

Appendix D



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Heron nests at Mason Neck Refuge

Wilderness Review

- Introduction
- Wilderness Inventory
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Introduction

The purpose of a wilderness review is to identify and recommend to Congress lands and waters of the National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS) that merit inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS). Wilderness reviews are a required element of comprehensive conservation plans, are conducted in accordance with the refuge planning process outlined in the Fish and Wildlife Service Manual (602 FW 1 and 3), and include compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and public involvement.

The wilderness review process has three phases: inventory; study; and, recommendation. Lands and waters that meet the minimum criteria for wilderness are identified in the inventory phase. These areas are called wilderness study areas (WSAs). In the study phase, a range of management alternatives are evaluated to determine if a WSA is suitable for wilderness designation or management under an alternate set of goals and objectives that do not involve wilderness designation.

The recommendation phase consists of forwarding or reporting the suitable recommendations from the Director through the Secretary and the President to Congress in a wilderness study report. The wilderness study report is prepared after the record of decision for the final CCP has been signed. Areas recommended for designation are managed to maintain wilderness character in accordance with management goals, objectives, and strategies outlined in the final CCP until Congress makes a decision or the CCP is amended to modify or remove the wilderness proposal.

Wilderness Inventory

Introduction

The wilderness inventory takes a broad look at each planning area (Wilderness Inventory Area [WIA]) to identify Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs). A WSA is an area of undeveloped Federal land that retains its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation, and further, meets the minimum criteria for wilderness as identified in Section 2(c) of the Wilderness Act.

Minimum Wilderness Criteria

A WSA is required to appear natural, provide for solitude or primitive recreation, and be either a roadless area that meets the size criteria, or an island of any size. Only Federal lands are eligible to be considered for wilderness designation and inclusion within the NWPS.

Roadless — Roadless refers to the absence of improved roads suitable and maintained for public travel by means of motorized vehicles primarily intended for highway use. A route maintained solely by the passage of vehicles does not constitute a road.

The following factors were the primary considerations in evaluating the roadless criteria.

- A. The area does not contain improved roads suitable and maintained for public travel by means of motorized vehicles primarily intended for highway use.
- B. The area is an island, or contains an island that does not have improved roads suitable and maintained for public travel by means of motorized vehicles primarily intended for highway use. A roadless island is defined as an area surrounded by permanent waters or that is markedly distinguished from the surrounding lands by topographical or ecological features.
- C. The area is in Federal fee title ownership.

Size — The size criteria can be satisfied if an area has at least 5,000 acres of contiguous roadless public land, or is sufficiently large that its preservation and use in an unimpaired condition is practicable.

The following factors were the primary considerations in evaluating the size criteria.

- A. An area of more than 5,000 contiguous acres. State and private lands are not included in making this acreage determination.
- B. A roadless island of any size.
- C. An area of less than 5,000 contiguous Federal acres that is of sufficient size as to make practicable its preservation and use in an unimpaired condition, and of a size suitable for wilderness management.
- D. An area of less than 5,000 contiguous acres that is contiguous with a designated wilderness, recommended wilderness, or area under wilderness review by another Federal wilderness managing agency such as the Forest Service, National Park Service, or Bureau of Land Management.

Naturalness — The Wilderness Act, Section 2(c), defines wilderness as an area that “generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature with the imprint of human work substantially unnoticeable.” The area must appear natural to the average visitor, rather than “pristine.” The presence of historic landscape conditions is not required.

An area may include some human impacts provided they are substantially unnoticeable in the unit as a whole. Significant hazards caused by humans, such as the presence of unexploded ordnance from military activity and the physical impacts of refuge management facilities and activities are also considered in evaluating the naturalness criteria.

An area may not be considered unnatural in appearance solely on the basis of the sights and sounds of human impacts and activities outside the boundary of the unit. The cumulative effects of these factors in conjunction with land base size, physiographic and vegetative characteristics were considered in the evaluation of naturalness.

The following factors were the primary considerations in evaluating naturalness.

- A. The area appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature with the imprint of human work substantially unnoticeable.
- B. The area may include some human impacts provided they are substantially unnoticeable in the unit as a whole.
- C. Does the area contain significant hazards caused by humans, such as the presence of unexploded ordnance from military activity?
- D. The presence of physical impacts of refuge management facilities and activities.

Solitude or Primitive and Unconfined Recreation—A WSA must provide outstanding opportunities for solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation. The area does not have to possess outstanding opportunities for both solitude and primitive and unconfined recreation, and does not need to have outstanding opportunities on every acre. Further, an area does not have to be open to public use and access to qualify under this criteria; Congress has designated a number of wilderness areas in the Refuge System that are closed to public access to protect resource values.

