

Big Lake

National Wildlife Refuge



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Refuge Facts

- Established: 1915.
- Acres: 11,038.
- Located in Mississippi County, AR, 18 miles west of the Mississippi River.
- Other management: conservation easement—one in Green County; fee title tracts—two in three counties totaling 151 acres. Wilderness area of 2,100 acres. National Natural Landmark of 5,000 acres.
- Location: the refuge is located on Highway 18, two miles east of Manila.

Natural History

- Refuge was once a portion of the Mississippi River, but now the Little River flows through it.
- The New Madrid earthquakes of 1811-12 created the characteristics that made Big Lake a hunting and angling paradise. An extensive network of man-made ditches in the Missouri Bootheel drains approximately 2,000 square miles of farmland directly through the refuge detrimentally affecting the area.
- Concentrations of wintering and migrating ducks, shorebirds, and wading birds.
- Bald eagle and osprey nests.
- Swamp 5,250 acres; open water 2,600 acres; bottomland hardwoods; 2,159 acres; marsh 300 acres; moist soil plants 250 acres; cropland 42 acres; levees, roads, and administrative areas 437 acres.

Financial Impact of Refuge

- Two-person staff.
- 50,000 visitors annually.

Refuge Objectives

- Provide high quality, diverse habitats for migrating and wintering waterfowl, shorebirds, wading birds, other migratory birds, and other native species of fish and wildlife.
- Provide nesting and brood-rearing habitat for wood ducks.
- Protect habitat for endangered species.
- Provide compatible hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, environmental education, and interpretation opportunities for the public.

Management Tools

- Water management for waterfowl, marsh and water birds, and shorebirds.
- Forest management for neotropical birds.
- Moist-soil, crop, and marsh habitat management for wildlife.
- Providing waterfowl sanctuary area.
- Law enforcement.
- Conservation partnerships.
- Commercial fishing for rough fish.
- Control of nuisance beavers and feral hogs.
- Wilderness stewardship.

Public Use Opportunities

- Wildlife drive.
- Observation points.
- Hunting.
- Fishing.
- Universally accessible fishing pier.
- Wildlife observation and photography.
- Education/interpretation.
- Bright's Landing Interpretive hiking trail.

- Boat access to Big Lake.
- Hiking trails.

Calendar of Events

March-October: fishing.

April-October: frogging.

May: Peak warbler migrations, International Migratory Bird Day.

June: National Fishing Week.

September-December: squirrel/ rabbit hunting.

October: National Wildlife Refuge Week.

November-December: raccoon/ opossum hunting.

November-January: peak waterfowl numbers

November-January: archery deer hunting.

Questions and Answers

When does the fishing season open/ close?

The lake opens to the public on March 1 and closes on October 31.

When does the hunting season open?

Squirrel/Rabbit: September 1 - December 31

Raccoon/opossum: November 31 - December 31.

Deer (archery): November 1 - January 31.

Why is the lake so muddy?

Big Lake is part of an extensive drainage/flood control project which extends well into the bootheel of Missouri. Water from approximately 2000 square miles of intensively farmed land enters the refuge through a number of large manmade ditches. Significant rainfall events cause the watershed to reach the refuge within 24 hours.

Unfortunately, this fast moving water carries excessive amounts of trash, debris, and while there are facilities in place to prevent trash and debris from entering the refuge, the refuge still receives enormous amounts of silt every year contributing to the muddy conditions frequently found on Big Lake.

Unfortunately, the majority of the silt does not leave the refuge, it merely settles out on the bottom, where it can be stirred up by wind action. The most significant aspect of this siltation is a rapid filling of the lake that impairs the growth of aquatic vegetation important to fish and wildlife resources and degrades the natural character of the Big Lake Wilderness.

Do you allow waterfowl hunting?

No waterfowl hunting is permitted on Big Lake National Wildlife Refuge. For information on waterfowl hunting on the adjacent Big Lake Wildlife Management Area, contact the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission at 877/972 5438.

Why do you lower the lake levels during the summer?

The summer drawdown on Big Lake is a management tool designed to stimulate aquatic vegetation, and compact sediments in the shallow portions of the lake. Drawdowns begin in mid-July when the water is lowered until the maximum drawdown (approximately 1.5 feet) is reached. Water levels are held at this until mid-October when they are slowly raised until the maximum pool elevation is reached. Contrary to public perception this practice actually benefits the fish resources in the lake in a number of ways, including increasing the available food during the summer months, and improving spawning habitat. The resulting benefits for waterfowl are tremendous. The aquatic vegetation provides an abundance of natural foods for wintering concentrations of ducks and geese.

Do you allow camping?

Camping is not allowed on the refuge.