

# Happy 100<sup>th</sup> birthday to America's best kept secret

by Bill Kent

Today is the 100<sup>th</sup> birthday of the National Wildlife Refuge System. When President Theodore Roosevelt made Florida's tiny Pelican Island a refuge for birds on this date in 1903, he wrote the first chapter of a great American conservation success story.

It all began with one man and one boat, protecting pelicans on a five-acre island in Florida.

From that humble beginning arose the world's largest and most diverse network of lands dedicated to the protection and management of a vast array of wildlife.

The National Wildlife Refuge System is a network of habitats that benefits wildlife, provides unparalleled outdoor experiences for all Americans, and protects a healthy environment.

In its first hundred years, the Refuge System helped save our national symbol—the American bald eagle—from extinction and has protected hundreds of other wild species including fish, migratory birds, and many other plants and animals, as well as the habitats that support them.

Entering its second century, the National Wildlife Refuge System covers 95 million acres in more than 535 refuges and thousands of small prairie wetlands that serve as waterfowl breeding and nesting areas. There are wildlife refuges in every state, and at least one within an hour's drive of every major American city, providing much-needed refuge for people as well as wildlife.

Although there are many refuges, and millions of acres, this system is one of America's best kept secrets. This is unfortunate, because every American has reason to say, "Look what we have done in this country to protect our wildlife resources."

I have had the privilege of working in seven states on some of the most interesting of those 535 refuges, including a few where spectacular wildlife concentrations occurred with regularity.

I want to take you on a quick tour of those refuges, and hopefully, you will understand why I think every American should take pride in the National Wildlife Refuge System, especially during this Centennial year.

After graduating from the University of Georgia, I began my career on Merritt Island Refuge, which sur-

rounds the Kennedy Space Center in Florida.

Pelican Island Refuge was a satellite of Merritt Island, and I was fortunate to visit that tiny island a few times; once, to band young pelicans.

Merritt Island's semi-tropical woodlands, marshes and nearby brackish water rivers are home to diamond-back rattlesnakes, manatees, sea turtles, roseate spoonbills, bald eagles, osprey, and large concentrations of waterfowl during fall migrations. (Another Merritt Island satellite refuge, St. John's, was where the last Dusky Seaside Sparrow was seen in the wild. We spent long hours trying to reestablish its preferred habitat, but those efforts were too late.)

The hunting and fishing, wildlife photography and rocket launches at the Kennedy Space Center were all outstanding. However, my best memory is of working with nesting sea turtles, where we collected the eggs to protect them from raccoon predation, then released the newly hatched turtles.

Okefenokee Refuge in southeast Georgia is an entirely different habitat: a 400,000 acre freshwater swamp with upland islands containing oak and other hardwoods, bald cypress. "The land of the trembling earth" (one of the translations of the Native American "Okefenokee") is surrounded by tens of thousands of acres of pine forests.

Thousands of alligators, flocks of white ibis, spectacular wildflower displays in spring, osprey, black bears, bobcats, rattlers and other reptiles, wild turkeys, and sandhill cranes are all regular sights at Okefenokee Swamp.

My wife and I were fortunate to live in a small cabin on the refuge. When I think back to those years, I have memories of black bears grazing like cattle on an abundant acorn crop next to our cabin, long nights counting alligators from an airboat, and the great enjoyment of watching school kids learning about that magical and mysterious place from the refuge staff.

My family and I next made a big move to Massachusetts, to Parker River Refuge. This Refuge covers only 4,500 acres, of which 3,000 acres is salt marsh; the remainder is a large portion of the last barrier island on the northeast coast.

When I was there, we also managed six other

refuges in Maine and Massachusetts, including Rachel Carson Refuge, on the southern Maine coast. Once again, there were large flocks of waterfowl during fall migrations.

The truly spectacular wildlife events, however, occurred in spring and fall when, within a matter of hours, thousands of warblers of many species would move through the refuge on their way north or south.

At times, it seemed the most abundant species on the Parker River Refuge was *Homo sapiens*—that’s right, human beings. The refuge was only 30 minutes north of Boston and at that time no fee was charged to enter the refuge.

There are about seven miles of undeveloped beach, and many days it seemed as if half the population of eastern Massachusetts wanted to get their own piece of sand in the sun. There were only 350 parking spaces, and it was common on summer days that we closed the entrance gate at 8 a.m. because all the spaces were taken.

We reopened at 4 p.m., and it was quite easy to refill those spaces within 30 minutes.

Our next stop was the Klamath Basin Refuges: nearly 200,000 acres of wetlands, forests, sagebrush and farmlands spread between six refuges straddling the Oregon-California border on the east side of the Cascade Mountains.

This was our introduction to the importance of water to wildlife and humans; east of the Mississippi River, folks usually have no concerns about the availability of water, but here it was different.

Historically, there were over 500,000 acres of wetlands in the basin, but reclamation efforts for farming have reduced that area to less than 150,000 acres, the majority contained within the refuges. During the height of the fall migration, our surveys frequently totaled one million ducks and geese.

Watching those birds flying in and out of feeding areas was truly a spectacular, yet humbling sight. Needless to say, the hunting was excellent—even I managed to bring home a few birds.

Klamath Basin wintered as many as 1,000 bald eagles, as well as thousands of other raptors such as rough-legged hawks, harriers, and the occasional peregrine or gyrfalcon. One of the refuges in the basin

was established to protect a major night roost used by the eagles.

Standing at the entrance of that refuge early in the morning or just before sunset, when hundreds of eagles fly in and out of the roost, is a wildlife spectacle which draws observers from all across the U.S. and numerous foreign countries.

In 1991 we moved to the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, fulfilling a desire my wife and I shared since we first married. You know, perhaps better than I, why the Kenai refuge is one of those “special places.”

Astonishing runs of salmon, thousands of moose, elusive brown bears and soaring bald eagles, are all reasons why more than 500,000 visitors come here every year.

The visitors also come to simply view the expansiveness of Alaska. Even though the Kenai Peninsula represents a small part of the state, the Kenai refuge is often referred to as “Alaska in miniature” because so many of Alaska habitats are found here, ranging from beach to forest to alpine tundra.

I hope this quick tour has provided you a small glimpse of the world’s finest system of wildlife habitats. I urge you, with deep sincerity, to visit this refuge and others in Alaska and the other 49 states during this Centennial year.

When you do, please take a moment to reflect on what no other country but this one has accomplished in providing every citizen with a continuing legacy of exceptional wildlife resources and the habitats to support them.

I am sure you will be as proud of the National Wildlife Refuge System as I am.

A final note: this August, the Kenai Refuge will co-host a Centennial Celebration with Alaska Maritime Refuge at the Ninilchik Fairgrounds.

Current plans call for live music, food, displays, and more. Watch for more information about the Celebration as the summer progresses!

*Bill Kent has worked on National Wildlife Refuges for 27 years and is the Supervisory Park Ranger at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. He and his family live in Sterling. 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>.*