

Sand Lake

*National Wildlife
Refuge*

Wildlife Drive



Welcome



This blue goose, designed by J.N. "Ding" Darling, is the symbol of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Welcome to Sand Lake National Wildlife Refuge (NWR), one of over 565 refuges and 38 wetland management districts in the National Wildlife Refuge System – a network of lands set aside specifically for wildlife. Managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Refuge System is a living heritage, conserving wildlife and habitat for people today and for generations to come.

Sand Lake NWR was established in 1935 as a refuge and breeding area for migratory birds and other wildlife. The Refuge is home to over 266 bird species, 40 mammal species, and a variety of amphibians, fish, and reptiles.

Wildlife Drive

The Wildlife Drive is a 13 ½-mile road that is mostly gravel. It has signs that correspond with interpretive information in this brochure. The road is open from early April through November; however, it may also close at other times if the driving conditions are hazardous. Plan for approximately 1 hour to complete the Wildlife Drive.

We invite you to learn about the Refuge grassland and wetland habitats and the wildlife that find food, water, and shelter here. Watch for ducks, geese, shorebirds, other waterbirds, warblers, white-tailed deer, and other wildlife. The best times to view wildlife are at dawn and dusk.

*Footprints of
the Civilian
Conservation
Corps*



1

During the Great Depression, Sand Lake NWR was developed by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). The CCC was active on the Refuge from 1935 to 1939 constructing buildings, dikes, roads, and an observation tower. The tower was initially built to scout for fires, spot poachers, and study migrations of birds. Today, you can climb this historic 108-foot-tall structure to get a panoramic view of the Refuge. The observation tower is one of the few structures that remain on the Refuge from the CCC era.

*Important
Habitat for Birds*



2

Sand Lake is an 11,450-acre shallow lake that provides important food such as aquatic insects and plants for birds that breed, nest, or migrate through this area. Watch for ducks, geese, grebes, and pelicans on Sand Lake. During the spring and fall migrations, large concentrations of birds can be viewed here.

In 1988, Sand Lake was recognized as a Wetland of International Importance by the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands. Signed in 1971 in Ramsar, Iran, this international treaty was developed due to concerns over the increasing loss of wetlands and habitat for migratory birds.

Sand Lake

National Wildlife Refuge

 Refuge boundary

 State highway


 County road

 North Loop Road
(Opens early April and closes September 1)

 Wildlife Drive
(Opens early April and closes in November)

