

[Draft] Compatibility Determination for Wildlife Observation and Photography, Salt Plains National Wildlife Refuge

Refuge Use Category

Wildlife Observation and Photography

Refuge Use Type

Photography *, Photography, video, filming, or audio recording (commercial), Photography, video, filming, or audio recording (news and educational), Wildlife observation *, Wildlife observation (commercial)

Salt Plains National Wildlife Refuge

Refuge Purpose and Establishing and Acquisition Authorities

“... as a refuge and breeding ground for birds...” (Executive Order 5314, dated Mar. 26, 1930)

“... for use as an inviolate sanctuary, or for any other management purpose, for migratory birds” [16. U.S.C. 715d (Migratory Bird Conservation Act)]

“...shall be administered by him [Secretary of Interior] directly or in accordance with cooperative agreements and in accordance with such rules and regulations for the conservation, maintenance, and management of wildlife, resource thereof, and its habitat thereon, ...” [16 U.S.C. 664 (Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act)]

“...for the development, advancement, management, conservation, and protection of fish and wildlife resources...” [16 U.S.C. 742f(a)(4) (Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956)]

“... for the benefit of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, in performing its activities and services. Such acceptance may be subject to the terms of any restrictive or affirmative covenant, or condition of servitude ...” [16 U.S.C. 742 f(b)(1)(Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956)]

National Wildlife Refuge System Mission

The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System) is to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and, where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans (Pub. L. 105-57, 111 Stat. 1252).

Description of Use

This compatibility determination reviews and replaces the 2006 compatibility determination for Wildlife Observation.

What is the use?

Photography.* Refuge visitation for the purpose of photographing refuge natural or cultural resources (including fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats) or public uses of those resources (not for commercial, news, or educational purposes).

Photography, video, filming, or audio recording (commercial). Commercial activity conducted by an individual or organization involving photography, videography, filming, or other recording of sight or sound in accordance with current guidelines and policy such as the EXPLORE act.

Photography, video, filming, or audio recording (news and educational). Activity involving photography, videography, filming, or other recording of sight or sound for news, public information, or educational purposes.

Wildlife observation.* Viewing of fish, wildlife, plants, or their habitats by refuge visitors.

Wildlife observation (commercial). Commercial guiding or outfitting of refuge visitors to view fish, wildlife, plants, or their habitats (including provision of access to viewing areas).

Is the use a priority public use? Yes

Where would the use be conducted?

This use will be conducted on designated trails, along refuge roads, at waysides, fishing areas, Selenite Crystal Digging Area from sunrise to sunset. There is one photo blind on Eagle Roost Trail and another on Casey Marsh Trail. These areas are currently open to public visitation and this use with a previously approved compatibility determination. An approved Special Use Permit (SUP) is required to conduct this use in any other area of the refuge.

The refuge is important for many species. The refuge has six threatened and endangered species: Red Knot – threatened, Piping Plover – threatened, Lesser Prairie-chicken – threatened, Monarch Butterfly – candidate, Tricolored Bat – proposed endangered, and Whooping Crane – endangered. For the Whooping Crane, the entire refuge is designated critical habitat.

Many shorebirds, waterfowl and sandhill cranes migrate through during the fall and spring. Sandhill Crane numbers peak at around 80,000 in the fall. The refuge is a site of international importance with the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network and is designated a Globally Important Bird Area by the American Bird Conservancy. About 1/3 of the inland breeding population of Snowy Plovers nest on the salt flats. The refuge is also important for migratory and resident Bald and Golden Eagles. There are four active Bald Eagle nests.

The refuge is 32,197 acres and is made up of salt flats, mixed-grass prairie, herbaceous wetlands, forested riparian areas, rolling sand hills, and open water. The salt flats, largest in the central lowlands, is about 12,000 acres and is a National Natural Landmark with the U.S. Department of the Interior. Great Salt Plains Reservoir is about 8,700 acres and includes Ralstin Island, an important colonial waterbird rookery.

To reduce impact, over 90% of the refuge will not be accessed to protect these key species and habitat. Areas may be temporarily closed for other visitors and public uses for filming and photography.

When would the use be conducted?

This use would be conducted year-round from sunrise to sunset. In the past this use tends to peak in the spring and fall. Some trails are temporarily closed in the fall and spring due to white-tailed deer and wild turkey hunts to keep visitors safe. Trails and public access areas are also temporarily closed due to prescribed fires, maintenance, and other habitat management actions.

How would the use be conducted?

Anyone conducting this use must follow general refuge regulations including no drones, pets must be on leash, no trash and no harassing, disturbing, collecting fish, wildlife or plants.

