

Turnbull National Wildlife Refuge Visitor Services Action Plan FY26 to FY31



58,870

TOTAL VISITS
to Turnbull National
Wildlife Refuge

3,825

STUDENTS
reached with
environmental education

25,903

PHOTOGRAPHER
visits at Turnbull National
Wildlife Refuge

5,212

HOURS
of volunteer work in
support of wildlife and
conservation

FY25 Data

Visitor Services Vision for Turnbull NWR

We envision a welcoming sanctuary where individuals of all backgrounds can safely engage with and gain a profound appreciation for the rich natural and cultural heritage of the Channeled Scablands. Through immersive environmental education, wildlife observation, and community engagement we aspire to inspire stewardship and foster lasting connections to our unique ecosystems. Our commitment is to provide meaningful recreational opportunities that encourage exploration while preserving critical habitats. Together with our community partners and volunteers, we strive to cultivate the next generation of environmental stewards, ensuring that all visitors can learn, participate with, and find inspiration in nature for years to come.

(Adopted 2025)

MIGRATORY
WATERFOWL

QUALITY OUTDOOR
RECREATION
OPPORTUNITIES

NATIONAL WILDLIFE
REFUGE SYSTEM

CHARISMATIC
WILDLIFE

HABITAT
RESTORATION

Turnbull NWR was established in 1937 as a refuge for “migratory birds and other wildlife.” The redhead duck (*Aythya americana*) is a focus species, with efforts made to increase their population through habitat restoration.

Images courtesy of
Gabriel Williams, Sam
Judy, Peter Pearsall,
Ian Shive, Steve
Degenhardt, & Matt
McCormick (USFWS
Photos)

Redhead ducks, Peter Pearsall/USFWS

DESIRED OUTCOMES

1. Become a resilient and collaborative environment where staff, volunteers, and partners co-create meaningful opportunities that **EMPOWER** individuals to actively participate in wildlife and habitat conservation
2. **ENGAGE** with the local community as a space where people return for high-quality, accessible, and meaningful wildlife-based experiences that foster a sense of connection and stewardship



Turnbull NWR Classroom,
Joshua Contois/USFWS

LOCAL STUDENTS

Emphasis on Partner Schools
in Cheney and Spokane



OUTDOOR RECREATION

Includes Birders, Hikers,
Photographers, and Hunters



SPOKANE COUNTY RESIDENTS



SPOKANE COUNTY, WASHINGTON CENSUS DATA

Median Household Income - Spokane County, WA - \$73,500, U.S. Average - \$83,730
Minorities - Spokane County, WA - 23%, U.S. Average - 41.60%
Speak English Less than Very Well - Spokane County, WA - 3%, U.S. Average - 8.4%
Families Below the Poverty Line - Spokane County, WA - 13.1%, U.S. Average - 11.1%

Data from United State Census Data, Accessed December 2025



View from Stubblefield Trail,
Donna Sinks/USFWS

EMPOWER staff, volunteers, and partners

Goal 1 – The refuge and its programming remain resilient within capacity and stay true to the National Wildlife Refuge System’s values. Volunteers, partners, and refuge staff work together to design and create onsite opportunities with the community, empowering individuals to take an active role in wildlife and habitat conservation for the future.

Objective 1 – Maintain, strengthen, and expand partnerships to build resiliency and capacity, ensuring continuity of programming

Action A.1.i – Work to cross-train FWS staff and partners to understand each other’s needs and programming to ensure smooth transitions.

Action A.1.ii – By the end of FY26, determine a frequency of meetings with key partners to identify opportunities and co-design actions that support each other around conservation and the local communities. Use this platform to identify opportunities and challenges to working together.

Action A.1.iii – On a yearly basis, work with partners that conduct tours, walks, etc. to set a regular frequency of

programming, ensuring the FWS Mission is incorporated and a positive visitor experience.

Action A.1.iv – By FY30, create a Visitor Services standard operating procedure(s) document to best capture institutional knowledge, programming, partners, and processes to ensure resiliency.

Action A.1.v – Strengthen the relationship with the refuge Friends organization through frequent communications, coordination, and co-design.

EMPOWER staff, volunteers, and partners (continued)

Objective 2 – Create a robust volunteer program to meet the refuge needs

Action A.2.i – Identify longer-term volunteer opportunities for local community members to address refuge and community needs and share workload.

Action A.2.ii – Explore the idea of volunteer crew(s) or cohorts to address needs and minimize impacts to FWS staff for training and safety concerns.

