



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

# Washita

## National Wildlife Refuge

### Welcome: Canada Goose Magnet

*“They tumble out of the sky like maple leaves, side-slipping right and left to lose altitude, feet spraddled toward shouts of welcome below.”*

Aldo Leopold could easily have been describing the more than 40,000 geese that punctuate the quiet beauty of the 8,075-acre Washita National Wildlife Refuge each winter. Within the refuge, the slow-moving Washita River winds through prairie and farmlands to merge with Foss Reservoir, providing a home and resting area for geese and other waterfowl. Gently rolling hills, ravines, and bottomlands laced with creeks shelter wildlife as common as white-tailed deer and as unusual as the Texas horned lizard, a state protected species.

### Wildlife: Numbers Swell With the Seasons

Mark your calendar for Washita NWR’s procession of migrating birds. Seasonal timetables vary with the weather, so exact dates are hard to pinpoint. For instance, you might see fewer than a thousand geese one day in October, then return two days later after a cold front to hear the honking of 20,000 geese settling into their winter life here.

### Fall/Winter Peak Bird Watching

November through February brackets the best times to see thousands of waterfowl. Snow geese lift from the waters in a blur of white wings. Canada geese are joined by smaller numbers of Ross’s and white-fronted geese. Mallards top the duck list and hooded mergansers and pintails are also abundant.

The restless waterfowl flocks attract instant attention, but sharp-eyed wildlife viewers will notice sandhill cranes along the shorelines and in fields in fall. As many as 3,000 may pass through in early November. White pelicans drop in as well to pursue fish in Foss Reservoir before flapping southward. Bald eagles find the open, goose- and duck-filled waters good hunting grounds each winter.

Swainson’s hawks prey on small rodents in refuge fields to replenish their energy for the long flight to South America. Bird

watchers have spotted as many as 200 in a field in early October! When reservoir levels drop to expose mudflats close to river inlets, migrating shorebirds take advantage of a fall rest stop. American avocets probe the mud for crustaceans, joined by greater yellowlegs, killdeer, and sandpipers. Look for shorebirds again in spring.

### Spring/Summer Migrants Give Way to Nesters

When sandhill cranes fly through in spring, refuge staff always look closely to see if they are joined by any endangered whooping cranes. America’s tallest bird sometimes graces the refuge fields with its presence in fall, and occasionally in spring.

In early May, pairs of Mississippi kites, neotropical migratory birds fresh from a winter in South America, build their stick nests high in trees along watercourses. Unlike most birds of prey, these slim-winged birds thrive mostly on a diet of insects pursued in flight.

The scissor-tailed flycatcher winters south of the border and nests at Washita NWR as well. Watch for Oklahoma’s state bird sporting its showy, split tail from a high-wire perch.

Summer features cliff and barn swallows nesting under bridges, snowy egrets wading in the shallows, and resident red-headed and red-bellied woodpeckers drumming in the forests. Roadrunners dash by the headquarters office.

### Mammal Life: Cottontails to White-Tails

A variety of mammals are found on the refuge. They are most active during early morning and late evening hours as they search for food. Some, like bats, prefer the nighttime. Small rodents and rabbits spend the day hiding since they make up a good part of the diet of predators like coyotes, hawks, badgers, and elusive bobcats. The headquarters area is a good spot to see armadillos, dwelling at the northern edge of their natural range.

White-tailed deer hide in wooded old river channels and feed in refuge fields. Beavers cut trees along the waterways. Porcupines climb trees to feed on twigs, buds, and inner bark.

### Growing Crops for Wildlife

Canada geese spending winters at Washita NWR thrive on fields of wheat and milo grown especially for them. The hungry birds feed on green wheat first. When the temperatures drop, they shift to the richer milo. Some 2,000 acres of croplands stretch across the refuge. Local farmers grow crops here, taking part of the harvest and leaving the rest for wildlife.

### History: Piecing Together the Past

Imagine watching bison herds cutting a swath through the prairie wildflowers you can see today on the refuge. Archeological finds in the area revealed bison horns, antlers, stone scrapers, and stone points from nomadic hunters who survived here centuries ago. A camp site and burial ground discovered above the Washita River dates to the 1500s. The nomads returned to the same camp each year on their journeys following wildlife herds.

Remember, all archeological sites and finds are protected. Taking artifacts not only breaks the law, but destroys a story line connecting us to our past.

Washita NWR lies in the heart of Cheyenne and Arapaho country. Thirty miles west marks the 1868 Battle of the Washita. Many Cheyenne and Arapaho men, women, and children died in battle against General George Custer and his troops. In 1892, the United States acquired the lands from the tribes and opened them up immediately to homesteading. Cheyenne and Arapaho still live in the area.

