

HIKING & BIKING GUIDE

Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge



Promoting the conservation of natural resources on
Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge





Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) is a 35,000 acre refuge on the Tennessee River. The refuge is famous for the huge numbers of ducks, geese and cranes that congregate in the numerous wetlands and backwater areas during the winter. More than 60,000 ducks and geese and 20,000 sandhill cranes have wintered at Wheeler NWR. Whooping cranes, river otters, beaver, coyotes, white-tailed deer, bald eagles, hawks, owls and alligators can all be spotted on the refuge. the swamps, hardwood and pine forests, wetlands, fields, creeks and sloughs on the refuge are an outdoor lover's dream.



Walking, hiking and biking are popular refuge activities. The refuge offers options from short walks to lengthy treks. This Guide describes the refuge's Nature Trails and the longer Hiking and Biking Routes.



Nature Trails

The Nature Trails are easy short trails developed with the non-hiker in mind. These trails are suitable for people of all ages yet they offer a rewarding natural experience and provide a taste of the rich diversity of the refuge. Bicycles are **not** allowed on the Nature Trails.





Atkeson Cypress Trail (.3 miles, 15 minutes) is accessible from the Visitor Center parking lot. Look for the sign at the trail entrance. The trail begins with a boardwalk that meanders through a cypress swamp then continues through a wooded area. The trail loops around, skirting open crop fields where sandhill cranes often congregate in the winter and ends up back at the parking lot. There are benches at various locations, offering the opportunity to sit and enjoy a peaceful respite and observe birds and wildlife. This trail is only open during Visitor Center business hours.

(34.5471548, -86.9506071)



Wildlife Observation Building Trail (200 yards, 10 minutes) is located behind the Visitor Center. The trail leads to the Wildlife Observation Building which overlooks a waterfowl display pool. During winter months thousands of geese, ducks, sandhill cranes and the occasional whooping crane gather in and around the pool to feed. Migratory songbirds gather in the trees along the trail in the spring and fall. This trail is only open during Visitor Center business hours.

(34.5471548, -86.9506071)



Flint Creek Trail (1.5 miles, one hour) is located on the north side of Highway 67, 1/4 mile west of the Visitor Center Entrance Road. This scenic trail offers an opportunity to see various species of plant and animal life associated with an oak-hickory forest. The trail crosses the backwaters of Flint Creek on two boardwalks then continues into wooded areas. The First trail to the left after you cross the second boardwalk will lead you to a short loop walk. For a longer walk, continue straight. The trail is shaded by a thick forest of hickory, oak, red maple, sweet gum, yellow poplar and dogwood. Chipmunks, squirrels, woodpeckers, wrens and northern cardinals are commonly seen along the trail and American white pelicans can often be spotted in nearby Flint Creek in the winter.

(34.5534400, -86.9460197)



Beaverdam Swamp Boardwalk (1.0 mile, 30

minutes) is accessed from Exit 7 on Interstate 565 near Huntsville. Beaverdam Swamp hosts some of the largest tupelo gum trees in Alabama and has been designated a National Natural Landmark. A boardwalk winds through the swamp and terminates at a viewing platform that overlooks a small stream.

Various species of frogs, turtles, small fish and other amphibians and reptiles are sometimes visible. (34.6503229, -86.8182711)



Dancy Bottom Trail (2.4 miles round trip, one

hour) is accessed from the Visitor Center by turning right from Visitor Center Road onto Highway 67. Drive 1.7 miles to the traffic light at Indian Hills Road and turn right. In 3.1 miles turn right onto Red Bank Road.

The parking area is 1.7 miles on the right just before a small bridge. The trail parallels Flint Creek through mixed pine and hardwood forest. Deer,

squirrels, rabbits, woodpeckers and owls are often encountered on the trail. A boardwalk traverses a low wetland area. The trail ends at Bean Place Road. (34.5065655, -86.9554819)





Hiking and Biking

Hiking and biking have become increasingly popular on the refuge—with good reason. Both activities are easy and fun with mostly flat-going on gravel dual-track roads. There are no steep slopes and the lack of elevation changes, the quality of the roads and the natural beauty of the refuge offer relaxed pedaling and hiking and the ability to link together multiple routes will appeal to visitors who want to attempt more challenging multi-mile treks.