Action A.2.iii – Recruit refuge volunteers through partners such as Audubon Spokane, Washington Master Naturalists, Washington Native Plant Society, and others.

Action A.2.iv – Continue to co-host the Earth Fest event, which has become the largest single-day volunteer stewardship event on the refuge.

Action A.2.v – Develop a compatibility determination for the establishment of special recreation permits which would allow for food vendors to operate during Earth Fest or other special events.

Objective 3 – Continue to support local academic institutions through research and engagement opportunities

Action A.3.i – Provide an overview and training for biologists, researchers, or other non-refuge staff that may intersect with refuge visitors every May.

Action A.3.ii – Communicate the opportunities and management questions related to research on the refuge.

Action A.3.iii – Provide overviews of careers within the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and provide student opportunities (projects, internships, seasonal positions, etc.) to local universities, with an emphasis on Eastern Washington University.

Action A.3.iv – Continue to support the Friends group through presentations and use of the classroom with their research scholarship opportunities, which promote research on the refuge for the purposes of increasing knowledge and influencing decision making and future management actions.

Objective 4 – Empower local Indigenous People

Action A.4.i – Work with Spokane Tribe on the development of new self-guided lesson plans that incorporate traditional ecological knowledge and Salish language vocabulary.

Action A.4.ii – Continue to support Tribal collections of food plants, perhaps through the creation of a Tribally-managed plant collection plot on the refuge.

Action A.4.iii – Explore the possibility of establishing an Indigenous working group to foster inter-Tribal communication and cooperation around participation in and utilization of refuge events and resources. Identify funding sources to pay stipends to Tribal members participating in this kind of work.



ENGAGE with local communities

Goal 2 – People, especially the local communities, see the refuge as a community asset and return to the refuge after quality wildlife-based experiences. People recognize the refuge as a welcoming space and seek both reliable and novel experiences through responsible recreation.

Objective 1 – Promote community involvement through on- and off-site events

Action B.1.i – Continue to promote conservation community opportunities such as tree potting (spring) and planting (fall) to improve habitat restoration and conservation efforts so the community understands the value of partnerships and conservation in their local communities.

Action B.1.ii – Support Spokane Audubon and other partners through special use permits with bird walks for spring and early summer (generally one

or two a week). Explore need for mandatory orientations for guides as a permit condition.

Action B.1.iii – Support Plant Stewards with wildflower walks to ensure excellent interpretive opportunities for local communities.

Action B.1.iv – Continue to work with the Friends of Turnbull in planning events.

Action B.1.v – Strengthen capacity to recruit volunteers to assist with community events.

Action B.1.vi – Codesign conservation events with partners to address community and conservation-based needs.

Action B.1.vii – Prioritize Open House event by FY27 to identify community needs and opportunities and communicate refuge management goals and priorities.

Action B.1.viii – Identify and participate in a large, non-conservation themed community event such as Spokane Pride, Hoopfest, Bloomsday, or the Cheney Rodeo to reach non-traditional user and community members, as resources allow.

ENGAGE with local communities

(continued)

Action B.1.ix – Identify and participate in one new large, conservation-themed community event such as the Spokane Outdoor Expo or Spoketopia, as resources allow.

Action B.1.x – Create a new community event (on- or off-site) such as Beers with a Biologist, collaborations with the Spokane Symphony, or something yet to be imagined, to promote novel ways of interacting with the community on conservation topics.

Objective 2 – Ensure visitors can understand and recreate responsibly through proper products for safe opportunities on the refuge

Action B.2.i – Update and overhaul existing publication materials including general brochure, bird list, trail map tear sheet, and other needs for safe recreation. Ensure that new and updated publications, especially trail maps, include accessibility information so that visitors can make more informed decisions about their hikes.

Action B.2.ii – Work with local academic institutions to explore opportunities for internships, studies, etc. on developing communications strategies to increase transparency of refuge

operations that may impact visitor experience to build trust.

Action B.2.iii – Continue to maintain a high-quality website to promote responsible recreation and high-quality information for self-guided experiences.

Action B.2.iv – Identify where local users frequent to learn or gain information to improve timely communications needs.

Action B.2.iv – By end of FY29, work to secure funding to revamp contact station, entrance kiosk, and comfort station kiosk signs to provide trip planning, safety, orientation, rules and regulation information that should mirror and compliment tear sheet materials.

Action B.2.v – Design confidence signs (mileage markers, or similar) for the Stubblefield and Bluebird trails.

