

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

# Red Rock Lakes

## *National Wildlife Refuge*

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April 2013



Trumpeter swans  
© W. Steve Sherman



View of Red Rock Lakes Refuge  
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*There are few places where the only sounds you hear in the still of a moonlit night are calls of trumpeter swans flying overhead. Or, where you might witness at the break of day a bull moose appearing out of the early morning mist. This is a place where creeks flow freely, wildlife thrives, and a soul can get lost in solitude and wildness. This is your national wildlife refuge.*

## A Quiet Retreat for Wildlife and People



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

Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) lies in the eastern end of the relatively wild and undeveloped Centennial Valley near the headwaters of the Missouri River. This 50,775-acre Refuge was established in 1935 as a breeding ground for wild birds and animals with a special emphasis on protecting the rare trumpeter swan. Annual spring runoff from the surrounding mountains replenishes the Refuge's 16,500 acres of lakes and marshes providing some of the most important wetlands and swan breeding habitat in the Rocky Mountains.

Over the years, the trumpeter swan population has rebounded. Today, in addition to conserving "species of concern" like the trumpeter swan, Refuge management works with partners to protect the larger landscape needed for providing travel corridors and near pristine habitat for far-ranging wildlife such as wolves, grizzly bears, waterfowl, elk, and moose.

The Refuge includes 32,000 acres of designated Wilderness and is registered as a National Natural Landmark. These lands are managed to retain as much of the wilderness character as possible. Likewise, public use is managed to provide visitors the rare opportunity to experience isolation and solitude.

Red Rock Lakes NWR is one of more than 560 refuges in the National Wildlife Refuge System – a network of public lands set aside specifically for wildlife. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service manages these lands to conserve wildlife and their habitat for people today and for generations to come.

## Early Valley Visitors

The Centennial Valley was occupied by people as far back as 10,500 years ago. More recently (500 AD to 1800 AD), the area was well known to various tribes such as the Bannock, Blackfoot, and Shoshone Indians. Trapper Osborne Russell, in the mid-1800s, followed the Indians' well-worn trails through the valley and found many bison and signs of indigenous people. Settlement by European immigrants did not occur until 1876. With settlement, herds of livestock were driven into the valley, and homesteads sprang up in scattered locations.

*The Buck Ranch was one of the several ranches that operated in the valley in the early 1900s.*



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In the early days, market hunting for waterfowl and big game brought some revenue to local residents, but most settlers concentrated on livestock and sporadic lumbering. The long winters, great distances to market, and small land parcels combined to make subsistence difficult. Few survived the depression of the 1930s. Visitors can still see old homestead buildings on the Refuge today.

## Return of the Trumpeters

Trumpeter swans once ranged over much of the interior of the United States, but their numbers decreased as they were shot for their plume feathers and as their habitat disappeared. By the early 1900s, only a remnant population was left in parts of Canada and Alaska, as well as in the Greater Yellowstone Area (GYA). The GYA is comprised of southwestern Montana, southeastern Idaho, and northwestern Wyoming. Less than 100 swans were in the GYA in 1935, when the Refuge was established. The Refuge provided protection and seclusion, and swan populations increased. Their slow, steady growth continued in the GYA until the nesting population peaked in the early 1960s.



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*Nuttall's sunflower*



*The once depleted populations of trumpeter swans are now increasing in number and have been reestablished in their former ranges.*

Current trumpeter swan summer populations for the GYA average about 450 birds. This population grows to approximately 4,500 trumpeter swans during fall as migrating birds arrive from Canada. Most swans winter in the nearby Madison River Valley, at Ennis Lake, along the Henry's Fork River, and in other areas in southeast Idaho and southwest Wyoming.

