As the last glaciers melted 10,000 years ago, they left behind poorly drained soils and basins created by chunks of melting ice. The resulting watery landscape contains a mixture of cedar swamps, tamarack bogs, and lakes. The ridge you are now on, between Mandy Lake before you, and Rice Lake to the south, was one of the few high places close to the abundant wild rice crops of the lakes. A 1.6-mile long hiking trail skirts the edge of Mandy Lake to the North Bog Road, rewarding the hiker with excellent wildlife viewing.

Ancient people lived and buried their dead on this ridge. Among these trees are mounds that archaeologists think were built by prehistoric Ojibwe people about 1,300 years ago as a cemetery. Such sites are found from southwestern Wisconsin across central Minnesota to the Red River Valley. This is the largest know concentration of linear mounds in Minnesota and Wisconsin. All remains of peoples’ use of the land on the refuge are fragile and irreplaceable. They are protected by state and federal laws.

Evidence suggests the Eastern Dakota Indians occupied the Rice Lake area 200–400 years ago. Attracted by wild rice and plentiful game, the Dakota probably lived here in temporary hunting and fishing camps. Archaeologists believe most of the villages were at Mille Lacs Lake, southwest of here. At Twin Lakes, located down the road to your left, an ancient dugout canoe was discovered in 1960. Perhaps, the canoe was used by Indians to gather wild rice and hunt game. A short, scenic hiking trail begins at the east end of the picnic area and makes a short loop on the north side of Twin Lakes.

The Dakota and Ojibwe people took resources from the land which were renewed each year; maple syrup, wild rice and game. But in the late 1800s the use of the land changed dramatically.

As the railroads extended westward, more European settlers moved into the area. The resources, which for centuries were used for subsistence, became commodities.

In 1900, a livestock ranch began operating in and around Rice Lake. Wanting to have it in pit in place the ditches they dug was too small to be effective.

For a few weeks in the fall, Indians centered their activities around the harvest of wild rice. They poled their canoes through dense stands of wild rice, loaded the stalks over their boats, tapping the stalks with sticks, dislodging the grain into the bottom of the boat. On slow days they parched the rice over a fire, placed the grain in shallow holes in the ground, tramped out the kernels from the husk, and winnowed out the grain. They took the wild rice back to their villages where they stored it in pits for use during the winter. A local band of Ojibwe still gather wild rice here each September.

Climb the observation platform for a view of the 3,600 acre lake. In the fall, Rice Lake often holds concentrations of 250,000 ducks and other waterfowl. In October 1994, a Minnesota state record was set when more than 1,000,000 ducks were counted in a single day!

Loggers harvested the towering white pine and maple from the forests that surround Rice Lake. During the winter, logs were hauled to the lake by teams of horses and unloaded on the ice. A boom was made around the logs and, when the ice melted, the log raft was towed to the lake’s outlet. Lumbermen drove the logs down the Rice River and on to the nearby Cuyuna Range, 20 miles to the northeast.