### Things to Do at the Refuge

#### Visit the Refuge Headquarters

The observation deck behind the office offers an excellent view of wintering geese feeding in farm fields.

#### Auto Tour Route

This driving tour covers the length and breadth of the refuge—with panels and displays interpreting the history, wildlife, and management activities at 8 different locations.

## *Hiking*

Feel free to explore on foot from Owl Cove to Pitts Creek to Lakeview. Remember to check the map for closed areas on the refuge. Generally, areas north and east of the lake and river channel are open year-round.

## *Centennial Trail*

This 1/3-mile accessible loop is designated as a National Recreational Trail and features educational signs, a boardwalk, and an observation deck to help visitors experience and understand the wildlife and habitats in this unique setting.

## *Recreation Areas*

County roads next to the refuge provide access to recreation areas at Owl Cove, Pitts Creek, Lakeview, McClure, Riverside and Turkey Flat. A boat launch ramp for small watercraft is located at Riverside for those interested in fishing or just a lazy float down the Washita River. An observation tower at Owl Cove provides an excellent elevated view of wintering waterfowl at the point where the river widens out to form Foss Lake.

## *Wildlife Watching and Photography*

Feeding flocks of geese, herds of white-tailed deer, strutting Rio Grande turkeys and spring migratory birds attract wildlife watchers in abundance year-round. There are a number of photo blinds available at locations around the refuge.

## *Hunting*

All permitted hunting on the refuge must follow all state regulations. Additional restrictions apply. Contact the refuge office for details.

Certain portions of the refuge are open to quail and rabbit hunting. Non-toxic shot is required for all small game hunting.

Controlled hunts are offered for geese and sandhill cranes each fall and winter. Please contact the refuge office for more information.

Hunting for deer on the refuge is offered through the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation's Controlled Hunts Program.

Rifles are permitted for use only during the refuge deer hunts. Handguns are not permitted at any time. Only shotguns may be used for small game.

## *Fishing and Boating*

Anglers enjoy fishing from shore or boat on the Washita River and upper end of Foss Reservoir. The sand bass spawning

run in the Washita River in the spring attracts the most anglers. Shoreline fishing is open from the refuge boundary south of Lakeview Recreation Area all the way to the northwest boundary west of the McClure Recreation Area. All applicable state laws must be followed.

Boats are permitted on the refuge from March 15th through October 14th. Boaters should be aware of submerged tree stumps and other underwater hazards. Excessive speed on refuge waters is a safety hazard - please be courteous. The use of Personal Water Craft (jet skis) is not allowed on the refuge.

## **Meeting Your Needs**

The refuge office is open from 7:30 am to 4:00 pm on weekdays.

Winters are fairly mild and summers hot. In spring, be prepared for spring thunderstorms and the possibility of a tornado.

You will find motels in Clinton, 28 miles to the southeast and Elk City, 28 miles to the southwest. Foss Lake State Park, just south of the refuge, offers camping.

## **Help Us Protect the Refuge**

Help us protect wildlife habitat— please drive only on designated roads.

Weapons are allowed only in Public Hunting Areas during hunting seasons.

Overnight camping, open fires, fireworks, littering, swimming, and water skiing are not allowed on the refuge.

Washita NWR should be a quiet place to enjoy nature—please leave loud radios and other sound equipment at home.

Keep wild things wild—all plants and animals are protected and should not be disturbed or collected (except fish and wildlife legally taken during the refuge hunting and fishing seasons).

Please leave only your footprints; take all litter with you.

## **Volunteering at the Refuge**

Contact Washita NWR for information on volunteering to help with the Christmas Bird Count in late December or early January. Expertise in bird identification is helpful but not required.

Volunteers are also needed to help with mammal, reptile, and amphibian surveys and other censuses throughout the year.

Other volunteer jobs include data entry, litter removal, trail and building maintenance.

## **For Further Information**

More detailed information on refuge facilities and activities is available on our web site at <http://www.fws.gov/southwest/refuges/oklahoma/washita/index.htm>. Contact us at [Washita@fws.gov](mailto:Washita@fws.gov).

## **Washita NWR Facts**

### *Where is it?*

An overlay on a Bureau of Reclamation project, the refuge rests on the northwest portion of Foss Reservoir between the towns of Butler and Hammon in Custer County, Oklahoma. Headquarters and office are located 5 miles west of Butler on State Highway 33, then 1 mile north and one-half mile west.

### *When was it established?*

April 15, 1961.

### *How big is it?*

8,075 acres.

### *Why is it here?*

To provide a feeding and resting area for migrating and wintering waterfowl and sandhill cranes.