DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE — WILDLIFE FEATURE

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NORTH AMERICAN MAMMALS AIDED BY NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGES

Approximately half of the estimated 416 species of North American mammals are found on lands and waters encompassed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's National Wildlife Refuge System, according to a current study.

The Interior Department agency operates 385 refuges in the system. Twenty-seven units covering 23.7 million acres are being managed primarily for one or more species of mammals. Examples are the National Bison Range in Montana, the Desert National Wildlife Range in Nevada, the National Elk Refuge in Wyoming, and the Kenai National Moose Range in Alaska.

The diversity of living space available on national wildlife refuges to mammals covers all eight major life zones in North America--pinon-juniper, tropical forest, desert, deciduous forest, grasslands, coniferous forest, chaparral, and tundra.

Several refuges have been instrumental in the preservation of mammals once on the verge of extinction. The Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge, Okla.; Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge, Neb.; and the National Bison Range all contribute to preserving remnant populations of the American bison whose numbers had declined from about 60 million in the early 1800's to only 20 in the wild by 1900. Estimates presently place the population of bison at 30,000 on the North American Continent.

The sea otter, also near extinction at the turn of the century, has benefited from protection afforded on the Aleutian Islands National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska.

The introduction of the muskox to Nunivak Island National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska has resulted in a well established herd, from which transplants have been made to other parts of its former range.

The Refuge System contains 600,000 acres of wilderness on 36 refuges in 17 States. Approximately 100 species of mammals are found on those lands designated as wilderness. Since wilderness designation limits many options for habitat manipulation, those mammals requiring isolation and an undisturbed environment are benefited.

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The 163,000 acres of lands under farming practices on 131 refuges provide food and cover for a number of species of mammals. Waste grain crops produced and harvested annually increase food availability for smaller mammals such as mice, shrews, rabbits, and squirrels. Grain, such as corn or wheat, left standing over winter provides a supplemental food source for deer, pheasants, grouse, and other wildlife.

The nearly 3 million acres of grasslands on 150 refuges provide habitat for many species of mammals. Management of the grasslands is done primarily for the benefit of migratory waterfowl, and has both positive and negative effects on mammals. The approximately 90,000 acres seeded to dense nesting cover for waterfowl in the Dakotas, Minnesota, and Nebraska also provide habitats for rabbits and deer. With the increase in prey species, predators such as the skunk, fox, and coyote also show a corresponding increase.

Prescribed burning, done on 15,000 acres of grasslands on 30 refuges annually, causes a temporary displacement of mammals until revegetation occurs. On a long range basis this management practice revitalizes the habitat and greatly benefits wildlife.

The 2.5 million acres of refuge forest lands under active forest management practices on 65 refuges annually benefit most forest-dwelling mammals by creating openings in the forest cover which in turn, encourages a greater diversity and variety of food sources. Many mammals are found on refuges within these forests and brushlands and although the exact number of species is unknown, it is estimated by scientists to exceed 100.

Intensive water management practices applied on 850,000 acres on 276 refuges within the system provide a variety of habitat for many species of aquatic mammals, such as muskrat, beaver, river otter, and mink. Water development projects range from the massive network of dikes on the Bear River Refuge in Utah, to the small concrete catch basins on the Desert National Wildlife Range in Nevada. The extensive marshes at Bear River, while primarily for the benefit of waterfowl, also provide habitat for large populations of muskrats. The small concrete basins, commonly called "guzzlers," at the Desert Range provide a critical water supply for desert bighorn sheep by conserving water from infrequent rains.

Providing supplemental food through artificial feeding programs on a national wildlife refuge is generally reserved for emergency use and is not a common practice except at the National Elk Refuge in Wyoming. Approximately 1,600 tons of supplemental feed are provided each winter to augment the refuge's limited supply of natural forage. This historic wintering range has been largely destroyed through private development and subsequent change in land use. The feeding program has been instrumental in preserving one of the largest migratory elk herds in the world.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: This is one of a series of three news releases based on the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's recently released draft environmental statement, Operation of the National Wildlife Refuge System--an in-depth examination of the system as it exists today.