



Ruby Lake National Wildlife Refuge

Planning Update #2/March 2011

Greetings from the Project Leader



White-faced ibis. Photo by Steven Koehler

An update on CCP progress

This is the second planning update for the CCP process. The previous planning update provided background on the Ruby Lake National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) and the CCP process and announced the public scoping meeting in Elko, NV.

Although the scoping period for the CCP closed on December 30, 2010, there will be additional opportunities for input in the future. Some of the highlights from the scoping information we received are included on the following pages of this update. Look for a more complete scoping summary report on our website (www.fws.gov/rubylake/).

Our next steps are to refine the draft vision statements and develop goals and management alternatives for the refuge with consideration of the issues identified during the scoping processes.

Thank you for your participation in the initial scoping process for the Ruby Lake National Wildlife Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP). I appreciate the feedback we received from you at the scoping meeting, and via letters and e-mails. We are carefully considering all of the information received from you, other members of the public, organizations, and elected officials.

This planning update has a draft Refuge vision statement for your review. There will be further opportunities to learn more about the Refuge and provide your

input into the CCP process over the next two years as we continue to work on developing this 15-year management plan for the Refuge. Resources and contact information for CCP questions and more information are listed on the last page of this update. Thank you for your continued interest and support in this important planning process.

Guy Wagner

Guy Wagner, Project Leader
Ruby Lake NWR



Ruby Lake NWR. Photo: USFWS

Contents

- Greetings from the Refuge Manager1
- An update on CCP Progress.....1
- Refuge Vision Statement.....2
- Public scoping highlights.....3
- CCP Progress.....8
- Please feel free to contact us!.....8

Refuge Vision Statement

The following is the draft vision statement for the Refuge. A vision statement consists of a description of the refuge setting and a concise statement of desired future conditions for the refuge. It reflects the mission of the refuge system, the purposes for which the refuge was established and any other relevant mandates. We invite you to comment on the draft vision statement for Ruby Lake Refuge.

"Cradled between the Maverick Springs Range and the majestic Ruby Mountains lies the most remote national wildlife refuge in the contiguous United States. A hydrologic marvel, the freshwater marshes of Ruby Lake National Wildlife Refuge are born from montane snowmelt, which discharges from over 200 springs, creating a wildlife oasis in the high desert of northeastern Nevada. Migratory waterfowl and other birds find the pristine marshes of the Refuge an ideal

place for nesting and raising young. The marshes also serve as a critical stopover for birds migrating across the arid west to northern nesting areas or flying south to wintering grounds in California.

At Ruby Lake, they pause to rest and replenish precious body reserves before continuing their journey. Over 240 species of birds use Ruby Lake NWR during the year, including the largest breeding concentration of canvasbacks in the western United States, outside of Alaska, and Nevada's only resident population of trumpeter swans.

Upland areas provide excellent habitat for a wide variety of shrub-steppe and grassland species, such as sandhill cranes, sage grouse, and pronghorn antelope. The Refuge exemplifies quality habitat management. Rare native species such as the northern leopard frog, relict dace, and pygmy rabbit find a home at the Refuge, and the staff and their partners are committed to using sound science to preserve and restore ecosystem function in both the marsh and surrounding uplands. The adjacent snow-

capped Ruby Mountains provide a secure source of water, ensuring that Ruby Lake NWR functions as a key component in the greater system of refuges and natural areas, which make it possible for migratory birds and other wildlife to continue existing in a modern, human-dominated landscape.

As they enter the area, people cannot help but notice an increase in the variety and abundance of all kinds of wildlife. Visitors enjoy wildlife-oriented recreation, such as bird-watching, photography, fishing, and hunting, while immersed in the inspiring, rugged splendor of Nevada's Ruby Valley. The development and delivery of educational programs fosters an appreciation for the Refuge's flora and fauna in the next generation of conservationists. Over time, the Refuge will become a leading center for environmental education and outreach to the local community and beyond. Visitors to Ruby Lake are awestruck by the beauty of the area, and appreciate the Refuge as a unique and remarkable resource of national significance."



