

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Clarks River

National Wildlife Refuge



USFWS/Andy Eller

Unmatched anywhere in the world, the National Wildlife Refuge System is an extensive network of lands and waters protected and managed especially for wildlife and its habitat. This unique system encompasses over 100 million acres of lands and waters from north of the Arctic Circle in Alaska to the subtropical waters of the Florida Keys and beyond to the Caribbean and South Pacific. The National Wildlife Refuge System is managed by the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which manages and protects over 540 refuges for the benefit of both wildlife and present and future generations of Americans. The lands managed as the Clarks River National Wildlife Refuge are a part of this system.

Clarks River National Wildlife Refuge



This blue goose, puddles, designed by J.N. "Ding" Darling, has become the symbol of the National Wildlife Refuge System. J.N "Ding" Darling was the Director of the Service from 1934-1935.

Clarks River National Wildlife Refuge is a beautiful bottomland hardwood forest located in western Kentucky. The refuge lies along the east fork of the Clarks River and is a seasonal home to over 200 different species of birds. The refuge currently consists of 8,500 acres and is the only refuge located solely within the bounds of the Commonwealth of Kentucky. The city of Benton, Kentucky can be found near the southeastern end of the refuge, and the city of Paducah, Kentucky is situated near the refuge's northwestern boundary.

The U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Bottomland Hardwood Preservation Program first identified the present-day Clarks River National Wildlife Refuge as a high priority site for protection in 1978. In 1991, the Kentucky Department of Fish

and Wildlife Resources asked the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service to consider the site for protection as a unit of the National Wildlife Refuge System. The Refuge was established in July of 1997 under the Emergency

Wetland Resources Act of 1986, with a proposed acquisition boundary of 18,000 acres. The first tract of land was purchased in August of 1998.

Refuge Habitat

The Clarks River rises in Tennessee and flows north through Kentucky before reaching the Tennessee River at Paducah. It meanders for 40 miles through the refuge, descends 85 feet or approximately two feet per river mile, and is slow-moving due to low topography and flat floodplains. Localized flooding for short periods is common, as moderate rains often



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photos:
USFWS/Clarks River

cause the streams to flood over their banks. The Clarks River is special because it is one of the few in this region that has not been dammed or channelized.

The most significant resources of Clarks River NWR are the wetland habitat complexes formed by the river, creeks, beaver ponds and natural ponding in the area. These bottomland hardwood forests are extremely diverse and especially valuable in terms of providing wildlife habitat, preventing soil erosion, and protecting water quality. Bottomlands flood anywhere from several inches to several feet seasonally. This typically occurs in winter and spring months.

On Clarks River NWR, the bottomland hardwood forests are composed of overcup oak, pin oak, bald cypress, and maple trees. Slightly higher, better drained areas are covered with willow oak, swamp chestnut oak, red oak, sweet gum, sycamore, ash, and elm.

Bottomland forests have declined significantly throughout the past century due to human influences. Only a small percentage of these habitats still exist today, making places like Clarks River NWR even more vital for species that are dependent on these habitats.

Managing for Wildlife

The primary management objectives of the Clarks River NWR are to provide habitat for a diverse group of wildlife species associated with the Clarks River and its floodplain while providing the public opportunities for wildlife-dependent recreation.

Water birds – Levees and water control structures are used on the refuge to impound water on standing crop fields or managed moist soil areas in order to provide wintering



habitat for migratory waterfowl. Water management typically occurs in late summer to early fall, in preparation for waterfowl migration. This type of management also provides habitat for other water birds such as wading birds and shore birds.

Songbirds – Since 2003, Clarks River NWR has been involved in an important migratory songbird research project, the MAPS (Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survivorship) program. During the summer breeding season, a banding station is operated where songbirds are captured by means of a fine gauge mist net, banded with a small numbered leg band, and released. Data such as age, sex, and condition are recorded for each captured bird to determine their status, movement, and productivity. The results of this monitoring effort helps determine population trends in many species of migratory songbirds, a great number of which are declining.

A small portion of the Refuge is also managed in native warm season grasses for songbirds associated with early successional habitats. Native warm season grass habitat, made up of species such as big bluestem, little bluestem, and switchgrass, is maintained by prescribed burning or mowing.



Cooperative Farming – The Refuge also participates in a program where farmers plant crops in a share system. In return for using Refuge land for agriculture, farmers are required to leave a percentage of their crops for wildlife. This provides a supplement to the natural foods provided on the refuge that helps replenish energy reserves of migrating waterfowl during stopover. Many other species of wildlife benefit from this practice as well.



Wildlife

Migratory Waterfowl – Arriving in early autumn and usually peaking in late December, many species of migratory waterfowl such as mallards, wood duck, gadwall, wigeon, pintail, and teal utilize Clarks River Refuge as winter habitat. An autumn visit to the Refuge can be an

extraordinary event revealing both the remarkable species of migratory waterfowl and the beautiful colors of fall leaves!