Action B.2.vi – Review existing signage to ensure traffic and road signs (Lower Pine Lake specifically) for motorists are compliant with the current edition of the Manual of Uniform Traffic Control Devices.

Action B.2.vii – Review existing interpretive signs to ensure signs for pedestrian accessibility and design. Potentially combine this review with requirements

under Secretarial Order 3431 – Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History.

Action B.2.viii – Work with Junior Wildlife Ranger to prioritize establishment of Junior Ranger program, potentially with a local academic institution, or with the regional office.

Action B.2.ix – Revisit visitor contact area and identify ways to improve existing exhibits by working with partners with volunteers to improve exhibit mechanics.

Action B.2.x – Work with universities in GIS to design updated maps to feature in visitor center and work with a vendor to order vinyl to properly install.

Objective 3 – Provide meaningful recreation for both self-guided and facilitated opportunities to see the refuge as a place for inspiration

Action B.3.i – Explore the development or expansion of two trails (Blackhorse Connector and proposed Wapiti trail) to provide longer “loop” trail opportunities to improve visitor experience. Address accessibility concerns for new trail development as outlined by US Access Board.

ENGAGE with local communities

(continued)

Action B.3.ii – Work with existing partners to facilitate guided interpretive programming such as bird walks.

Action B.3.iii – Update interpretive signage to ensure emotional and intellectual connection opportunities utilizing tangible or intangible resources with universally accessible design.

Action B.3.iv – Continue to maintain quality refuge hunting (elk, turkey, and mentored youth waterfowl).

Action B.3.v – Work to identify local art groups for interpretive opportunities with new community partners.

Action B.3.vi – Work with WA State Parks to improve signage and potentially pave the 5.5-mile section of the Columbia Plateau Trail (CPT) that passes through the refuge. An option for connecting the CPT to the public use area of the refuge along Cheney Plaza will also be explored.

Objective 4 – Provide meaningful environmental education to inspire stewardship from local youth and families

Action B.4.i – Support guided on-site field trips and classroom visits as capacity allows.

Action B.4.ii – Attend STEM Nights across the county to promote the agency and its mission directly in schools.

Action B.4.iii – Continue partnership with Eastern Washington University and Cheney Middle School which brings out every 6th grader in the district to some type of field-based experience.

Action B.4.iv – Continue working with Westwood MS on their 7th grade Environmental Field Day, despite their loss of grant funding. Consider alternatives and ways to streamline activities.

Action B.4.v – Host teacher workshops and trainings (Project Wild, Project Wet, etc.) on-site.

Objective 5 – Build Trust with Local Indigenous Communities

Action B.5.i – On a regular frequency, meet sincerely with Tribal partners to understand Tribal interests and needs.

Action B.5.ii – Help Tribal partners meet their needs within the Refuge’s abilities through codesigned opportunities around food sovereignty, and other desired projects.

Action B.5.iii – Identify projects that can be co-developed and develop an event or project

around that connection.

Action B.5.iv – Work with the Tribe to identify opportunities around co-facilitated elk management.

Action B.5.v – Work with Tribe to develop land acknowledgement that would be included in future self-guided lesson plans.

Action B.5.vi – Maintain commitment for future codesign interpretation opportunities.

Action B.5.vii – Work with the Tribes to revisit and revise the web presence.

Action B.5.v.iii – Explore options for providing youth opportunities for interested Tribal members.

Resources and Partners	Turnbull National Wildlife Refuge benefits from a dedicated and active conservation community. The work outlined includes community partners at every level and the following organizations are critical to achieving lasting and measurable success.
The Friends of Turnbull NWR	FOTNWR is a nonprofit organization that advocates for and supports the mandate of the refuge to protect and enhance wildlife and their habitats through education, research, habitat preservation and restoration and compatible public uses.
Spokane Audubon Society	SAS is a nonprofit group that advocates for birds and their habitats in the Inland Northwest and connects people with nature. They support the refuge by offering guided programs in the spring and summer.
The Lands Council	TLC is a nonprofit environmental organization based in Spokane, Washington, dedicated to protecting and revitalizing the forests, water, and wildlife of the Inland Northwest. They are a key player in regional conservation efforts through a combination of advocacy, education, restoration projects, and community engagement.
Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife	WDFW is dedicated to preserving, protecting, and perpetuating the state’s fish, wildlife, and ecosystems while providing sustainable fish and wildlife recreational and commercial opportunities. They collaborate on the annual hunts at Turnbull.
Washington Department of Natural Resources	DNR manages over 5.6 million acres of forest, agricultural, aquatic, and commercial lands to generate revenue for public schools and other state institutions while conserving natural ecosystems. It also serves as the state’s largest firefighting force and leads efforts in environmental restoration, scientific monitoring, and sustainable land stewardship.
Inland Northwest Land Conservancy	INLC is a nonprofit land trust organization based in Spokane that works to permanently protect the lands and waters essential to life in the Inland Northwest. Using conservation easements, land stewardship, and partnerships with landowners and agencies, they preserve ecologically valuable landscapes such as forests, rivers, and wildlife habitats.
Washington State Parks	WA State Parks mission is to protect Washington’s treasured natural and cultural resources while providing recreational and educational opportunities that connect people to the outdoors. Staff collaborate on interpretive programming.