Ruby Lake NWR. Photo: USFWS



Public scoping meeting in Elko, Nevada, on November 3, 2010. Photo: USFWS

Public scoping highlights

During the fall/winter of 2010, meetings were held, news releases circulated, website information posted, and informational mailings sent out to known interested parties to gather input and comments about issues to be considered in the future management of Ruby Lake National Wildlife Refuge. Interested parties had an opportunity to attend a public scoping meeting in Elko, Nevada, on November 3, 2010. Approximately 25 people attended the meeting. Additional meetings were held with various resource agencies, local ranchers, and landscape scale inter-agency planning cooperatives. Verbal comments were recorded on flipcharts during scoping meetings. Additional comments were received via letters, emails, and comment cards.

The following issues were raised by the public to be addressed in the CCP process. These comments will be important in formulating the objectives, strategies, and alternatives considered in the Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) for Ruby Lake National Wildlife Refuge.

Wildlife Management

Several comments stated that the Refuge should be managed primarily to protect and enhance migratory birds and other wildlife in accordance with

the Refuge's statutory purposes. One comment suggested that since fishing is one of the priority public uses identified in the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act, it should be given more consideration when it comes to water management. The comment went on to state that impacts to the fishery should be considered when making any management decision.

Habitat Management

Vegetation. Several comments addressed different aspects of vegetation management on the Refuge, including grazing, haying, prescribed fire, and the use of herbicides. Most of the comments were related to grazing. A few comments expressed concern about the use of grazing as a management tool. One suggested that grazing should only be permitted if the benefits to marsh vegetation management outweigh the costs. Another stated that while limited grazing may be a useful tool for managing vegetation for the benefit of waterfowl, the CCP should evaluate potential negative impacts of grazing on the relict dace and sage grouse, as well as on the productivity of soils and riparian areas. Several comments were supportive of grazing and cited potential benefits of grazing including: improved habitat conditions through control of dense vegetative growth, increase in insects which are food for birds, improvements in biodiversity, and increase in bird

populations. Several of the comments also suggest that grazing should be increased on the Refuge. It was also suggested that the timing and location of grazing on the Refuge be reevaluated. Several comments stated that grazing should be used to manage vegetation instead of prescribed fire. Another suggested that a management intensive grazing program be implemented similar to a successful program on the Deseret Ranch in Utah. Finally, a comment suggested that forage has declined on the Refuge because grazing lands are no longer irrigated.

We received a few comments related to haying on the Refuge. One suggested that the area hayed should be increased. Another comment suggested that the hay permit should be put out for bid in March or April. Two comments asked that permittees be allowed to irrigate the area before haying.