Some roads are closed seasonally to motorized traffic (**See Appendix** for closures). Three routes described in this section (***White Springs Dike, Eagle Nest Island and the Hiking and Biking Trail***) are closed to motorized traffic year-round and are great hiking and biking options. There are no single-track roads on the refuge, and biking off established roads and trails is not permitted.

None of the refuge roads described in this guide are paved. Fat tired multi-speed off-road bikes rule here. One-speed “beach cruisers” and road bikes with narrow, high pressure tires are not suitable on the refuge. You will be using maintained roads so jumping logs, fording creeks and dodging boulders are not on the agenda.

You may encounter other outdoor enthusiasts during your visit. Anglers, runners, hunters, kayakers and birdwatchers frequent the refuge. Respect their activities as they would yours. Year-round hiking and biking are possible as winter temperatures are usually above freezing. Summer can be dangerously hot with triple digit temperatures and high humidity. For this reason, each route description includes whether it is shaded, partially shaded or non-shaded. Winter is the best time to visit for wildlife viewing.

Refuge Rules:

- Stay on established roads when biking. Off road biking is not permitted on the refuge.
- Do not litter. Pack it in and pack it out.
- Some areas of the refuge are closed to the public during certain times of the year. Respect these closed areas and do not enter. **Check with the Wheeler NWR Visitor Center 256-350-6639 if in doubt.** You may be ticketed if caught in a closed area. See Appendix for road closures.
- **The fields around the Observation Building and Visitor Center are closed to the public year round.**
- Bikers should obey all traffic rules and signs.
- No overnight camping is allowed. Refuge lands are open to visitors from dawn to dusk.
- Wildlife always has the right of way. Give them plenty of space.
- Do not block gates when parking. You may be towed.
- Dogs must be leashed. Pick up after your pet.

To make your experience more enjoyable consider the following:

- Use sunscreen.
- Morning and late afternoon/evening are the best times to view wildlife.
- Wear a helmet when biking!
- Don't forget insect repellent.
- Pack water, especially in summer.
- Watch for venomous snakes and alligators.
- Silence! A quiet approach will ensure a better wildlife viewing experience.
- Some roads may be open to motorized traffic. Use caution and keep your eyes open for vehicles.
- Areas of the refuge are open seasonally for deer and small game hunting. Be aware of hunters and respect their space.
- Consider wearing hunter orange in season.

How to Use this Guide

Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge has over 100 miles of roads. This guide lists the most scenic and enjoyable routes. For ease of use, the guide contains two sections: *North of the Tennessee River and South of the Tennessee River*.

For each route the following is provided:

- A short description.
- Directions to access points.
- Mileage to points of interest and road intersections.
- Terrain guide (steep, flat, hilly, etc.).
- Description as either loop, one-way or out-and-back to allow for planning of vehicle shuttles.
- Either shaded, partially shaded or non-shaded.
- Some routes allow for linking multiple roads for longer trips. Where this is possible the guide describes options.
- A few routes will include brief stretches on public road outside refuge boundaries. These are noted in the description.

Loop: Route will return to access point.

One-way: Access and departure points are different.

Out-and-back: Route will retrace to return to access point. Distance listed is total out-and-back length.

Thank you for visiting!

Maps and more information are available at the refuge: Visitor Center, 3121 Visitor Center Road, Decatur AL 35603, or call 256-350-6639.

This is your public land, treat it like the valuable asset it is! Practice Leave No Trace biking!



