

Lower Suwannee

National Wildlife Refuge



photo: USFWS



photo: Ken Litzzenberger



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Refuge Facts

- Established: 1979.
- Acres: 52,998 (fee ownership of 51,104 acres and Management Agreements on 1,831 acres).
- Located in Dixie and Levy counties, Florida.
- Location: The refuge headquarters is located 14 miles southeast of Chiefland, FL, just off of County Road 347 (1.5 miles south of Fowlers Bluff). The refuge can also be accessed from Dixie County Road 349, 10 miles south of Old Town, or from Dixie County Road 357, 14 miles south of Cross City.
- Administers Cedar Keys NWR as part of complex.

Natural History

- Refuge occupies lands along the lower reaches of Suwannee River, beginning at Yellow Jacket and continuing for 20 miles until the River flows into the Gulf of Mexico.
- From the mouth of the river, the refuge stretches along the Gulf of Mexico for 10 miles northward almost to Horseshoe Beach, and Southward to Cedar Key.
- Comprises and protects 36,000 acres of wetlands and 16,000 acres of uplands.
- Important habitat for wading and shore birds, migratory song birds, bald eagles, ospreys and swallow-tailed kites.

Financial Impact of Refuge

- 13-person staff.
- 165,000 visitors annually.

Refuge Goals

- Expand scientifically-based monitoring and research to support management decision on wildlife habitat and populations.

- Restore, conserve, and enhance the natural diversity, abundance, and ecological function of refuge habitat, with an emphasis on managing habitat to benefit threatened and endangered species and those of special concern in the State of Florida.
- Protect refuge natural and cultural resources to ensure their integrity and to fulfill the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System.
- Provide opportunities for environmental education, interpretation and wildlife-dependent recreation in accordance with the National Wildlife Refuge System Act of 1997.
- Promote interagency and private landowner cooperation and partnerships for the management and protection of natural and cultural resources within the Big Bend area of Florida, the Suwannee River Basin, and the North Florida Ecosystem to benefit wildlife, water quality and quantity, and the American people.

Management Tools

- Forest management including commercial sale of timber products.
- Prescribed fire to improve wildlife habitat and protect against wildfire outbreaks.
- Deer and feral hog management through public hunting.
- Education/Interpretation.
- Law enforcement.
- Partnerships.

Public Use Opportunities

- Fifty miles of roads open to public vehicle traffic.
- Fifty miles of secondary woods roads for foot and bike traffic.
- Walking trails and interpretive bicycle and auto trail.

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- Boardwalks, observation towers and fishing piers.
- Wildlife/wildlands observation and photography.
- Breathtaking vistas.
- Hunting.
- Saltwater and freshwater fishing.
- One and three hour canoe trails near the mouth of the Suwannee River. Canoeing and sea kayaking on other coastal creeks.

Calendar of Events

January: Good time for viewing wintering waterfowl in coastal areas, small game hunting.

February: Peak of Bald Eagle nesting, ospreys begin nesting, night hunting for raccoons.

March: Swallow-tailed kites return to nest on the refuge, spring bird migration begins, wild turkey hunting opens.

April: Peak of spring migration, Cedar Keys Arts Festival - third weekend in April, annually, wild turkey hunting season continues.

May: International Migratory Bird Day, peak of breeding bird activity.

June - August: Great time to explore the river and coastal areas by boat.

August 15 - September 15: Peak of Fall Migration for shore birds.

September: Archery deer hunting.

October: National Wildlife Refuge Week, Open House at Seahorse Key Lighthouse, Cedar Keys Seafood Festival, nine-day muzzleloader deer hunt.

November: General gun deer hunt.

December: Audubon Christmas Bird Count.

Questions and Answers

Is the refuge open to the public?

Generally, the refuge is open for wildlife-dependent recreation. Please call ahead or consult refuge brochures for specific issues, like hunting or fishing.

Is there hunting presently going on, if so is it safe to visit?

There are areas with walking trails that remain closed to hunting all year. These include the river trail that provides a view of the beautiful Suwannee River and the Shell Mound with bank fishing, walking trails, and breath-taking vistas of the gulf coast.

We like to drive around and look at wildlife, do the gates close at night?

No, the gates do not close at night. You are welcome to drive through or night fish. Camping, fires and the use of spotlights are not permitted.

We are looking for a place to camp while visiting the area and refuge. Is there a place to camp?

Camping is not permitted on the refuge. There are several private campgrounds in both Levy and Dixie counties near the refuge that you can stay at for a reasonable fee. In addition Levy County operates a campground within the refuge at Shell Mound, and Dixie County operates a campground within the refuge at Shired Island. Both are open on a first come basis and a small fee is charged.

What is needed to hunt on the refuge?

The refuge provides both quota and nonquota hunts. Requirements for the non-quota hunts will not change from previous years. All hunts except for an either sex deer hunt and a youth hunt will be open to all applicants. A free refuge brochure that contains the season dates, information, regulations, a map and hunting permit is required for non-quota hunts and is available at refuge headquarters. Applications for the quota youth and either sex hunts must be received by the refuge office between August 15 and September 15. The selected applicants will be notified and a cost of \$12.50 assessed for each permit.

Are there bicycle trails on the refuge?

There are fifty miles of improved limerock roads open to both auto and bicycle traffic. Additionally, there are fifty miles of gated roads that are open only to foot or bike traffic. In Dixie County, there is a nine-mile interpretive auto and bicycle trail which connects County Roads 349 and 357, called the Dixie Mainline Trail. The trail passes through upland pines, bottomland hardwoods, cypress sloughs, hardwood hammocks, and crosses tidally-influenced creeks. Trail guides are available at either end of the trail or from the refuge office.