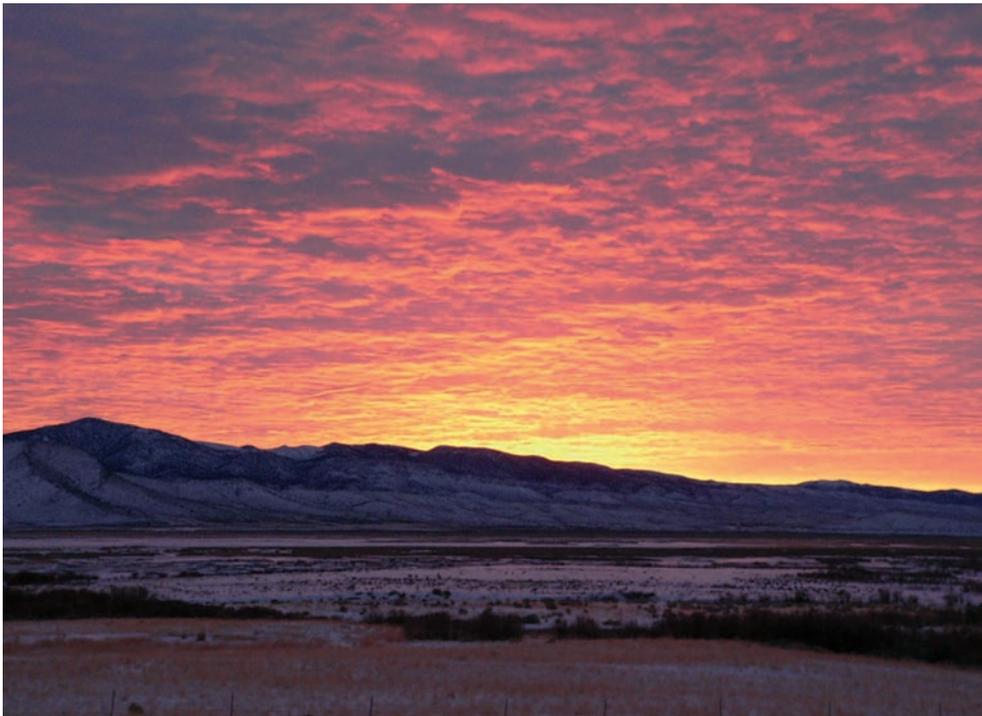
Fire Management. There were several comments related to fire management on the Refuge. A few comments requested that the CCP address the use of prescribed fire to restore marsh habitat and remove and stimulate decadent stands of cattails. One comment stated that prescribed fire should be used during spring followed by grazing as is the practice in the Flint Hills of Kansas. Another comment requested that burning of upland areas be coordinated with the Nevada Department of Wildlife (NDOW) to minimize greater sage-grouse habitat concerns. Several comments expressed opposition to the use of prescribed fire on the Refuge. Specific concerns cited include: adverse impacts on air quality; health effects of smoke; promotion of invasive plants; potential for escaped (uncontrolled) fire; and resulting exposure of topsoil to wind erosion.

Herbicide. A few comments opposed the use of herbicides to manage large areas of emergent vegetation, citing adverse impacts on fish and overspray/rhizome transfer to non-target areas. One comment further recommended that smaller areas be treated over multiple years to create a mosaic of vegetation in various succession stages. Another comment suggested that aquatic vegetation treatments should be performed at a larger scale, over a long period of time.

A few comments requested that the CCP describe the extent of invasive species



Ruby Lake NWR headquarters. Photo: USFWS



Sunrise at Ruby Lake NWR. Photo: USFWS

on the Refuge and how the Service will address them. Ditches were mentioned as a specific problem area for invasive plants on the Refuge. It was also suggested that goats be used to control invasive plants on the Refuge.

Other comments were focused on providing food for waterfowl. One comment requested that the CCP identify those portions of the marsh that have the highest potential for bird and wildlife food production and to set them aside for

that purpose. Another comment suggested that the Service plant grain on some parts of the Refuge to attract more geese. In addition, one comment requested that the Service consider active production of forage species such as sago pond weed and nutgrass to facilitate waterfowl production and benefit a variety of other birds and wildlife.

Wildlife and Habitat Resources. We received a variety of comments on other wildlife and habitat management topics

not addressed above. One comment suggested that the CCP be flexible and address adaptive management. A few comments requested that the Service address management of sage grouse nesting, brooding, and summer habitat on the Refuge. We received comments suggesting that Refuge mudflats be improved to increase shorebird diversity; that the CCP should address management for the relict dace; that the Service coordinate and cooperate with NDOW in the construction and enhancement of relict dace habitat within the boundaries of the Refuge; that the Refuge ensures fencing on the Refuge is built to wildlife specifications (three strand fences with a smooth bottom wire at 18 inches off the ground); that the Refuge maintains adequate boundary fences to prevent any incursion by feral animals and establishes emergency removal procedures; dredges the collection ditch; introduces an alternative food source for fish (e.g. crawfish, minnows); and removes undesirable fish species through poisoning.