North of the Tennessee River

Blackwell Swamp Loop

Distance: 7.5 miles

Terrain: Slight uphill grades

Type: Loop

Cover: Shaded

This is a tree-shaded loop around a large swamp full of cypress trees and beaver lodges. The loop is heavily vegetated and views are limited for much of the way. Great blue herons, red-tailed hawks, deer, beaver and turtles are common here and this is one of the best places on the refuge to spot alligators. During summer and fall butterflies tend to congregate here in large numbers. Blackwell Swamp is picturesque, ringed by wildflowers and full of lotus and lily-pads floating on tea-colored water. The north end of the refuge features a stand of dead trees that attracts woodpeckers.

Directions to Starting Point: Take County Line Road (Exit 7) from Interstate 565. Drive south for 5.5 miles. Look for Jolly B Road on the left and follow it for 0.5 miles and you will see a refuge welcome sign as you enter refuge lands. Continue for 0.5 miles past the refuge sign to the gravel parking on the right.
(34.5676767, -86.7783290)



Road Mileage:

Mile

- 0.0 From the parking area go south.
- 0.2 Gate and canoe launch ramp. A good place to look for birds and alligators.
- 0.7 Road on right, continue straight.
- 0.9 Road splits. Bear left. Tennessee River visible on right for next 1.5 miles.
- 2.7 Pass a pump house on the right at the top of a small rise.
- 3.1 Water treatment plant on right.
- 5.2 Block structure on right. Blackwell Swamp is visible on the left and a short trail leads to swamp edge with good views. This is the north edge of the swamp and the dead trees here are favorite perches for flycatchers, woodpeckers and raptors.
- 6.9 Rejoin Jolly B Road. Turn left.
- 7.0 Refuge sign.
- 7.5 Arrive back at parking area.

HGH Road/JTT Road

Distance: 6.1 miles

Terrain: Slight uphill/downhill grades

Type: One-way

Cover: Shaded

A relatively easy route through hardwood forests with a scenic rest stop at Buckeye Impoundment conveniently located at 4.0 miles. Some slight uphill and downhill grades, nothing strenuous.

Directions to Starting Point: Start at the same parking area as Blackwell Swamp loop. (34.5676767, -86.7783290)



Mileage:

Mile:

- 0.0 Go west (instead of south for the Blackwell Swamp Loop) past the refuge gate.
- 0.6 Road on left, continue straight.
- 1.5 Road splits at refuge gate. Bear right. An option is to bear left through gate. Left road will transect Buckeye Impoundment for 2.5 miles. Road is subject to flooding during high water periods. Rejoins HGH/JTT Road at 4.4 miles.
The Buckeye Impoundment is closed to all entry (including hiking and biking) to reduce disturbance to wintering waterfowl November 15 - February 28.
- 3.0 Bear left after gate. You will begin a gentle mostly downward grade for the next mile.
- 4.0 Road comes to a T. Turn right. Option is to turn left for a short trek to dead end at Buckeye Impoundment. Nice scenic place to stop for a rest.
- 4.2 Road turns left at intersection with John Gordon Road.
- 4.4 Gate on left. This is where the optional Buckeye Impoundment transect rejoins.
- 5.9 Gate on left. Bear right.
- 6.1 Road comes to a T at Rockhouse Road (paved).

The gravel road to the left is Rockhouse Road. You can continue on it back to the parking lot starting point for a combined 11.4 mile loop.



Rockhouse Road

Distance: 5.3 miles

Terrain: Flat

Type: One-way

Cover: Partially shaded

This route hugs the north bank of the Tennessee River and is a good place to spot great blue herons, common loons, and various duck species on the Tennessee River and sparrows and killdeer in the vast fields along the road. Large numbers of ducks congregate here in the winter. Rockhouse Road is heavily used by anglers and vehicles are usually present.

Directions to Starting Point: Start at the same parking area as Blackwell Swamp loop. (34.5676767, -86.7783290)



Mileage:

Mile

- 0.0 Go south.
- 0.2 Gate and canoe launch ramp. A good place to look for birds and alligators.
- 0.9 Road splits. Bear right.
- 2.6 Water control structure.
- 4.5 Gate and pumphouse on right. Short spur road on right leads to open water. Continue straight on main road.
- 5.3 Rockhouse Road (paved).

