

Hunting one of many ways to enjoy National Wildlife Refuge System

by Robin West

Hunting is an American tradition filled with much history and lore. Recent surveys estimated that 6% of the U.S. population age 16 or older, over 13 million people, went hunting in 2001, averaging 17.5 days afield each, and accounting for approximately \$20 billion in total expenditures on travel, equipment, licenses, etc.

Alaska tied with Arkansas, Idaho, and South Dakota for fourth place for the highest percentage of residents (16%) who participated in hunting activities last year. Montana led the national average with a 24% participation rate, followed by North Dakota (19%), and West Virginia and Wyoming (17%). For sheer numbers of hunters, Texas lead the pack with 1,201,000, followed by Pennsylvania, then Michigan, New York and Wisconsin.

While these estimates are impressive, also important is the trend in the participation rate. It has been declining for quite some time. Hunting participation rates nationally dropped by 7% in the last five years alone. Interestingly, the 10-year comparison also showed a significant decline in the number of hunters, but with it came a significant increase in the total amount spent by hunters.

Changing demographics and public values, increasing costs, complexity of regulations, competing interests for free time and the availability of places to hunt are all probable reasons for the ongoing decline in hunting participation.

Along with the rapid urbanization of America, a lack of open lands readily accessible in many places probably accounts for most of the change. With this steadily increasing urban expansion, along with more and more private land being placed off limits to the general public, American hunters are increasingly looking to public lands for hunting opportunities.

Here enters the National Wildlife Refuge System. The system was established by President Theodore Roosevelt 100 years ago come March 2003. Roosevelt was, among other things, a noted hunter and conservationist. There are now 537 refuges in the system, at least one in each of the 50 states. Of these, 302 are open to hunting. All 16 National Wildlife Refuges in Alaska,

totaling about 80 million acres, are open to hunting.

Some people question how a wildlife refuge can be open to hunting. Shouldn't refuges be places of sanctuary, as the term "refuge" implies?

Congress mandated the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System: "to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, 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 of Americans."

Americans enjoy wildlife in a variety of ways: some participate in consumptive uses such as hunting and fishing, some participate in nonconsumptive uses like wildlife viewing and photography, and still others hold value in studying wildlife vicariously and appreciate knowing that they are simply "out there."

Many enjoy wildlife in multiple ways. Refuges, in implementing their mission, strive to provide for a variety of public values while managing for healthy and sustainable wildlife populations. The basic management premise is that we need adequate quality and quantity of wildlife habitats to have healthy wildlife populations, which in turn provide wildlife for study, viewing, photography, and hunting. All user groups share in the common need to manage for healthy sustainable wildlife populations.

When Congress passed the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997, it clearly established wildlife conservation as the single mission of the system, but also instructed that wildlife-dependent recreational uses (hunting, fishing, wildlife viewing and photography, and outdoor education and interpretation) be recognized as appropriate and as the priority general public uses of the system through which the American public can develop an appreciation for fish and wildlife.

These uses are to be facilitated on refuges whenever they are determined to be compatible with the specific purposes for which individual refuges are established. While some refuges remain closed to all hunting (such as some small endangered species

refuges in the Lower 48), the majority of refuges include hunting in their public use programs.

Fishing and wildlife viewing are practiced by even more Americans than hunting. An estimated 34 million anglers (16% of the U.S. population) and 66 million wildlife viewers (31%) enjoyed these activities in 2001. These, and other statistics, are available as part of the preliminary findings of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's 2001 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation report. The report can be accessed on the Internet at: <http://federalaid.fws.gov/>

As members of the American public, you are co-

owners of National Wildlife Refuge System lands. I hope you enjoy them, whether you hunt or fish, watch or photograph wildlife, or just enjoy wild places that support healthy wildlife populations. Please come out and visit the best system of lands managed for wildlife anywhere in the world.

Robin West is the Refuge Manager of Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Besides his professional conservation pursuits, he is an avid hunter, fisher and wildlife photographer. For more information about the Refuge, visit the headquarters in Soldotna, call (907) 262-7021. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://kenai.fws.gov>.