

# Wallkill River National Wildlife Refuge

## *Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan*

### Vision for the Future

*“The Wallkill River National Wildlife Refuge promotes the environmental health and works to strengthen the biological diversity of associated habitats within the Wallkill Valley. Through active management, the refuge protects and conserves wetland dependent species, especially the federally listed bog turtle. We also support protection for state-listed species, migratory birds and regionally rare plant communities.*”

*“Local communities realize quality of life benefits as residents and visitors enjoy the refuge’s natural beauty and biological diversity. Visitors engage in a variety of wildlife dependent activities including hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation. Through these programs, we share the ecological significance of the Wallkill River Valley and the refuge’s links with other natural areas.”*

### Refuge Setting

The Wallkill River refuge lays approximately 60 miles northwest of New York City in the northeastern section of Sussex County, New Jersey (Wantage, Hardyston, and Vernon), and in southern Orange County, New York (Minisink and Warwick). The refuge encompasses nine miles of the Wallkill River and lays in a rolling valley between the Kittatinny Ridge to the west and the Hudson Highlands to the east. This valley contains headwater wetland complexes of riverine habitats, ponds, emergent marshes, fens, scrub-shrub wetlands, wooded swamps, mixed hardwood upland forests, grasslands and farmlands. The refuge was created in 1990 with a 7,500-acre acquisition boundary, and currently protects 5,106 acres of a combination of wetland and upland habitat supporting migratory birds, federal- and state-listed species, and regionally significant wildlife and plant communities in the Wallkill River watershed.



USFWS

*The Wallkill River refuge protects a variety of habitats including grassland, scrub-shrub and forest.*

### Status of our Conservation Plan

We started preplanning for a single Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Assessment for both the Wallkill River and Shawangunk Grasslands national wildlife refuges in late fall 1998. Later, in November 2002, we decided to write separate plans for each refuge. We selected the Shawangunk Grasslands refuge as our first priority and finished that CCP in 2006. We are proud to announce that we now have available a draft plan for the Wallkill River refuge. Once final, that plan will guide wildlife and habitat management, land conservation and public use programs on the refuge for the next 15 years.

### Details of the Draft Plan

Our draft plan, developed by a team of specialists, presents three fully developed, distinct management alternatives. The team consists of regional planners, biologists, refuge staff, and resource specialists from the New Jersey Division of Fish and Wildlife and the New York Department of Environmental Conservation. Our team also consulted with ecologists

and other scientific experts to learn as much as possible about the natural resources in the region. We also carefully considered public input from scoping meetings and a citizen survey. The three alternatives share some actions in common. Those may be required by law or policy, or already have gone through public review and agency review and approval. Or, they may be administrative actions that do not require public review, but deserve calling to your attention in this public document. We believe they are crucial to achieving the refuge’s purposes, vision and goals. These actions include protecting the federal-listed bog turtle, controlling invasive plant species such as purple loosestrife and Phragmites, and controlling nuisance animal species such as mute swans and Canada geese.

### Description of the Alternatives

We based our three alternatives on the purposes for establishing the refuge, its vision and goals, and the issues and concerns identified by the public, state agencies, and the Service during the planning process. The issues included protecting priority species and habitats,

expanding the refuge's boundary, improving opportunities for public use while ensuring resource protection, and providing adequate funding and staffing resources for the refuge.

#### *Alternative A. Current Management*

This alternative would maintain the status quo in refuge management over the next 15 years. Thus, it provides a baseline for comparing or contrasting the two "action" alternatives described below. Under Alternative A we would continue to use a variety of habitat management tools to maintain the refuge's early successional habitats, non-forested wetlands, grasslands and forested communities. We would continue efforts to protect the federal-threatened bog turtle by managing occupied sites on refuge-owned lands and attempting to acquire occupied sites within the current acquisition boundary. We would continue to offer hunt programs for deer, spring and fall turkey, migratory birds, woodcock and resident Canada geese according to New Jersey State seasons. We would maintain current access sites for fishing and boating, and current trails for wildlife observation and photography. We would continue to offer limited environmental education and interpretation programs, as staffing and funding allows. Finally, we would continue to pursue acquisition from willing sellers of the 2,021 acres of important wildlife habitat that lays within our currently approved acquisition boundary.