During the winter, the birds are limited to the confines of the open water on the Refuge and elsewhere within the GYA. In earlier years, wildlife managers believed that naturally available foods were insufficient to maintain the growing population. As a result, grain was provided for the swans at MacDonald and Culver Ponds during the winter. Wintering swan numbers increased and became crowded enough on the small Refuge ponds to raise concern for the potential spread of diseases. In 1992, biologists throughout the traditional swan migration route agreed that the birds should be encouraged to migrate to areas with larger natural bodies of open water. Consequently, the feeding program was discontinued.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service successfully moved swans from the Refuge to repopulate their former habitats in other areas. As a result, states such as South Dakota, Minnesota, Nevada, and Oregon have reestablished wild flocks of trumpeters. These and other restoration efforts mean that the haunting call of the trumpeter swan can again be heard in all four of the North American migratory bird flyways – the Pacific, Central, Mississippi, and Atlantic flyways.

## Refuge Wildlife Throughout the Seasons

The diverse habitats of the Refuge attract a variety of wildlife species throughout the year. Each spring, greater sandhill cranes nest in the Refuge meadows and marshes. These long-legged birds are most easily observed in the open areas near Upper Red Rock Lake from April through September. Their courtship display and dance takes place in April and May. Great blue herons, willets, avocets, and long-billed curlews are other conspicuous waders and shorebirds that nest on the Refuge.

The Refuge's lakes, marshes, and creeks provide attractive habitats for a multitude of ducks and geese. Eighteen species of waterfowl, including lesser scaup, raise their young here each year. In October and November, thousands of ducks and geese congregate on the Refuge before their southward migration. Thousands of trumpeter and tundra swans often make their appearance on the Refuge in late October.

The timber-covered slopes and aspen stands on the south side of the Refuge are attractive to raptors, many different songbirds, and dusky and ruffed grouse. Brewer's sparrows are among the more common sagebrush residents.

*Moose can be found on the Refuge at any time of the year.*



Moose are year-round residents, but most of the elk, deer, and pronghorn migrate out of the Centennial Valley in the winter due to the severe weather. Refuge visitors will encounter other familiar mammals such as red fox, badger, coyote, and Wyoming ground squirrel.

## Enjoy Your Visit

Feel free to enjoy recreational activities such as fishing, hunting, wildlife observation, photography, hiking, and camping at Red Rock Lakes NWR. The best time to visit the Refuge for most activities is from May through September.

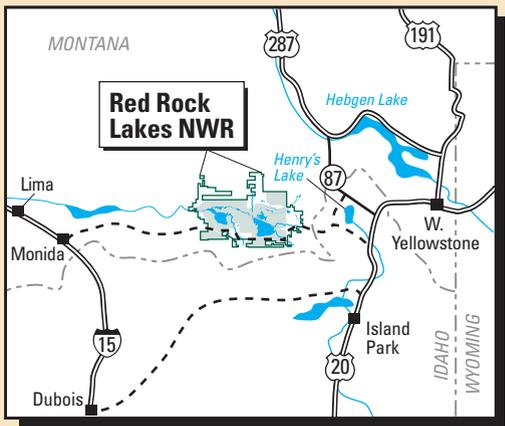
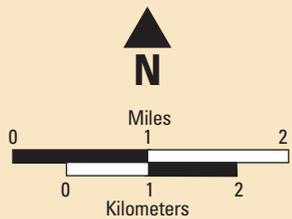
To preserve the wilderness explorer spirit, there are few hiking trails. Instead, nature provides many routes created by big game animals. You are welcome to cross-country hike throughout open areas of the Refuge, or follow big game routes, and see the Refuge from the wildlife's point of view.

Animals are best seen during morning and evening hours. Visitors are encouraged to learn the habitats and behavior of specific animals, such as moose foraging on willows, badgers digging holes in grasslands, and falcons swooping on concentrations of shorebirds. This is your key to successful wildlife viewing on the primitive, undeveloped landscape of the Refuge where artificial facilities have been minimized, and wildlife is on the move.