 1 Interpretive area


 Linked symbols designate accessible features

 Refuge headquarters

 Restroom


 Wildlife observation

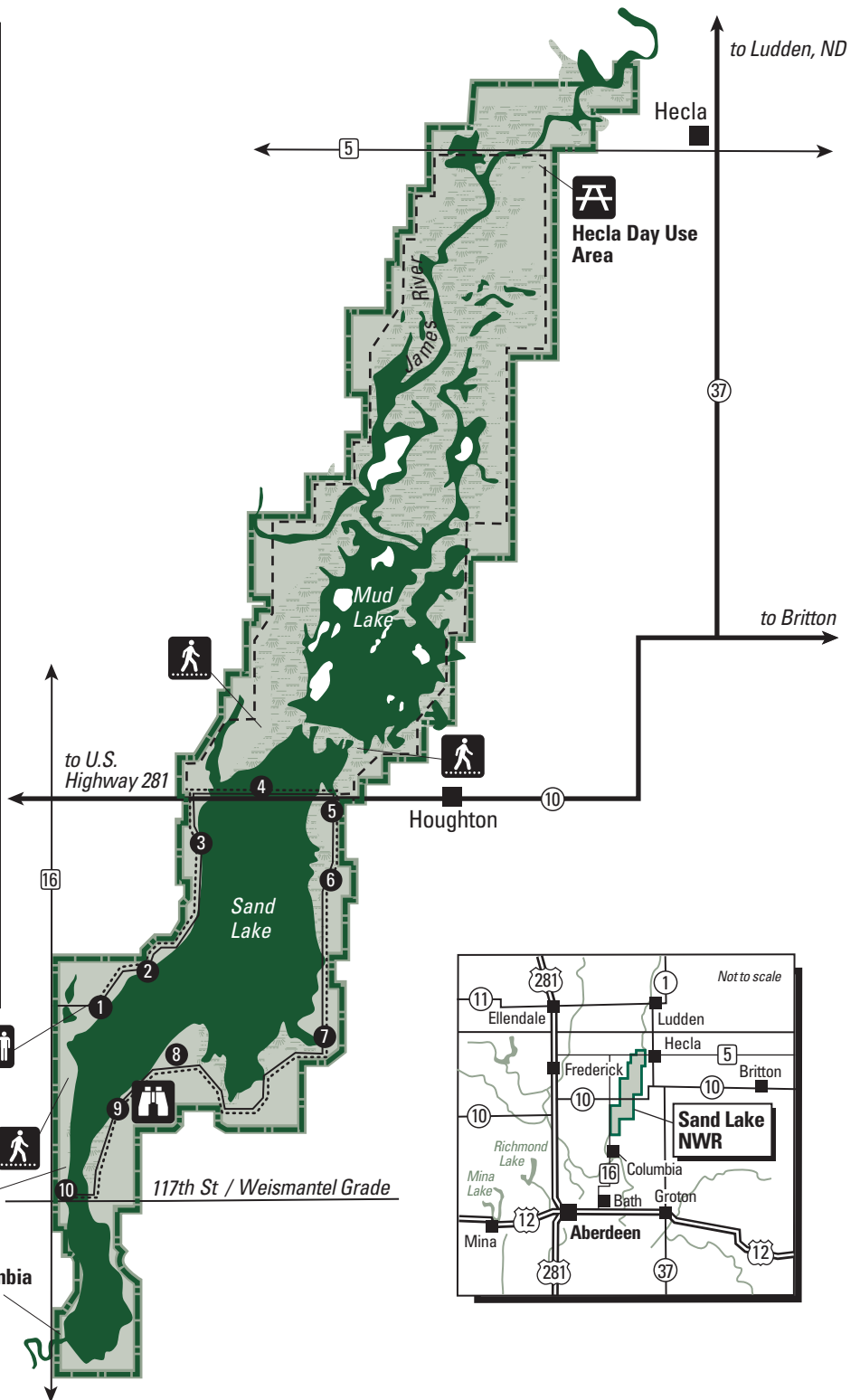
 Observation tower

 Day use area

 Nature trail

 Marsh

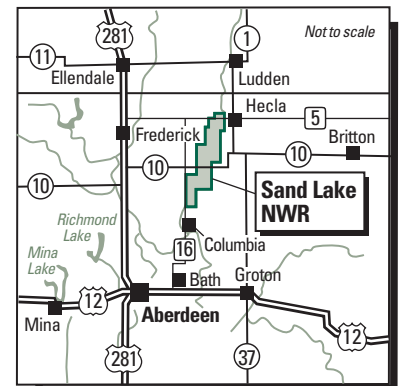
 Grasslands



Columbia Day Use Area   

Sand Lake Overlook  

Columbia Dam



Banding Ducks

3

As you approach this area, notice the trail that leads to a shallow wetland. Here, ducks are banded in August and September. Duck banders launch nets that trap ducks feeding on grain on the shoreline. Upon capture, the species, sex, and approximate age are recorded, and the ducks leg is fitted with a band that has a unique identification number. Later, when banded ducks are found or harvested by a hunter, the number can be reported to the U.S. Geological Survey's Bird Banding Lab. This information helps us better understand migration patterns, population sizes, and survival rates of ducks.

Wetlands – Important for Wildlife and People

4

Wetlands are among the most productive habitats on earth. They nurture a large variety of insect and plant life, which in turn attracts shorebirds, songbirds, wading birds, and great numbers of ducks and geese that find food and shelter here. Wetlands also benefit people by removing excess nutrients, sediment, and pollutants from water as it flows through them; reducing flooding by capturing and holding rain and snowmelt; and by providing areas for recreation.

Watch for Birds

5

Here, you may see or hear several species of songbirds. American redstarts, common yellowthroats, and yellow warblers fly among the leaves and branches of the willow trees.

As you drive the next mile, watch for northern harriers and hawks flying overhead, and ducks such as blue-winged teal, mallards, and northern pintails swimming and feeding on aquatic insects and plants in Sand Lake.

*Over-water
Nesting Areas*

6

Common reed, also known as Phragmites, is a perennial grass that grows to 10 feet tall and forms dense colonies in wet areas. The clumps of Phragmites provide nesting habitat for many species of water birds. Canvasbacks, redheads, American bitterns, eared grebes, and western grebes build floating nests among the stems.

*Habitat for Duck
Production*

7

Shallow wetlands, like the one on the right, provide habitat for ducks. In spring, ducks breed here. In summer, hens bring their ducklings to feed on aquatic insects such as beetles, dragonfly larvae, and mosquito larvae. Plants such as duckweed and sago pondweed also provide food for ducks. Other plants like bulrush and cattails provide shelter from predators.

*Reconstructed
Prairie*

8

Two hundred years ago, the land on your left was native prairie – an area that had never been plowed. There were no houses, roads, or trees. Herds of bison grazed the native prairie along the James River.

As European Americans settled in this fertile area, the native prairie was plowed and crops were planted and harvested, and habitat for wildlife was changed.

Today, Refuge managers plant cropland areas with native grass species such as big bluestem, Indiangrass, and switchgrass. Grasslands serve as important habitat for nesting ducks and other migratory birds such as bobolinks, western meadowlarks, and a variety of other species. Still, the diversity of native prairie can never be fully restored. Therefore, it's important to conserve the native prairie that remains on the landscape.

*Eagle
Observation*



Throughout your drive, you likely noticed large cottonwood trees near the road and shoreline of Sand Lake. Bald eagles often roost on branches while they rest or watch for opportunities for an easy meal. Look closely for a large nest, approximately 6 feet wide and 4 feet tall, constructed by a bald eagle. These nests often take up to three months to build. An eagle typically lays 1-3 eggs and incubates them for approximately 35 days. Young eagles may stay in or near the nest for 3 months before they completely fledge. In subsequent years, bald eagles often use the same nest and add more material each year.



Many ducks nest in the grasslands, but ducks such as redheads and ruddy ducks are over-water nesters. They build floating nests among the cattails. When the ducklings hatch, Sand Lake and the nearby wetlands are ideal places to raise and nurture their young.

Other birds that form large groups or colonies also nest in the cattails. Colonial nesting birds include black-crowned night herons, cattle egrets, Franklin's gulls, great egrets, and white-faced ibises.

This is the last interpreted area on the Wildlife Drive. Continue driving west to reach County Road 16. Thank you for visiting Sand Lake NWR.

Accessibility

Equal opportunity to participate in and benefit from programs and activities of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is available to all individuals regardless of physical or mental ability. For more information, please contact the U.S. Department of the Interior, Office of Equal Opportunity, www.doi.gov/accessibility.

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