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Spokane Conservation District	SCD is a non-regulatory agency that connects people with resources to promote the sustainable use and conservation of soil, water, forests, and other natural resources throughout Spokane County.
Spokane Tribe of Indians	The Spokane Tribe of Indians is a federally recognized tribe whose ancestral lands span over 3 million acres in what is now northeastern Washington, with their present-day government based in Wellpinit, WA.
Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation	RMEF is a national nonprofit conservation and pro-hunting organization founded in 1984, dedicated to ensuring the future of elk, other wildlife, their habitat, and the American hunting heritage.
Eastern Washington University	EWU is a regional, public university located in Cheney, Washington, offering a wide range of undergraduate and graduate programs with a strong focus on applied learning & community engagement.
Gonzaga University	GU is a private Jesuit institution in Spokane, Washington, founded in 1887, that offers a rigorous liberal arts education, with a strong emphasis on developing the whole person through academic excellence, ethical leadership, and community engagement.
Cheney School District	This district serves the communities of Cheney, Airway Heights, and the West Plains, covering one of the largest geographic areas in the state at 381 square miles.
West Valley Outdoor Learning Center	WVOLC is an educational facility operated by the West Valley School District in Spokane Valley that provides hands-on, nature-based learning experiences for over 3,500 students annually, fostering environmental awareness and stewardship through direct interaction with wildlife and natural ecosystems.
Ice Age Floods Institute	IAFI is a nonprofit educational organization founded in 1995 that promotes public awareness and understanding of the cataclysmic Ice Age floods that shaped the landscapes of the Pacific Northwest, particularly through interpretive programs, field trips, and support for the Ice Age Floods National Geologic Trail.

Turnbull NWR Interpretive Themes

These themes serve as a guide for refuge managers and visitor services staff to guide decision making and available resources for community engagement and refuge programming. It allows the refuge to create and share content that directly connects refuge management efforts to the public and in a relevant, understandable, and compelling way. They can be used to create new environmental education or interpretive programming, help orient volunteers, emphasize focuses for contractors on exhibits or signage, to leverage resources or capacity, and more.



Turnbull
National Wildlife Refuge



1.

The powerful forces of volcanism, glaciation and some of the largest floods in geological history have forged a distinct environment at Turnbull National Wildlife Refuge that is unique to the region.

2.

The Refuge provides vital habitat for wildlife, from moose to migratory birds, making it a living sanctuary where people can connect with nature firsthand.

3.

Turnbull's diverse plant communities, from wildflowers to ponderosa pines, are key components of the Refuge's ecosystems and enrich the visitor experience across seasons.

4.

Turnbull fosters meaningful human experiences—through quiet reflection, outdoor learning, and recreation—while deepening connections between people, nature, and place.

5.

At Turnbull National Wildlife Refuge, fire is a natural and necessary force. Through careful management, the refuge works with fire rather than against it, to sustain a healthy, resilient landscape.

About This Document

The Visitor Services Action Plan (VSAP) was conceived by staff in multiple regions to address the planning needs by field-based Visitor Services staff. Unlike other more formal step-down planning, which requires compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the VSAP process is based on the framework developed by the Interagency Visitor Use Management Council (IVUMC). It is intended to be a short-term (5-year) plan that approachable and actionable.

To create this document, a visitor services review was held in May 2025. This process involved scoping sessions with staff and partners, a detailed look at all Refuge facilities, and lengthy discussions about the desired future conditions for the refuge. Those conversations led to the drafting of a mission statement and objectives for implementation. Lastly, an interpretive research fellow was hired to broaden primary topics for interpretation into fully developed interpretive themes.

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NATIONAL
WILDLIFE
REFUGE SYSTEM

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