#### *Alternative B.*

##### *Service-preferred Alternative*

Alternative B proposes to expand the current refuge boundary by 9,550 acres through a combination of fee-simple and easement acquisition from willing sellers. The proposed expansion boundary encompasses a 15-mile tributary of the Wallkill River, includes tremendous wetland resource values, and forms a key corridor connection between preserved habitats on the Kittatinny Ridge to the west and the Pochuck Mountains to the east. Also under Alternative B we would take a more proactive approach to restoring wetlands and we would establish a 100-meter forested corridor along either side of the Wallkill River. We would establish three grassland focus areas on the refuge and let other small fields revert to early successional habitat. We would open the refuge to bear hunting according to New Jersey State seasons. Other opportunities for

wildlife-dependent recreational uses would increase on the current refuge and would be added in the proposed expansion area. Funding and staffing would increase to adequately support program expansions.

#### *Alternative C*

This alternative proposes to establish and maintain the ecological integrity of natural communities on the refuge and surrounding landscape without specific emphasis or concern for any particular species or species groups. We propose to expand the refuge's current acquisition boundary by 7,609 acres to help restore the natural hydrologic regimen of the Wallkill River system. A bottomland hardwood forest component would be established on more than 70 percent of the current refuge. Sites prone to continuous flooding would likely be sustained as emergent marsh and shrublands. Upland sites would likely revert to a mixed mid-Atlantic hardwood forest association. We would attempt to restore the natural hydrologic regimen of the Wallkill River and its tributaries by removing man-made impediments to water flow. We would allow hunting for deer and resident Canada geese only. Other public uses within the current refuge boundary would remain the same as Alternative A and additional opportunities would be offered in the proposed expansion area.

#### **Public Review and Comment on the Plan**

Public involvement is crucial in the planning process, and we encourage your participation. Your comments will help shape the final plan. We are releasing the draft plan for a period of public review and comment. We ask that you submit your comments by March 10, 2008, by regular mail, email, or fax. Please send your comments to Beth Goldstein, Planning Team Leader, at the address below. You can also submit comments at our open houses and public hearings (see next column for dates and locations).



Steve Maslowski/USFWS

*Wood Thrush*

#### **How to Obtain a Copy of the CCP**

The draft plan is available online at <http://www.fws.gov/northeast/planning/Wallkill%20River/ccphome.html>. To request the document in print or on CD, contact:

Beth Goldstein  
Planning Team Leader  
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
300 Westgate Center Dr.  
Hadley, MA 01035  
Phone: 413/253-8564  
E-mail: [northeastplanning@fws.gov](mailto:northeastplanning@fws.gov)  
(Please put "Wallkill River" in the subject line)

#### **Open Houses and Public Hearings**

*Wednesday, February 20, 2008*

Tri-Co Federal Credit Union  
47 Route 206, Suite 1  
Augusta, NJ 07822

*Thursday, February 21, 2008*

Sussex Wantage Branch Library  
69 Route 639  
Wantage, NJ 07461

#### **Meeting Format:**

6:00 - 7:00 pm - Open House

7:00 - 9:00 pm - Public Hearing

*All locations are fully accessible.*

#### **For Further Information**

Edward Henry, Refuge Manager  
Wallkill River National Wildlife Refuge  
1547 County Route 565  
Sussex, NJ 07461-4013  
Phone: 973/702 7266  
Email: [wallkillriver@fws.gov](mailto:wallkillriver@fws.gov)

<http://www.fws.gov/northeast/wallkillriver>

**Federal Relay Service for the deaf and hard-of-hearing: 1 800/877 8339**

**U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service**  
<http://www.fws.gov>  
**February 2008**