A few comments addressed predator management on the Refuge. One comment suggested that the CCP should address predator control for protection of threatened and endangered species and migratory birds. Another suggested that the Service control coyotes by lethal means to prevent them from preying on species such as sandhill cranes. In addition, one comment suggested that both coyote and crow populations on the Refuge should be reduced.

Water Management

We received more comments on water management than any other topic. One comment recommended that the Service conduct a basic water resources assessment for the Refuge that would include: an inventory of Refuge water rights and their quantity and quality, the types and uses of the rights, and determination of whether those rights are sufficient to meet the purposes of the Refuge; a description of threats to water quantity and quality; a description of existing water management practices and off-Refuge practices that impact Refuge resources. Other comments stated that because of the Refuge's water supply, it tends to be one of the most stable wetlands in the State,

making it even more important during times of severe drought.

Many comments expressed opposition to past water management practices. Several comments were opposed to moving water to the north part of the marsh (North of the Brown Dike) rather than the South Marsh. Specific concerns cited included the perceived impacts on diving ducks, fishing, and increased vulnerability of game fish populations in winter. One comment stated that, in many cases, the Refuge water levels have been maintained to perpetuate the Refuge's fishery at the expense of water management aimed at maximizing migratory bird use and production. It went on to state that deeper water levels maintained for fish are not always conducive to providing the best nesting habitat for birds.

We also received several comments requesting that water management practices on the Refuge be changed in some way. One comment recommended that the sport fishery be maintained and enhanced by giving the South Marsh priority in delivery of water in years of below average precipitation, with the North Dike Units (10, 13, 14, 20, and

21) having secondary priority. A few comments requested that the Service manage the waters within the Refuge to better provide ideal waterfowl habitat conditions for both diver and dabbling species during waterfowl nesting seasons and during annual migration periods. Other comments suggested that water management account for drought conditions and that the Service should manage water elevations ideal for waterfowl nesting and feeding across most of the Refuge rather than just some units, thereby increasing the total surface area of wetlands. Another comment suggested lower minimum water levels be established, citing the same benefits. One comment suggested that the Service should periodically expose the bottom soils to the air by draining the units on a fairly regular basis. Another comment requested that a larger portion of the annual Finger Springs outflow be directed to the North Marsh where it flowed historically prior to the construction of the Collection Ditch. The comment further stated that such management would improve nesting habitat for western snowy plover, American avocet, black-necked stilt, long-billed curlew and Wilson's phalarope, as

well as migratory stopover habitat for the lesser yellowlegs, greater yellowlegs, long-billed dowitcher, western sandpiper, least sandpiper, semipalmated plover and black-bellied plover. Finally, one comment suggested that improvements to water quality and water control structures would improve marsh habitat and hunting opportunities.

Threats and Resource Protection

Climate Change. We received several comments about threats to Refuge resources and how they should be addressed in the CCP that included: addressing climate change in several different CCP sections, including the vision statement, legal and policy guidance, planning issues, geographic/ecosystem setting, and refuge resources sections; including a plan to inventory and monitor climate change-related variables and trends in coordination with other agencies in the region; and initiating a process to define and minimize any foreseeable and manageable stressors impacting wildlife, their health, and their habitats.

Water Supply. We also received a few comments regarding the potential



Ruby Lake NWR. Photo: USFWS

threats to Refuge ground and surface water resources. Specific threats identified include proposed interbasin water transfers as well as industrial (mining) groundwater pumping/piping projects in Ruby Valley. It was suggested that the Service actively participate in state water hearings in order to protect the marshes water supplies.

Energy. Other threats mentioned in the comments include potential rights-of-way for energy developments, pipelines, and roads. It was stated that these facilities negatively impact wildlife habitats and wildlife, spread weeds, facilitate aerial predation, and fragment habitat areas and cannot be mitigated.