*Wildflowers abound on the Refuge from late spring into the summer.*



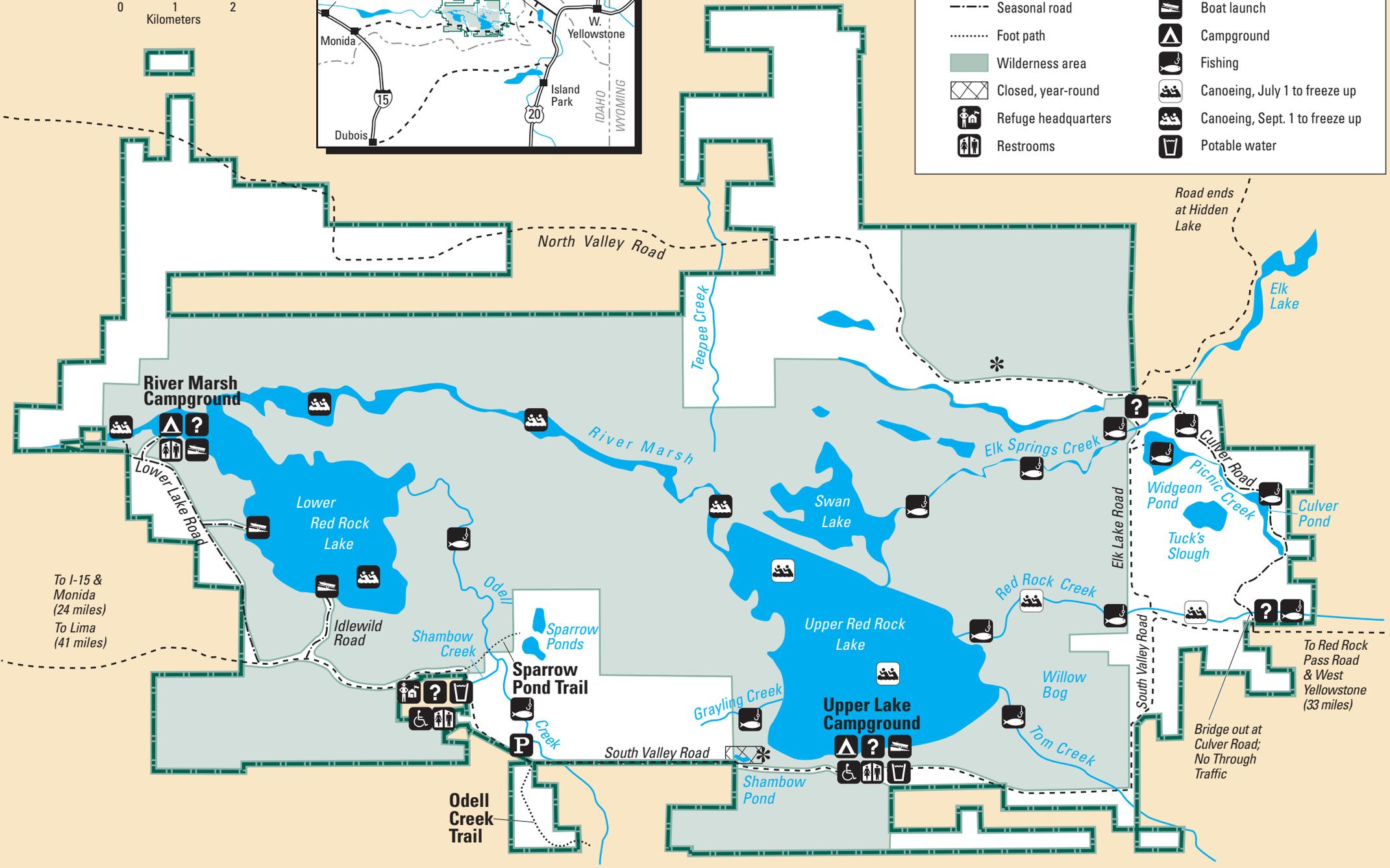
Beginning in May, look for a myriad of wildflowers starting to appear on the Refuge. By July, the Refuge becomes a wildflower paradise. Shooting stars, buttercups, sticky geranium, and Indian paintbrush color the grasslands and mountainsides in hues of reds, pinks, blues, and yellows.