Opportunities for solitude refer to the ability of a visitor to be alone and secluded from other visitors in the area. Primitive and unconfined recreation means non-motorized, dispersed outdoor recreation activities that are compatible and do not require developed facilities or mechanical transport. These primitive recreation activities may provide opportunities to experience challenge and risk; self reliance; and adventure. These two elements—solitude and primitive recreation—are not well defined by the Wilderness Act, but can be expected to occur together in most cases. However, an outstanding opportunity for solitude may be present in an area offering only limited primitive recreation potential. Conversely, an area may be so attractive for recreation use that experiencing solitude is not an option.

The following factors were the primary considerations in evaluating outstanding opportunities for solitude or primitive unconfined recreation.

- A. The area offers the opportunity to avoid the sights, sounds and evidence of other people. A visitor to the area should be able to feel alone or isolated.
- B. The area offers non-motorized, dispersed outdoor recreation activities that are compatible and do not require developed facilities or mechanical transport.

Supplemental Values—The Wilderness Act states that an area of wilderness may contain ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic or historical value. Supplemental values of the area are optional, but the degree to which their presence enhances the area’s suitability for wilderness designation should be considered. The evaluation should be based on an assessment of the estimated abundance or importance of each of the features.

Mason Neck National Wildlife Refuge

The CCP planning team identified the entirety of Elizabeth Hartwell Mason Neck National Wildlife Refuge (Map D-1) as the only wilderness inventory area because there are no natural terrain barriers separating any portion of the refuge from any other portion. The Service does not own the entire 2,277-acre refuge in Federal fee title; a portion is leased from the Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority (Map D-2). The CCP Planning Team evaluated the refuge to determine if it retained its primeval character and influence, was without permanent improvements or human habitation, and further, met the minimum criteria for wilderness as identified in Section 2(c) of the Wilderness Act. Our findings are described below.

Does the wilderness inventory area:

- 1) *Have at least 5,000 acres of land, or is it of sufficient size to make practicable its preservation and use in an unconfined condition, or is it a roadless island?*

No. The refuge is only 2,277 acres in size and is surrounded by human development and high-use recreation features. The Federal government does not own the entire refuge in fee title; part of it is leased from the Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority. To the east of the refuge lies Gunston Road and the residential areas of Gunston Manor and Hallowing Point Estates. To the north, High Point Road leads visitors to the refuge and to Mason Neck State Park, which features a variety of popular recreational improvements. To the west and south lie Occoquan Bay and the Potomac River, which receive heavy recreational use.

2) *Generally appear to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature with the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable?*

No. Sycamore Road, Anchorage Road, and Little Marsh Road traverse the refuge effectively partitioning the refuge into smaller parcels. Great Marsh and Woodmarsh Trails are popular walking trails with interpretive kiosks and platforms for wildlife observation.

(3a) *Have outstanding opportunities for solitude?*

No. Roads and parking lots provide vehicle access to visitors; most visitors are confined to the two major interpretive trails. Hunters however, have wide access to the refuge on foot.

3b) *Have outstanding opportunities for a primitive and unconfined type of recreation?*

No. Off-road or off-trail access is not allowed except during the white tailed deer hunting season, which is highly regulated.

4) *Contain ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value?*

Yes. The refuge supports numbers of nesting bald eagles and one of the largest colonial nesting bird rookeries in the region. However, these birds are protected from disturbance during their nesting seasons by a prohibition of public entry to their nesting areas.

Featherstone National Wildlife Refuge

The CCP planning team identified the eastern portion of Featherstone refuge (Map D-3) as the only wilderness inventory area because that is the largest contiguous portion of the refuge. The refuge is bisected into east and southwest sections by the CSX railroad right-of-way; the smaller southwest portion of the refuge is directly adjacent to a major high-density residential development. The Service owns in Federal fee title all of the refuge's 325 acres. The CCP Planning Team evaluated the refuge to determine if it retained its primeval character and influence, was without permanent improvements or human habitation, and further, met the minimum criteria for wilderness as identified in Section 2(c) of the Wilderness Act. Our findings are described below.

Does the wilderness inventory area:

- 1) *Have at least 5,000 acres of land, or is it of sufficient size to make practicable its preservation and use in an unconfined condition, or is it a roadless island?*

No. The refuge is the smallest of the Potomac River Refuge Complex refuges and small compared to other NWRS units at 325 acres. It is surrounded by human development and high-use recreation features. To the north lies the Featherstone Shores residential development, from which the single unimproved access right-of-way originates. To the west is the CSX railroad right-of-way, commuter terminal, and parking area. To the east lies Occoquan Bay and the Potomac River, which receive heavy recreational use.

- 2) *Generally appear to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature with the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable?*

No. Although the public is prohibited from access to the refuge, a considerable number of unauthorized users continue to illegally fish and camp there, causing an ongoing enforcement problem. Also, the remnants of an historic railroad right-of-way traverse a major portion of the refuge.

- (3a) *Have outstanding opportunities for solitude?*

No. The noise of the railroad and local traffic on the land side and of boat traffic on the water side routinely disrupt the refuge's otherwise relatively quiet ambient noise environment.