The gravel road to the right is HGH/JTT Road. You can continue on it back to the parking lot starting point for a combined 11.4 mile outing.



Arrowhead Landing

Distance: 4.8 miles

Terrain: Flat

Type: Out-and-back

Cover: Shaded

Arrowhead Landing Road parallels the western shore of Limestone Bay, a large, shallow bay that connects to the Tennessee River. The bay is often full of thousands of snow geese and American white pelicans in the winter. This road is used by fishermen and local running clubs and Limestone Bay is popular with kayakers.

Directions to the Route: Take Mooresville Exit 2 from Interstate 565 south to the stop sign. Turn right on old Highway 20 west for 0.6 miles and turn left onto the gravel road at the boat ramp sign (Arrowhead Landing Road). Park in the small parking areas next to the road. This is off the refuge and you will be on a public road for the first mile or so.
(34.6276396, -86.8924768)



Road Mileage:

Mile:

- 0.0 Go south.
- 1.5 Road splits. Keep left.
- 2.0. Arrowhead Landing boat ramp on left.
- 2.4 Refuge gate. This is the start of White Springs Dike Road.



Skinner Springs Road/Penny Bottoms Road

Distance: 8.0 Miles (both sections)

Terrain: Mostly flat

Type: Out-and-back

Cover: Partially Shaded

Due to limited parking, this route starts in the middle of the two sections. You can either choose to do the Penny Bottoms or Skinner Springs sections or both.

Penny Bottoms: Hardwood forests and leafy wetlands line both sides of the road for the first mile. The road then crosses open agricultural fields before once again transitioning into hardwood forests. The dike at the water control structure offers unobstructed views of Limestone Bay. The optional spur route that begins at 0.3 miles is a nice addition to the route and is a good place to spot wildlife, although it can be rough and muddy depending on weather.

Skinner Springs: A mixture of forest and agricultural fields.

Directions to the Starting Point. Take Greenbrier Road Exit 3 from Interstate 565. Drive south for 2.5 miles and turn right on Rockhouse Road. After 1.6 miles turn right on Henderson Road. Henderson Road will turn to gravel at 1.1 miles. Continue another 0.3 miles to a refuge gate. Park at side of gate.
(34.5831670, -86.8676871)



Road Mileage (Penny Bottoms):

Mile

- 0.0 Start at refuge gate. Go west through gate.
- 0.3 Continue straight. Optional road to the right leads to a small seasonal wetland area that hosts large numbers of waterfowl in the winter. This road continues another 0.7 miles to a split. Left goes 300 yards to open field, right goes 500 yards to gate and open field. **(Field past gate is private property, do not enter.)**
- 0.9 A ninety degree left turn at a tree line. A large hidden bay on your left is a good spot for ducks and geese. The road takes a ninety degree right turn after another 300 feet. Go right to continue main route. An option is to take the road to the left for .25 mile to a shady respite by the water.
- 1.4 Gate. Water structure and dike road beyond provides views of Limestone Bay on your left,

(Skinner Springs Road/Penny Bottoms Road continued)

shallow wetlands on your right. Good vantage point to look for birds.

- 1.6 Road ends at a turnaround at beginning of an agricultural field.

Road Mileage (Skinner Springs):

Mile:

- 0.0 Start at refuge gate. Go east.
0.3 Turn right to Skinner Bottoms Road. Refuge gate at start of road.
2.1 Route ends at Rockhouse Road (paved).

White Springs Dike

Distance: 7.0 Miles

Terrain: Flat

Type: One-way

Cover: Eastern portion (East of Interstate 65) shaded, western portion (West of Interstate 65) non-shaded

A picturesque route along the banks of the Tennessee River with unobstructed views of the main river channel for almost the entire distance. The dike hugs the north bank of the river for most of the way and you will enjoy the sparkling waters of the river, expansive wetlands and wooded forests. White Springs is a favorite gathering place for thousands of ducks in the winter and red-tailed hawks, northern harriers, ospreys and bald eagles are often spotted here. The road is closed to motorized vehicles year round.

