

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service National Wildlife Refuge System



If you travel much in the wilder sections of our country, sooner or later you are likely to meet the sign of the flying goose—the emblem of the National Wildlife Refuges.

You may meet it by the side of a road crossing miles of flat prairie in the middle West, or in the hot deserts of the Southwest.

You may meet it by some mountain lake, or as you push your boat through the winding salty creeds of a coastal marsh.

Wherever you meet this sign, respect it. It means that the land behind the sign has been dedicated by the American people to preserving, for themselves and their children, as much of our native wildlife as can be retained along with our modern civilization.

Wild creatures, like humans, must have a place to live. As civilization creates cities, builds highways, and drains marshes, it takes away, little by little, the land that is suitable for wildlife. And as their space for living dwindles, the wildlife populations themselves decline. Refuges resist this trend by saving some areas from encroachment, and by preserving in them, or restoring where necessary, the conditions that wild things need in order to live.

This essay introduced the series, “Conservation in Action,” a marvelously written collection of narratives about Refuges and the Refuge System. Rachel Carson was a scientist and chief editor for the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service from 1939-1952. (Photograph used by permission of Rachel Carson History Project.)

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM

The four refuges within the Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge Complex are part of the National Wildlife Refuge System, which is administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) under the U.S. Department of the Interior. Today the Refuge System encompasses 551 National Wildlife Refuges and thousands of small wetland and other special management areas totally over 150 million acres.

DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

Mission Statement

The mission of the U.S. Department of the Interior is:

"As the Nation's principal conservation agency,

the Department of the Interior has responsibility for much of our nationally-owned public lands and natural resources.

This includes fostering the wisest use of our land and water resources,

protecting fish and wildlife,

preserving the environmental and cultural values of our national parks and historical places,

and providing for the enjoyment of life through outdoor recreation.

The Department assesses national energy and mineral resources and works to ensure that their development is in the best interests of the Nation.

The Department also has a major responsibility for American Indian reservation communities and for people who live in Island Territories under U.S. administration."

U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) was established in 1940 by combining the Bureau of Fisheries and the Bureau of Biological Survey under the Department of Interior.

Mission Statement

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is:

“Working with others

to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats

for the continuing benefit of the American people.”

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is responsible for migratory birds, endangered species, certain marine mammals, and freshwater and anadromous (move between fresh and salt water) fish. Programs the USFWS oversees include the National Wildlife Refuge System, Fisheries and Habitat Conservation, Migratory Birds, Endangered Species, Federal Wildlife Law Enforcement and Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration which includes a Federal Aid program that provides grants to states for fish and wildlife management.

One of the key phrases in the USFWS mission statement is “working with others. . .” The agency provides the basic framework for conservation and stewardship through science, habitat protection, and management but depends on the help and support of visitors, citizens, and local and state governments to accomplish their mission.

NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM

Since it was established by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1903 at Pelican Island, Florida, the NWRS has grown to 551 Refuges, with at least one refuge in every state. These refuges protect 150 million acres of land, making them the largest system of lands and waters set aside for wildlife conservation in the world. Within the state of Washington, the USFWS manages 23 refuges and 10 National Fish Hatcheries. Oregon has another 21 refuges and 2 Fish Hatcheries.

Mission Statement

On 25 March 1996, President Clinton issued the first Executive Order (EO) in the history of the nearly 100-year-old NWRS that clearly defined the mission, purpose, and priority public uses of the System. As defined by the EO, the mission of the NWRS is:

". . .to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation and management, and where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations."

The Executive Order also addressed four principles to guide the management of the System: (1) habitat conservation, (2) public use, (3) partnerships, and (4) public involvement.

The EO recognized compatible wildlife-dependent recreational activities involving hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation as priority general public uses. The EO also directed the U.S. Secretary of the Interior to take a number of actions including expanding opportunities for these priority uses, particularly for families, and providing these uses on a more timely basis when new lands are added to the System.

Finally, the Executive Order recognized a stewardship and trusteeship on the part of the U.S. Secretary of the Interior to ensure that the biological integrity and environmental health of the National Wildlife Refuge System are maintained for the benefit of present and future generations.

In 1997, President Bill Clinton signed into law the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 which amended the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1996 in a manner that provided a comprehensive "**Organic Act**" for the Refuge System. The Act established in law fish, wildlife, and plant conservation as the mission of the refuge system and gives priority to certain wildlife-dependent recreational uses on national wildlife refuges, when they are compatible with refuges' purposes and the mission of the Refuge system. These uses are hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation.

Goals

The goals of the National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS) are:

- # To preserve, restore, and enhance in their natural ecosystems (when practicable) all species of animals and plants that are endangered or threatened with becoming endangered.
- # To perpetuate the migratory bird resource.
- # To preserve a natural diversity and abundance of flora and fauna on refuge lands.
- # To provide an understanding and appreciation of fish and wildlife ecology and peoples' role in their environment, and to provide refuge visitors with high-quality, safe, wholesome, and enjoyable recreational experiences oriented toward wildlife to the extent that these activities are compatible with the purposes for which the refuge was established.

Historical and Legislative Notes Concerning the National Wildlife Refuge System

1903 -- Pelican Island (3 acres) on the east coast of Florida. Established by Theodore Roosevelt, it became the first unit of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

1918 -- Migratory Bird Treaty Act. This Act recognized the need for bird conservation and promoted hunting regulations.

1934 -- Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp Act (Federal Duck Stamp). Spearheaded by J. N. "Ding" Darling, this Act provided an ongoing revenue source for the acquisition of wetland habitat by requiring each waterfowl hunter 16 years of age or older to possess a Federal Duck Stamp.

1956 -- U. S. Fish and Wildlife Act. This Act established the guidelines of the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

1962 -- National Refuge Recreation Act. This Act authorized the U.S. Secretary of the Interior to administer refuges, hatcheries, and other conservation areas for recreational use, as long as such uses did not interfere with the area's primary purpose.

1973 -- Endangered Species Act. This Act provided for the conservation of species in danger of becoming extinct by protecting habitat necessary for the survival and recovery of those species.

1980 -- National Wildlife Refuge Acts. In addition to specific acts of Congress, these Acts allowed more options for refuges to be established.

1997 -- National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act. Provided for a comprehensive “Organic Act” for the Refuge System which established in law fish, wildlife, and plant conservation as the mission of the refuge system.

Funding

New refuge lands are acquired with funds from several different programs including:

- Migratory Bird Conservation Fund
- Revenues from sales of the Federal Duck Stamp
- Endangered Species Act
- Land and water conservation funds
- Revenues generated from refuge entrance fees, timber sales, etc.
- A portion of funds from excise taxes on sporting arms and ammunition

Funding for refuge operations and maintenance are appropriated from the General Account by the U.S. Congress. This is the source of most of the funds to operate and maintain the Ridgefield NWR Complex.

Entrance fees collected at Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge are used to support recreation related expenses. In February 2008 the Ridgefield NWR used Recreation Fees to replace rutted and worn timbers on the access bridge to the Refuge’s River ‘S’ Unit. This bridge is the only access route to the River ‘S’ Unit with approximately 140,000 annual visitor crossings. Approximately \$1900 of Recreation Fees were used to replace 500 square feet of timbers that form the driving surface for visitors over the bridge. The remaining funds collected are used to support recreation related expenses including; brochures, signage, facilities enhancement, trail/road maintenance, restoration associated with wildlife-dependant recreation and public safety.