- (3b) *Have outstanding opportunities for a primitive and unconfined type of recreation?*

No. Although the refuge itself is not developed, the ambient noise environment and frequency of illegal visitation would generally prevent a primitive recreational experience. The small size of the refuge with impinging human development and recreation on all sides would prevent an unconfined type of recreational experience.

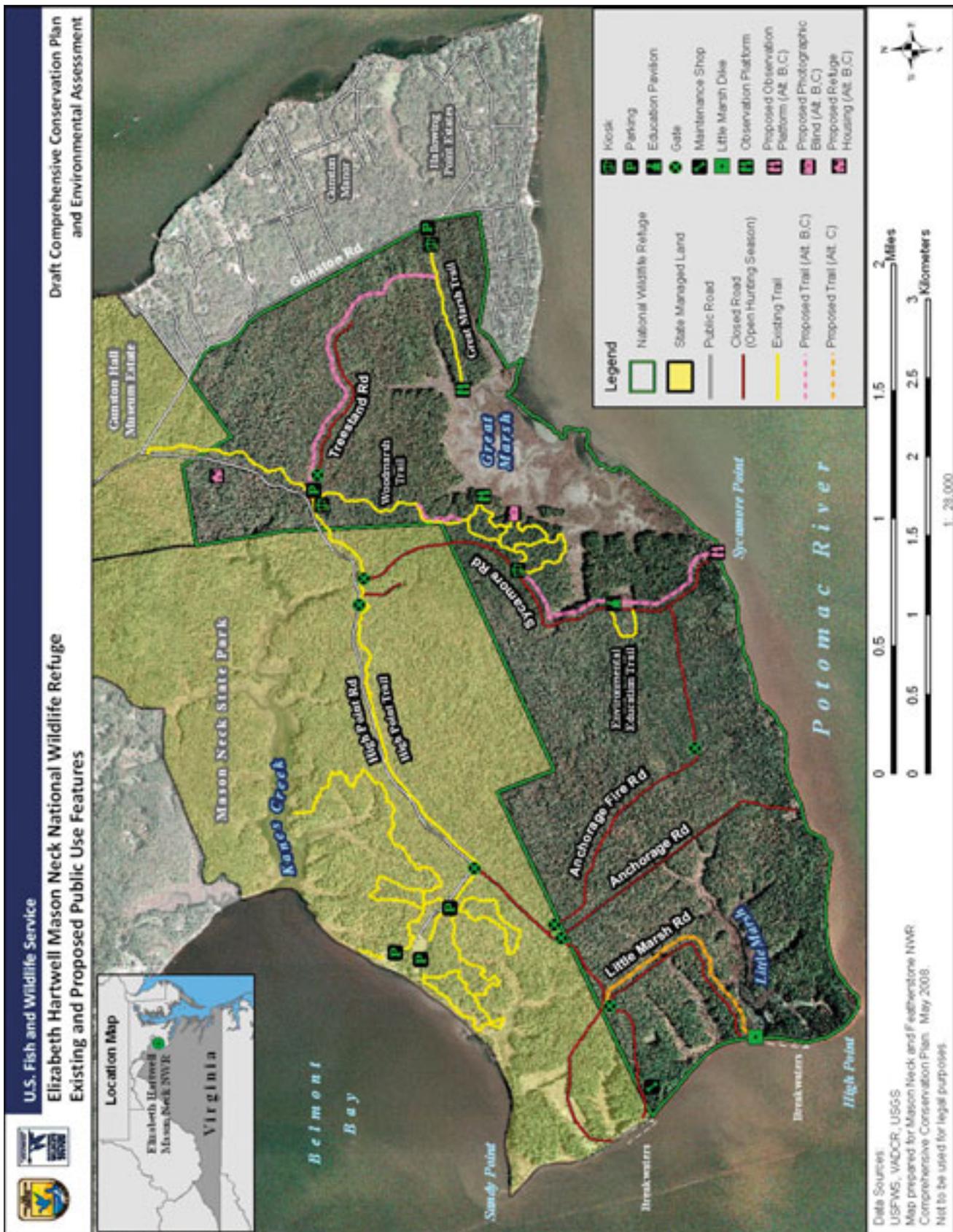
- 4) *Contain ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value?*

Yes. The refuge has supported at least one pair of nesting bald eagles in the recent past and also provides upland forest, riverine forest and emergent wetland habitats for songbirds, raptors, and other wildlife species in an otherwise rapidly developing metropolitan region.

The CCP Planning Team found that neither Mason Neck refuge nor Featherstone refuge meets any of the minimum criteria for wilderness as identified in Section 2(c) of the Wilderness Act. While there are ecological and historic values on the refuge, these do not, in and of themselves, warrant wilderness recommendation. In summary, Mason Neck refuge and Featherstone refuge do not qualify as WSAs, and will not be considered further for wilderness designation in this CCP.

Summary of Wilderness Inventory Findings

Map D.1. Existing and Proposed Public Use Features at Mason Neck National Wildlife Refuge



Map D.3. Proposed Public Use Features at Featherstone National Wildlife Refuge