An approved special use permit is required for conducting these activities in a closed area or outside open refuge hours (sunrise to sunset). The refuge manager and biologist review all special use permit requests.

Photography and filming on the salt flats is very popular. To reduce the impact on wildlife while allowing limited use, approved special use permits would allow people to access 25 feet passed the closed area signs. Access to the Selenite Crystal Digging Area may be allowed outside the crystal digging season April 1 through October 15 if it will not disturb endangered Whooping Cranes, migratory birds, or nesting shorebirds.

Why is this use being reevaluated?

This use is being reevaluated since at least 15 years have passed since it was first evaluated (603 FW 2.11 H.). Wildlife photography and wildlife observation both are existing priority public uses of the National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System) as identified in the Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 and receives enhanced consideration over non-priority uses. These activities are designed to promote the purpose of the refuge and support the mission, promote understanding and appreciation of natural and cultural resources, and their management on all lands and waters in the Refuge System.

The objective for wildlife photography and wildlife observation is to provide safe, enjoyable, high quality, and accessible opportunities to view wildlife on the refuge. In addition, the program aims to promote visitor understanding of America's natural resources while minimizing conflicts with visitors participating in other compatible wildlife-dependent activities. The refuge provides local, regional, national, and international visitors with a wide range of observational and photographic opportunities.

Availability of Resources

Table 1: Costs to Administer and Manage Wildlife Observation and Photography

Category and Itemization	One-time Cost	Recurring Annual Expenses
Develop Plan/NEPA document/opening package	\$0	\$0
Construct facilities	\$0	\$5,000

Develop signage and brochures	\$500	\$500
Survey and post use area boundary	\$0	\$500
Staff time (LE, administration, and management)	\$0	\$20,000

Current, refuge resources are adequate but with a significant increase in demand a fee may be implemented.

Anticipated Impacts of the Use

Short-term impact

The measurable environmental impacts for photography, filming and observation are expected to be short-term. There is some temporary disturbance to wildlife due to human activity on the land. The most likely impacts will be during spring and early summer when many animals are nesting and brood rearing, and during spring and fall migration. Visitor access is typically by individuals or small groups for short durations. Destruction or negative impacts to habitat and associated vegetation are minimal because public use is confined to trails, and to state, county, and refuge roads, and there is typically a large distance between photographer/observer and subject. Limiting the size of the impacted area, combined with sporadic, limited use by the public should prevent unacceptable impacts. These short-term, temporary effects are countered by the opportunity photography and wildlife observation allows, which results in stronger, long-term environmental stewardship benefitting the landscape as a whole. Operating these activities does not alter the refuge's ability to meet habitat goals and it helps support several of the primary objectives of the refuges.

Long-term impact

Wildlife photography and observation are not anticipated to have any cumulative negative impacts. Wildlife observation does occur at the same sites used for photography and filming. Wildlife impacts will be carefully monitored by observing changes in wildlife behavior and habitat response. If impacts are detected, adaptive strategies will be developed to reduce or eliminate these impacts.

Public Review and Comment

The compatibility determination will be available for public review and comment for 14 days. The public was made aware of this comment opportunity through posting at the refuge headquarters, posting on the refuge website, a letter emailed to partners, and on social media.

Tribes will be asked to review and comment on the compatibility determination. A hard copy of this document was also posted at the Visitor Center: 71189 Harper Road, Jet OK 73749. It will be made available electronically on the [refuge website](#). Comments will be accepted through this email shane_kasson@fws.gov.

Determination

Use is compatible with the following stipulations.

Stipulations Necessary to Ensure Compatibility

When photography, filming, or wildlife observation is proposed outside public use areas or not from sunrise to sunset a SUP is required.

Justification

The proposed use does not materially interfere with or detract from the fulfillment of the National Wildlife Refuge System mission or the purpose of the refuge. The very small impact associated with the proposed use does not materially interfere or detract from the refuge goals, objectives, or management activities. The proposed use does not benefit or adversely impact the biological resources of the refuge.

According to the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966, as amended by the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 there are six public uses that are deemed acceptable wildlife dependent public uses on refuges if they are found to be compatible with the refuge purposes. They are wildlife observation, photography, hunting, fishing, and environmental education, and interpretation. These uses are commonly referred to as the “Big Six” public uses on refuges. The proposed use adds to the opportunities available to the public on the refuge and supports two of the “Big Six” public uses already existing on the refuge, wildlife observation and photography.

Signature of Determination

Refuge Manager Signature and Date

Signature of Concurrence

Assistant Regional Director Signature and Date

Mandatory Reevaluation Date

2039

Literature Cited/References

None