

Refuge System centennial a chance to celebrate wildlife conservation in America

by Doug Newbould

This year marks the 100th birthday of the first national wildlife refuge. On March 14, 1903, President Theodore Roosevelt established Pelican Island, a three-acre island off the Atlantic coast of Florida, as a Federal Bird Reservation to protect pelicans and their habitat.

In 1942, Congress redesignated Pelican Island and other federal wildlife reservations as national wildlife refuges. From such humble beginnings, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service now manages a system of public lands consisting of 540 National Wildlife Refuges on 94 million acres. This system of strategically located habitats is represented in all 50 States and U.S. territories.

Alaska's 16 refuges encompass about 77 million acres, or 82% of all the lands in the National Wildlife Refuge System. About 23% of Alaska's refuge lands, or 18 million acres, are designated wilderness. Most Alaskans and perhaps most Americans are aware of refuges such as Pelican Island, Arctic and maybe even the Kenai national wildlife refuges. But how many have heard of refuges like Innoko and Tetlin in Alaska, Bosque del Apache and Sevilleta in New Mexico, or Cape May and Forsythe refuges in New Jersey?

Don't feel bad if you haven't heard of these places. Up until a couple of months ago, I was not aware of many of these special places either. Perhaps this lack of awareness is why some have referred to the National Wildlife Refuge System as "America's best kept secret."

But perhaps this year, the national celebration of the National Wildlife Refuge System centennial will help America discover one of its most important natural treasures.

My personal awareness and understanding of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Wildlife Refuge System expanded greatly last October, when I attended the National Wildlife Refuge Management Academy in Shepherdstown, W.V. I was one of four Alaskans and one of 28 Americans to spend three weeks in the "Mountain State" of West Virginia. I didn't have the heart to tell the locals we have glacial moraines bigger than some of their mountains.

Of course, that part of the country has its own beauty, and I was fortunate to be back there during the peak of autumn colors.

The first week, we attended lectures and participated in group exercises designed to expand our knowledge of the refuge system, its history, its mission and purposes, its incredible diversity and, most important to me, its wonderful workforce. I learned that the first year I came to work for the Fish and Wildlife Service and the Kenai Refuge was the year the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act passed into law, 1997. The Refuge System now had its own "organic legislation," a set of marching orders, if you will.

Refuges now have a mission statement: "The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people."

Refuges offer outstanding wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities, including "the big six"—fishing, hunting, wildlife observation and photography, environmental education and interpretation. If refuges are America's best-kept secret, then more than 35 million visitors each year are keeping their mouths shut.

At the end of the first week, each of us was asked to make a 10-minute presentation about our home units. It was a phenomenal day for me as I witnessed 27 peers share their passion for conservation—each telling a story about the special place they work. I learned about the little refuge on the coast of Maine, named for Rachel Carson, the woman who wrote "Silent Spring." I learned about the Lower Rio Grande Valley NWR, where several neighboring communities compete with each other to capture some of the several hundred thousand birders that "flock" to the area every year. I learned about a refuge in Minnesota, named for the wild rice that grows there: Rice Lake NWR, a place where wolves still run free. And I learned about the Yukon Delta NWR, over 19 million acres of western Alaska wild lands that still fit the definition of "untrammelled."

During our second week at the academy, we traveled to four very special “urban refuges,” and it was quite an experience for a country boy like me. First we crossed the Delaware River on a ferry to visit the Cape May NWR at the southern tip of New Jersey. There we saw some of the remnants of the millions of horseshoe crabs that beach themselves there each year.

From Cape May we traveled to the Edwin B. Forsythe Refuge at Brigantine, where you can look across the tidal marsh to the high-rise casinos of Atlantic City. I was surprised to see so many snow geese there, feeding on the marsh grasses.

Next, we continued north to Philadelphia to visit another unique refuge, the John Heinz NWR at Tinicum. This is truly an urban refuge that hosts tens of thousands of inner-city school children annually, teaching them about conservation and wildlife.

The last refuge on our trip was the Patuxent Research NWR near Laurel, Md. This special refuge is where the whooping crane restoration project began and continues today.

Our last week was back at the training center in Shepherdstown, and I think it was my favorite week of

all. We continued to learn about refuge programs, issues, challenges and opportunities that week, and our final exercise was a team presentation before a panel of refuge managers.

Each team of six service employees was given a set of refuge management scenarios/ problems to “solve.” These scenarios were really difficult situations designed to test our mettle. It was akin to the “Kobiashi-maru.” (For you non-trekkers, that was the test without a solution, for which Captain Kirk found a “creative” solution—he cheated.)

The really special thing about that week was the lasting friendships we formed. It was so hard to say good-bye to my new friends. But I know I will see them all again, as I travel this great land of ours visiting some of our national treasures—our National Wildlife Refuges.

Doug Newbould is the Fire Management Officer at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. 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>.