Directions to Starting Point: Access is from Highway 20 north of Decatur. Drive north from Decatur on Highway 31, crossing the bridge over the Tennessee River. One mile north of the bridge the road splits, Highway 31 goes north, Highway 20 goes east. Take the eastern split. Immediately after the split there is a gate on the right. The route starts at the gate. There is very limited parking. **(34.6287518, -86.9511295)**. Alternate starting point is at Arrowhead Landing which will be doing this route in reverse. **(34.5951054, -86.8919273)**



(White Springs Dike continued)

Road Mileage: **Mile**

- 0.0 Follow the gravel road atop the dike.
- 1.4 Eagles Nest Island Road goes left. Continue straight on the main dike road.
- 4.6 You will pass under the Interstate 65 bridges. Continue straight. Optional road to the left continues north between the bridges and joins Eagles Nest Island Road.

Eagle Nest Island Road

Distance: 5.0 miles

Terrain: Flat

Type: One-way

Cover: Shaded

A picturesque route through a canopy of towering hardwood trees. One of the best routes on the refuge for scenic photography. The fall foliage is spectacular. The tree canopy keeps this road cooler in the summer. The road is closed to motorized vehicles year round.

Directions to Starting Point:

Same as White Springs

Dike. (34.6287518, -86.9511295)



Mileage:

Mile

- 0.0 Follow the gravel road atop the dike.
- 1.4 Road angles off to the left at sign for Eagle Nest Island Road. Follow this road. The first 300 yards has water on both sides, a good place to spot ducks and geese.
- 4.3 I-65 bridges. Go straight. An option is to take the road to right between the bridges and turn right as it joins White Springs Dike to loop back to the starting point for a 9.6 mile route.
- 4.9 Turn left at T.
- 5.0 Gate to Arrowhead Landing. White Springs Dike road ends at the locked gate just south of Arrowhead Landing and can be combined with that route for another 2.4 miles.

Beaverdam Peninsula Loop

Distance: 2.5 miles

Terrain: Flat

Type: Loop

Cover: Partially shaded

This is an easy loop that skirts the eastern edge of Limestone Bay and is a good place to spot sandhill cranes, American white pelicans and snow geese in season.

Directions to Starting Point: Take Mooresville Exit 2 south from Interstate 565. At the stop sign turn left, follow old Highway 20 east for 0.6 miles to Pryor Road and turn right. Follow Pryor Road. The road will veer 90 degrees left then ninety degrees right. There is a third ninety degree left turn. At the third turn take the gravel road straight ahead where you will see Beaverdam Platform at the edge of the field in front of you and a trailer and gate on your immediate right. Park in the lot at the base of the platform. The road begins at the gate you passed on the way in.
(34.6101775, -86.8537410)



Road Mileage:

Mile

- 0.0 Go west on gravel road.
- 0.2 Road to the left is the loop road reentering at this point. Continue straight.
- 2.3 Rejoin loop road, go right to return to starting point.



Mooreville

Distance: 2.8 miles

Terrain: Slight hills

Type: Out-and-back

Cover: Shaded

A beautiful shady route near Limestone Bay. The mudflats at the end of the route are a good place to spot alligators. Be sure to take the time to walk or ride through the streets of picturesque Mooreville and take in the many historical buildings.

Directions to the Starting Point:

Take Mooreville Exit 2 south from Interstate 565. Go into the town of Mooreville and park at the public parking lot immediately across the road from the stop sign.

(34.6274984, -86.8802677)



Road Mileage:

Mile:

- 0.0 Go south on Broad Street (just east of parking lot).
- 0.2 Refuge gate.
- 1.1 Road splits. Keep right.
- 1.4 Road ends at Limestone Bay.