Human Disturbance. Another threat brought up in the comments was human disturbance impacts on wildlife. One comment stated that the impacts of recreational uses on wildlife must be compatible with the Refuge mission. Another recommended that human activity that would interrupt bird breeding should be managed by the Refuge. One comment requested that the Service preserve the Refuge natural resources and protect them against human encroachment and any development.

Wilderness Designation. One comment asked that the Service recommend the North Marsh and contiguous unaltered wildlife habitat for inclusion into the National Wilderness Preservation System and suggested the area be named the Snowy Plover Wilderness.

Cultural Resources

One comment requested that rock art preservation (petroglyphs) be addressed in the CCP. Another comment suggested that the Fish and Wildlife Service pursue funding from the National Park Service for managing the Refuge's significant cultural resources (Pony Express Trail, California Trail, Hasting's Cut-Off, and Ft. Ruby). In addition, one comment requested that the Service interpret the Refuge's cultural and paleontological resources and suggested that interpretive panels be provided at Bressman Cabin and Ft. Ruby.

Visitor Services

We received several comments related to visitor services opportunities on the Refuge. Some comments stated that visitor opportunities have declined from historic levels and that some

management practices and regulations have discouraged visitor use. One comment suggested that restrictions on visitor opportunities to protect wildlife should be based on strong evidence of harm. Several comments suggested that visitor opportunities should be expanded by: increasing season dates; opening more areas to public use; adjusting open areas in response to habitat conditions and management activities; and allowing new uses. Another comment requested that the CCP address opportunities for environmental education, interpretation, and volunteer projects on the Refuge. In addition, one comment requested that the Service incorporate climate change information in environmental education programs. Several comments also suggested that expanding visitor opportunities would increase public support for the Refuge.

One comment stated that only street legal vehicles should be permitted on the Refuge and law enforcement staffing should be adequate to enforce this prohibition. Another comment requested that the compatibility of existing uses with the primary wildlife mission of the Ruby Lake NWR should be evaluated and incompatible uses not permitted. One comment stated that people need to be able to enjoy their natural resources in a non-destructive manner.

Fishing. Several comments expressed support for fishing on the Refuge and/or suggested changes in how it is managed. Some comments addressed the perceived decline in fishing opportunities on the Refuge. Several comments asked that fishing opportunities be expanded or generally improved. One comment suggested that the studies aimed at improving uses such as fishing be conducted. Another suggested that the Service address the large populations of cormorants and pelicans that are consuming bass.

There were a number of specific suggestions for improving fishing opportunities on the Refuge. One comment suggested that the current slot limit for bass be changed to allow anglers to keep the smaller fish and allow larger fish to breed and grow. Another comment complemented the Service for expanding the float tube area and suggested that it be further expanded. One comment suggest-



Fishing at Ruby Lake NWR. Photo: Kohaver

ed that the Service coordinate and cooperate with NDOW to improve fish habitat in the Collection Ditch through dredging of prioritized areas and improving angler access. Another asked that stocking of game fish species be addressed in the CCP. Finally, one comment suggested that half the Refuge be managed for sport fishing opportunities and the other half be managed for birds.

Several comments expressed concerns about the impacts of managing a non-native fishery and the associated use by anglers. One comment addressed the potential for the spread of invasive zebra and quagga mussels associated with fishing. Another comment brought up the potential conflict between managing water for both birds and fish under drought conditions and suggested that there are a number of other places in northeastern Nevada where people can fish, including South Fork Reservoir, Wilson Reservoir, and Wildhorse Reservoir. Another comment stated that public use of the marsh beyond the road and dike system should be a lower priority. In addition, one comment expressed concern about the potential impacts of stocking non-native sport fish such as largemouth bass and various trout on the native relict dace. This comment urged that deference be made for the welfare of the dace over the use for recreational fishing.