### Red Rock Lakes

*National Wildlife Refuge*

- Refuge boundary
- Gravel road (county road)
- Seasonal road
- Foot path
- Wilderness area
- Closed, year-round
- Refuge headquarters
- Restrooms
- Accessible restrooms
- Parking
- Information
- Point of interest
- Boat launch
- Campground
- Fishing
- Canoeing, July 1 to freeze up
- Canoeing, Sept. 1 to freeze up
- Potable water



To I-15 & Monida (24 miles)  
To Lima (41 miles)

## To Protect You and the Refuge

Staff are available at the Refuge headquarters and visitor contact station during weekdays from 8:00 am to 4:30 pm to help you get oriented, answer questions, or provide more information.

Be prepared for cool summer temperatures, frigid winters, and sudden rain or snow storms during any season. Mosquitoes are abundant from late spring through late summer.

Wildlife observation, hiking, and photography are permitted except in areas designated as closed for the protection of swans and other sensitive wildlife. Trumpeter swans are extremely sensitive to disturbance and may abandon nests or young. Please do not approach nesting swans.



Hikers exploring the Refuge along Sparrow Pond Trail may see moose, swans and other waterfowl, cranes, and badgers. On the Odell Creek Trail, hikers walk through forested habitat and can access the Continental Divide Trail. Hikers do not need to remain on trails. However, as you explore the Refuge, be prepared for sudden encounters with moose or other thrilling, but potentially dangerous wildlife. Give wildlife plenty of space.



All pets must be under direct control of the owner or leashed. Hunting dogs being used during the appropriate waterfowl hunting seasons must be under the owner's immediate control at all times.



Horses may not be used to hunt, but may be ridden through the Refuge for access into mountainous areas south of South Valley Road and for retrieval of big game in areas open to hunting. Feed must be certified weed-free. Horses are prohibited in campgrounds.



Cross-country skiing and snowshoeing are permitted on the Refuge. To preserve the wilderness setting, there are no trails for these activities. Visitors should stay at least one-quarter of a mile away from animals when skiing or snowshoeing to avoid causing stress to wintering wildlife.

### *Help Preserve Wildlife Habitats- Follow Road Restrictions*

Cross country or off-road travel by motorized or mechanized vehicles is not permitted. All vehicles, including bicycles, are restricted to maintained Refuge roads and parking areas.

All Refuge roads open to wheeled vehicles will be open from May 15 to December 2. An exception is Widgeon Pond Road, which may not be open until July 15 to minimize disturbance if swans are nesting. All roads may be closed at anytime due to weather conditions.

To operate on public roads in and around the Refuge, Montana State law requires that all-terrain vehicles (ATV's) or motorcycles be "street legal" (equipped with license plate, lights, and horn). ATV operators must have a driver's license, or if under 16 years of age, a certificate. Motorcycle operators must have a motorcycle endorsement on their driver's license. Operators and passengers under 18 years of age must wear a helmet. These requirements are necessary to help ensure your safety and that of people around you.



Bicycles are permitted only on Refuge roads open to motorized vehicles. To minimize disturbance to wildlife and to preserve wilderness values, bicycles are not permitted on hiking trails.



Snowmobiles are not permitted on the Refuge. However, they are allowed to travel through the Refuge on unplowed county roads (South Valley, North Valley, and Elk Lake Roads) identified by fences or fence posts protruding above the snow. Snowmobiles must possess a valid registration decal as required by Montana State Law.

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*Help prevent the spread of spotted knapweed.*

Gasoline is not available locally, but can be purchased in West Yellowstone or Lima, Montana. To avoid being stranded, you should have enough gasoline for at least a 100-mile round trip. Please consider washing the undercarriage

of your vehicle prior to visiting the Refuge. This will help to reduce the spread of noxious weeds.



All of the historical, archeological, and natural resources on the Refuge are protected. Artifact collection is not allowed. Also, please do not pick flowers or other vegetation so that future visitors will enjoy them as you have.

### *Increase Wildlife Viewing Opportunities by Staying Overnight*



Camping is permitted ONLY at the Upper Lake and River Marsh Campgrounds for a maximum of 16 consecutive days. Fire grates, toilets, and tables are available at both campgrounds; potable spring water is only available at the Upper Lake Campground. Your camping fees are used to maintain the campgrounds. Please follow regulations posted at each campground.