South of the Tennessee River

Hiking and Biking Trail

Distance: 5.0 miles

Terrain: Flat

Type: Out-and-back

Cover: Partially Shaded

The trail offers views of Gray Field and Flint Creek, a good place to spot sandhill cranes in season. The trail splits at the 1.9 mile mark. The right fork follows Dinsmore Slough, a secluded spot that is often full of ducks and geese, for a short distance before skirting agricultural fields. The left fork follows Flint Creek and eventually ends at a low pass across Flint Creek.

Directions to the Starting Point: Route starts at the parking lot to the east of the Visitor Center Road on Highway 67. Turn left on the gravel just before the entrance gate on Visitor Center Road.

(34.5498858, -86.9428644)



Road Mileage:

Mile:

- 0.0 Go to the left before the refuge gate. Airport Road is closed to all entry (including hiking and biking) year round.
- 0.7 Short jog right then left for 100 yards.
- 1.1 Airport Road joins on the right. Go straight.
- 1.4 Hard left at stop signs and area closed signs. Bear left, DO NOT go right, this area is off limits year round due to bird activity. All areas to the west are closed to the public year round.
- 1.7 Water control structure at the foot of Dinsmore Slough on your right.
- 2.0 Trail splits.
- 2.5 Right fork ends at refuge boundary.
- 2.5 Left fork ends at a bend of Flint Creek.



Truck Trail

Distance: 12.8 miles

Terrain: Slight hills, curvy

Type: One-way

Cover: Shaded

If you opt to do the entire trail, this is the longest route on the refuge. If you do not want to commit to the entirety there are multiple access points that allow for doing only selected portions. The route roughly parallels the south bank of the Tennessee River for its entire length although for most of the way it is some distance away and views of the river are very limited. The road cuts through thick hardwood and pine forests and is a good place to spot deer, coyotes and woodland birds. Because of the length and the hills, this is the most strenuous route on the refuge. ***Truck Trail is closed to all entry (including hiking and biking) from the I-65 bridge to Mussel Camp Road November 15 - January 15.***

Directions to the Starting Point: From the Visitor Center take highway 67 east for 1.0 mile and turn left at the caution light at Upper River Road. Go 0.5 mile to Old River Road and turn left. Go 2.0 miles to refuge gate. Park on the left by the river.

(34.573570, -86.918168)



Road Mileage:

Mile:

- 0.0 Go past refuge gate.
- 0.5 Interstate 65 bridges.
- 2.2 Bethel Road. Alternate access, limited parking.
- 2.8 Road splits. Bear right.
- 4.0 Old Branch Road. Alternate access, limited parking.
- 6.7 Mussel Camp Road. Alternate access, limited parking. Spur road on the left leads to Tennessee River at 1.0 mile.
- 11.2 Cain Road on right. Alternate access, limited parking.
- 12.8 Bluff City Road. Alternate access, parking near river.

PHOTO GALLERY





Appendix

Road Closure Calendar

Road	Dates Open to Motorized Vehicles
Arrowhead Landing	Open year round
Beaverdam Peninsula	02/10-10/14
Blackwell Swamp	Open year round
Truck Trail	
Duncan Hill to Mussel Camp*	2/10-10/14
Mussel Camp to Bluff City	02/10-10/14
HGH	02/10-10/14
JTT	Open all year
Mooreville	02/10-05/31 and 10/01-10/14
Penny Bottoms	02/10-05/31 and 10/01-10/14
Rockhouse	02/10-10/14
Skinner Springs	02/10-10/14
Tally Bottoms	02/10-03/01 and 10/01-10/14
White Springs Dike	Closed all year
Eagle Nest Island	Closed all year

***Truck Trail** is closed to all entry (including hiking and biking) from the I-65 bridge to Mussel Camp Road November 15-January 15.

***Airport Road** is closed to all entry (including hiking and biking) year-round. Please use the Hiking and Biking Trail instead.

