field, and hardwood communities to sustain early successional and shrubland specialists such as American woodcock, brown thrasher, eastern towhee, field sparrow, and other species of concern.

**Goal 4:** Perpetuate the ecological integrity of upland northern hardwood and northern hardwood-hemlock forests to sustain native wildlife and plant communities, including species of conservation concern, by reducing forest fragmentation, ensuring age class and species diversity for woody and herbaceous species, and managing for the development of late-successional forest characteristics.

**Goal 5:** Visitors of all abilities enjoy opportunities for wildlife-dependent recreation and education to enhance public appreciation, understanding, and enjoyment of Refuge habitats, wildlife, and cultural history.

**Goal 6:** Collaborate with the local community and other partners on management and educational programs on the Refuge and the surrounding landscape.

### Public and Partner Involvement

We often discuss shared issues or concerns and management recommendations with state agencies, other conservation organizations, interested individuals, and our volunteer group, the Friends of the 500th. We will continue to inform them about our planning at every opportunity

We hosted public open houses in October 2006 in Thomas, Parsons, and Elkins, and in January 2007 in Canaan Valley. We distributed a workbook and issues survey to neighbors, visitors, and other interested parties during the fall and winter of 2006. A total of 2000 workbooks were sent out. Our purpose was to provide local residents and other interested individuals the opportunity to become involved in

the comprehensive conservation planning process. They voiced their concerns and recommendations about many aspects of refuge management, which we have highlighted below.

- create trail connections between existing trails on the refuge and between the refuge and adjacent public lands
- allow foot access only to prevent damage to the land
- allow multiple use access to the refuge
- increase interpretation and education by providing more guided walks, programs, and brochures
- re-route existing trails to decrease erosion
- evaluate the refuge for wilderness designation
- increase cutting of alder and aspen and allow cattle to graze to improve woodcock habitat
- continue to pursue land acquisition from willing sellers to protect wetlands and wildlife habitat
- hunting is incompatible with refuge's goals
- allow vehicles on closed roads to provide more access for deer hunters

### Stakeholder Evaluations

The traditional methods of open houses and workbooks do not always capture the full range of perspectives that exist. A stakeholder evaluation is a way to more fully understand community preferences and opinions related to key topics in refuge planning. It can also help refuge staff understand how changes in management affect individuals in terms of their preference for services and experiences. As part of the CCP



Ken Sturm/USFWS



Larry Master/WVDNR



Ken Sturm/USFWS

*Balsam fir stand (far left). Federally-listed threatened or endangered species at Canaan Valley National Wildlife Refuge include the West Virginia northern flying squirrel (left) and the Cheat Mountain salamander (above).*



*Jacob's ladder is a West Virginia Species of Concern*

planning effort at the refuge, FWS sponsored a stakeholder evaluation conducted by the Policy Analysis and Science Assistance Branch of U.S. Geological Survey (USGS)/Fort Collins Science Center in winter of 2007.

The stakeholder evaluation was intended to answer the following questions:

- What Refuge management issues are most important, and to whom?
- How do opinions about what is most important overlap or conflict?
- Why do stakeholders emphasize specific issues and what values are driving this?
- What potential solutions do stakeholders have for addressing important issues?

USGS met with over 60 stakeholders in late winter 2007. The meeting consisted of two parts: an exercise called Q-Sort followed by an in-depth follow-up discussion about the exercise and issues of concern. What makes Q-Sort an effective tool for evaluating stakeholder perspectives is that it is not necessary to have a large number of individuals, so long as the group is diverse. This is because the goal is to summarize perspectives, not individuals.

Five prevailing perspectives exist related to these key Refuge issues. These perspectives can be thought of as unique points of view or "conversations" that exist around the key issues mentioned above.

- Ecological Preservation Perspective – has a primary focus on wetland and watershed protection.
- Recreational Access Perspective – focuses on access first and foremost, with an emphasis on protecting resources through use of cutting edge design and technology for trail development.

■ Traditional Wildlife Management Perspective – emphasizes game species management (e.g., deer, woodcock, and grouse).

■ Wildlife First, Recreation Second – appears to lie somewhere in between the Ecological Preservation and the Recreational Access perspective regarding resource protection. They agree access is important, but feel that it should not compromise the Refuge resources or the fundamental mission of the Refuge management systems.

■ Economic Development Perspective – has the economic vitality of the Valley as its primary focus.

The decisions that the Refuge makes regarding its management must be inline with the reasons it was established and the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System. Canaan Valley National Wildlife Refuge was established to "preserve its unique wetlands and to protect the fish and wildlife resources of the valley." The mission of the Refuge System is wildlife conservation. These two aspects clearly shape the decision space (the set of possible decisions that are allowed for a community decision process) for the refuge. An important part of collaborating within this decision space is good communication and a transparent process. The refuge must take this input and consider the implications in regards to the purposes of the refuge and mission of the Service. In addition to the specific information that this stakeholder evaluation provides, it also provides another opportunity in this public participation process for continued discussions and improved relationships.

#### Refuge field reviews

After the public open houses, we hosted a series of field meetings with resource professionals from The Nature Conservancy, Canaan Valley Institute, the U. S. Forest Service, WVDNR, National Park Service, and West Virginia University, and recreational user groups to discuss some of the issues related to public use and habitat management on Canaan Valley refuge.

Between January and July 2007, these specialist groups met to discuss rare plant and natural community conservation, deer management, migratory bird management, educational and interpretation opportunities and other wildlife-dependent recreational uses of the refuge. These meetings helped the

refuge staff communicate with our state, federal and NGO partners concerning the potential management direction of the refuge over the next 15 years and benefit from depth of experience these resource professionals brought to these discussions.

As part of the refuge's process of evaluating wildlife observation trail alternatives, we contracted an engineering firm to provide a cost and construction analysis for two trail options that could connect the eastern and western slopes of the valley. This report provides information that will be used by the planning team for considering the possibility and compatibility of developing a trail that crosses the center of the valley.

#### Upcoming Public Meeting

*Thursday, February 28, 2008*

7:00–8:30 p.m.  
Canaan Valley Volunteer  
Fire Department  
Canaan Valley, WV

#### For more information on the refuge, contact

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#### For further information

<http://www.fws.gov/canaanvalley/>

**Federal Relay Service for the deaf and hard-of-hearing: 1 800/877 8339**

**U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service**

<http://www.fws.gov>

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