Fires are permitted only in campground grates. Firewood is not provided; however, dead or downed timber can be collected. Chain saws are prohibited.

To protect you and the bears, please store food, harvested game animals, personal hygiene items, and garbage inside bear resistant containers or in a hard-sided vehicle or camper. Please pack out your trash.

### *Take to the Water*



Boating is limited to canoes, kayaks, rowboats, rafts, and other non-mechanized vessels in designated areas during designated times of the year as shown on the map. Sail boating and windsurfing are not permitted. Onboard, approved flotation devices are required for each occupant of the boat.

Boaters are urged to use caution on Refuge waters as sudden storms, high winds, high waves, cold temperatures, low water levels, and muddy conditions are common. Be aware that waterfowl hunting is allowed in the fall on the Lower Red Rock Lake.

Please stop aquatic hitchhikers! To prevent the spread of nuisance species, clean all recreational equipment. You will be protecting the wetlands and creeks of the headwaters of the Missouri River.



**STOP AQUATIC HITCHHIKERS!**  
Prevent the transport of nuisance species.  
Clean all recreational equipment.  
[www.ProtectYourWaters.net](http://www.ProtectYourWaters.net)

## *Try Your Luck at Fishing*



All Refuge streams are open to fishing in compliance with State regulations. MacDonald, Widgeon, and Culver Ponds will be open to fishing under State regulations, unless it is necessary to close the ponds to protect nesting swans or Arctic grayling restoration efforts. Float tubes and boats of any kind are not allowed on the ponds. Fishing is not permitted in Swan Lake, in Upper and Lower Red Rock Lakes, or in the River Marsh in between the lakes. Swimming is not allowed in Refuge waters.



### **STOP AQUATIC HITCHHIKERS!**

Prevent the transport of nuisance species.  
Clean all recreational equipment.  
Particularly waders/boots.  
[www.ProtectYourWaters.net](http://www.ProtectYourWaters.net)

Artificial lures or flies must be used when fishing Refuge waters open to fishing. In order to minimize injury from hooks and improve the survival of released native fish, fishing with bait is not permitted. To prevent lead poisoning of waterfowl, the use of lead sinkers is prohibited. Whirling disease is present on the Refuge. To help prevent the spread of this disease to other creeks, please clean and thoroughly dry your fishing gear before entering other waters.

## *Hunting is a Popular Sport on the Refuge*



Hunting is permitted in designated areas of the Refuge only for ducks, geese, coots, moose, elk, white-tailed deer, mule deer, and pronghorn during the legal State hunting seasons for these species. Persons possessing, transporting, or carrying firearms on National Wildlife Refuge System lands must comply with all provisions of State and local law. Persons may only use (discharge) firearms in accordance with refuge regulations (50 CFR 27.42 and specific refuge regulations 50 CFR Part 32).

For more information, please refer to the Refuge hunting leaflet available at information kiosks on the Refuge or at the Refuge headquarters.

## **How to Find the Refuge**

The Refuge headquarters can be reached from the west by turning off Interstate Highway 15 at Monida (Exit 0), Montana, and driving 28 miles east over an improved dirt road. If approaching from the east, follow U.S. 20 southwest from West Yellowstone for about 17 miles to Red Rock Pass Road, just south of Henry's Lake River. Turn west onto Red Rock Pass Road. Follow this road for 30 miles (22 miles of dirt road) to reach the Refuge headquarters and visitor contact station.

South Valley Road from Interstate Highway 15 to Lakeview is periodically closed during the winter and is closed throughout the winter to the east of Lakeview. North Valley and Elk Lake Roads are not plowed during the winter and are closed until about late-April. These roads can still be hazardous and may be impassable for passenger cars until mid-May. Please call the Refuge staff to inquire about road conditions before proceeding on to the Refuge.

## **Accessibility Information**

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. Dial 711 for a free connection to the State relay service for TTY and voice calls to and from the speech and hearing impaired. For more information or to address accessibility needs, please contact the Refuge staff at 406/276 3536, or the U. S. Department of the Interior, Office of Equal Opportunity, 1849 C Street, NW, Washington, D.D. 20240.