Ray Stainfield



Migratory Songbirds– Neotropical songbirds spend approximately six months a year wintering in Central and South America and the remaining months on breeding grounds in North America’s temperate regions.

Over 200 species of neotropical songbirds can be found at Clarks River Refuge. Species such as the increasingly rare cerulean warbler, the Swainson’s warbler and the prothonotary warbler are three of the five birds on the Service’s list of highest priority neotropical migratory bird species. All of these species are dependent on forested wetlands, and each can be found in the area. Other neotropical songbirds, such as summer and scarlet tanagers, Kentucky warblers, indigo buntings and Acadian flycatchers, utilize the refuge for breeding and migration habitat. Because of protected lands like the Clarks River NWR, the music and beauty of the songbirds can still be heard.





Andy Eller



Other Wildlife – Clarks River NWR is also home to a wide variety of upland game species, small mammals, reptiles, amphibians and fish. Some of the more commonly seen wildlife includes white-tailed deer, raccoons, beavers, and squirrels. A closer look, however, reveals many of the more inconspicuous

species of mammals such as mink, mice, rabbits and coyotes that can be easily overlooked.

Ray Stainfield



Wildflowers - A walk through the Refuge during spring, summer and fall months can be a delightful experience because of the flowers in bloom. Well over 200 different species of wildflowers have been documented on the Refuge. Species on that list include Indian pink, white trout lily, several varieties of milkweeds, and several varieties of phlox.

During the warm summer months, the Refuge's wet areas provide wonderful habitat for many frogs, salamanders and snakes. The calls of different frogs can serve as a

different, yet fascinating, new type of music to the ears. The summer months also provide wonderful habitat for insects including ticks, mosquitoes and chiggers. Remember to bring bug spray to avoid contact with these insects.

Andy Eller





Enjoy the Refuge

The Refuge has an Environmental Education and Recreation Area on Highway 408 west of Benton, Kentucky. There is no entrance fee, and the area is open seven days a week for daylight use. The area includes a three-acre, handicap accessible fishing pond with a paved perimeter trail and parking area. The Environmental Education and Recreation Area also includes over two miles of hiking trails that wind around the pond, along an abandoned railroad grade, past a bottomland hardwood forest restoration site, past managed wetlands, and through native grasslands. Each of these sites will attract different types of wildlife as they mature. This area is a showcase of refuge management techniques, and provides a convenient place to enjoy the outdoors.

The Refuge Headquarters is currently located on Hwy 641 between Benton, Kentucky and Draffenville, Kentucky. Please contact the Refuge Headquarters periodically to determine if additional facilities or trails have been developed.



Wildlife Observation/Photography
 – Wildlife is plentiful throughout the Refuge and is easily observed. Vehicles are allowed on designated roads only. Foot traffic is permitted year around throughout the Refuge, except for seasonally closed areas. A bird list can be obtained by contacting the Refuge Headquarters.



Fishing – Most of the Refuge’s waters are open year-round for fishing. Some areas may be closed seasonally to provide sanctuary for waterfowl and other wildlife. A public fishing lake has been developed at the Environmental Education and Recreation Area just outside the city limits of Benton, Kentucky along Hwy 408 and is available to the public

daily. The waters associated with this three-acre lake are handicap accessible. Fish species one could expect to catch are catfish, bass and bluegill. More information is available in a fishing regulations brochure at the Refuge Headquarters.



Michael Johnson



Hiking – Hiking/walking trails are being developed as suitable locations are identified. A nice area is located off of Sharp Elva Road at the northern end of the Refuge. One of the most popular locations currently available is located at the Environmental Education and Recreation Area off of Highway 408 just outside the city of Benton, Kentucky. This area includes over two miles of trails. Some of the trails may be closed seasonally, so call before visiting.



Jason Bayer



Hunting – The Refuge is open to hunting waterfowl, white-tailed deer, turkey and small game during designated seasons. A permit is required and can be obtained by contacting the Refuge Headquarters.



Environmental Education -

Environmental education is an important objective of the refuge. Therefore, an on-refuge site is located just east of Benton, Kentucky on Highway 408. There is no entrance fee, and the area is open seven days a week for daylight use.

Special activities and programs for schools and other groups are conducted, as possible, to promote environmental awareness and wildlife conservation. For more information, please contact the Refuge Headquarters.



Ray Stainfield

Wildlife Viewing Tips

Dawn and dusk are the best times to see wildlife. Observe from the sidelines. Leave all “abandoned” young animals alone. The parent is probably close by waiting for you to leave. Don’t offer snacks, it disrupts their digestive systems and leads to other undesirable issues; therefore feeding of wildlife is prohibited.