Another comment suggested that NDOW be allowed to increase fish production at Gallagher Hatchery in a stepwise manner over a period of four years from the current 100,000 pounds per year to 130,000 pounds per year. It was further suggested that water discharge from the hatchery be monitored per NDEP requirements, and fish production reduced immediately if discharges approach or exceed water quality standards.

Hunting. Several comments expressed support for waterfowl hunting on Ruby Lake Refuge. However, many comments also stated that hunt conditions and hunter success have declined from historic conditions. Comments also stated that existing Refuge hunt regulations are not justified and discourage hunters from visiting Ruby Lake Refuge. One example cited includes the configuration, size, and habitat conditions of the open area that results in the most birds leaving the area after the first shots in the morning.



Ruby Lake NWR. Photo: USFWS

Another example given was the relatively complex variety of open seasons for different species that tends to discourage inexperienced hunters.

A number of comments suggested changes to improve and/or increase waterfowl hunt opportunities on Ruby Lake Refuge. Several comments requested changes to the open/closed areas. These ranged from opening the entire Refuge to hunting, to opening all but the East and/or West Marsh, to rotating the hunt zones from year to year. In addition, one comment suggested that a voluntary hunter harvest report be implemented to allow the Refuge to quantify the success of hunters in general and the relative impacts to specific species. Another comment stated that wildlife harvest programs be governed by scientifically based wildlife management protocols. Finally, one comment suggested that waterfowl be managed on a maximum sustained yield basis.

Several comments suggested changes in the types of hunting allowed on the Refuge. A few comments requested that the Refuge be reopened to muskrat trapping as it was in the past. Another comment stated that the Refuge should allow trapping of other species including coyote, both recreationally and as a management tool to reduce predation on wildlife such as sandhill cranes. In addition, several comments suggested that all or portions of the Refuge should be opened to pronghorn antelope and elk hunting.

One comment suggested that fur-bearer and upland game be managed on a maximum sustained yield basis in coordination with NDOW. Another comment suggested that habitat for upland birds and large and small game should be improved on the Refuge and hunting of these species should be allowed. One comment stated that the Service should establish harvest programs for fur-bearers for population monitoring and management, disease control, and research. In addition, one comment requested that the Service not open the Refuge to big game hunting given the availability of other opportunities in the county and the State.

Boating. One comment suggested that only non-motorized boats be allowed on the marsh to minimize the potential introduction of invasive mussels. Another comment requested that the use of motors should be limited to avoid harming the marsh habitat and resident/migratory wildlife. One comment suggested that existing boating restrictions remain in place. Several comments requested changes in the current 10 hp restriction for boat motors. Some comments asked that the boat motor hp limit be raised to 15 hp to allow the newer style 2 cycle "mudmotors."

A few comments suggested that the hp limits be raised to 25–30 hp or altogether to allow larger recreational boats such as ski boats. One comment suggested that outhouses be installed in the south marsh to avoid boaters having to return to one of the boat landings.

CCP progress

- Pre-planning
- Public Scoping and Identify Issues
- Develop Draft Vision Statement
- Develop Draft Alternatives; Objectives and Strategies
- Prepare Draft CCP/EA
- Public Review of Draft CCP/EA
- Prepare Final CCP/EA
- Public Notice of Decision



Canvasbacks. Photo: USFWS

Please feel free to contact us!

We distribute updates periodically throughout the CCP process when new information is available, but please check our website for updates, refuge tour dates and previously released documents:

www.fws.gov/rubylake/

We are available to provide additional information about CCP accomplishments to date and to answer any questions about the planning process. Feel free to call, write, e-mail, or fax. If you did not receive this newsletter through the mail and would like to be on our mailing list, please contact us. You may also obtain information from our website (above).

If you would like to be removed from the mailing list or are receiving multiple copies of these notices, please let us know.

Mark Pelz, Refuge Planner

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Pacific Southwest Region
2800 Cottage Way, W-1832
Sacramento, CA 95825

FAX: (916) 414-6497

E-mail: fw8plancomments@fws.gov

Phone: (916) 414-6504