Cars make good observation blinds. Drive slowly and stop to scan places where wildlife may be taking cover. Use binoculars or a long lens for a closer look.

photos:

USFWS/Clarks River

Try sitting quietly in one good location. Allow hiding wildlife to get used to your presence. Many animals that appear hidden will reappear once they think you are gone. Walk quietly in designated areas, and be aware of sounds and smells. Often you will hear more than you will see.

Teach children quiet observation, they are more likely to be successful and other wildlife watchers will appreciate your consideration.

Look for animal signs. Tracks, scat, feathers, and nests often tell interesting stories.

Refuge Regulations

Refuge signs define refuge boundaries. "Area closed" signs are erected to minimize disturbance to waterfowl or other wildlife and for public safety.

Pets on a leash are permitted.

Bicycling is permitted on established roads during daylight hours.

Horseback riding permitted only on improved access routes.

Firearms are permitted on the refuge only during authorized hunting seasons.

Searching for and removal of objects of antiquity is prohibited.

Disturbing or feeding wildlife and collecting plants is strictly prohibited.

Camping is prohibited.

Open fires are prohibited.

ATV's are prohibited.

Use of artificial lights, including vehicle lights, to observe wildlife is prohibited.



Directions

Getting There . . . Headquarters -

From I-24...take exit 25, south on Purchase Parkway. Take exit 43 off the Purchase Parkway, go right (east) on Hwy 348. Take Hwy 641 north and go 1.2 miles to Refuge Headquarters at 91 U.S. Hwy 641 North.

Headquarters is open Monday – Friday from 7:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Telephone number is 270-527-5770. Visit us on the web at www.fws.gov/clarksriver.

Environmental Education and Recreation Area –

From I-24... take exit 25, south on Purchase Parkway. Take exit 43 off the Purchase Parkway, go right (east) on Hwy 348. Take Hwy 641 south and go approximately half a mile then turn left onto Hwy 408 east. Go approximately 1 mile to the EERA (on the left).

Sharp Elva Area - From I-24...take exit 25, south on Purchase Parkway Take exit 43 off the Purchase Parkway go left (west) on Hwy 348 west. Go 7.3 miles to Oak Level/Elva Road (look for signs that say Jct. 1490 and Elva Missionary Baptist Church). Turn right. Go 1.8 miles, turn right onto Minter Road. Go 0.2 mile turn left onto Barnes Road. Go 0.2 mile turn right onto Sharpe/Elva Road. Go 0.2 to yellow gate on east side of road.

Wildlife Calendar

January

- Migrating Eagle numbers peak
- White-tail bucks begin to shed antlers

February

- Screech owls start calling
- Skunks search for mates
- Chorus frogs start singing and warm rains bring out peepers and spotted salamanders, mid month

March

- Killdeer nesting late March – mid May
- Turkeys begin gobbling
- Garter snakes start emerging on warm, sunny days

April

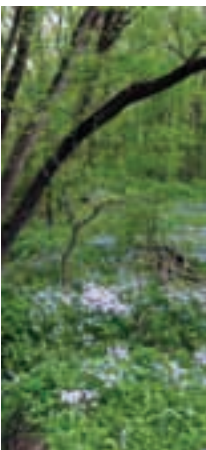
- Migrant songbirds begin to reappear locally
- Wild turkey nesting late April – mid May
- Flowering dogwoods bloom late April through May

May

- Quail nesting begins
- Indian Pink blooms May – June.
- Ruby-throated hummingbird nesting mid May – early June
- Raccoons are born

photos:

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June

- Peak of wild turkey hatches
- Butterfly milkweed blooms
June - August Peak white-tailed deer fawning occurs



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July

- American goldfinch breeding late July – mid August
- Peak of quail hatch
- Cardinal flower blooms July - September

August

- Whitetail bucks molt to winter coat mid – late August
- Gray squirrel birthing peaks
- Migrant songbirds begin staging for southward migration

September

- Monarch butterflies migrating
- Whitetail fawns lose spots early – mid September
- Whitetail bucks lose antler velvet late September – mid October
- Teal migrating



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October

- Whitetail buck rutting late October – mid November

- Snakes begin moving to hibernation sites

- Fall color peaks around third week of month

November

- Groundhogs begin hibernating
- Persimmons become ripe after the first hard frost.
- Sandhill cranes can be seen migrating

December

- Fox and squirrel breeding begins
- Hibernating colonies of Indiana bats reach their peak numbers



Volunteers

The refuge offers a wide variety of volunteer opportunities and we are always happy to have help. To receive more information and an application form, contact Refuge Headquarters.

Friends of Clarks River National Wildlife Refuge

The Friends of Clarks River NWR is a nonprofit group formed to give assistance and support to the Refuge. They help with various projects and educational programs. To obtain more information or a membership form, contact Refuge Headquarters at 270-527-5770 or go to www.friendsofclarksriver.org.



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**U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
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