

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Sand Lake

*National Wildlife
Refuge*

Auto Tour Guide



We invite you to take a journey along the Wildlife Drive at Sand Lake National Wildlife Refuge.

Keep your senses sharp as you pass through the marshes, open lakes, grasslands, and woodlands of the Refuge. You never know what gifts nature will offer you today.

Sand Lake National Wildlife Refuge



This goose, designed by J.N. "Ding" Darling, is the symbol of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Sand Lake National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) was established in 1935 as a refuge and breeding area for migratory birds and other wildlife. The Refuge is home to over 266 bird species, 40 mammal species, and a variety of fish, reptiles, and amphibians. Sand Lake NWR is a Globally Important Bird Area and one of the top birding sites in North America.

Sand Lake NWR is one of over 550 refuges in the National Wildlife Refuge System - a network of lands set aside specifically for wildlife. Managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Refuge System is a living heritage, preserving wildlife and habitat for people today and for generations to come.

The Wildlife Drive

We invite you to learn about the Refuge and its wildlife by touring the Wildlife Drive. Along the way, you might see all kinds of wildlife, including ducks, geese, waterbirds, warblers, shorebirds, and deer, just to name a few.

The Wildlife Drive is generally open from April 1 to mid-October, but it is occasionally closed during these times due to hazardous driving conditions. The best times to view wildlife are in the early morning and late afternoon.

There are 12 numbered stops along the 15-mile route. The paragraphs on the next few pages correspond to these stops and describe the wildlife and habitat you will see along the way. It usually takes approximately 1½ hours to complete the tour.

Please stay on the gravel roads. The first stop is 0.8 miles ahead.

Sand Lake

From this point, you can see across the widest part of Sand Lake. This shallow lake provides important resting habitat for migratory birds. Its waters also contain vital food sources for these birds.

Common wildlife seen on the lake include ducks, geese, pelicans, and grebes. The tall

trees lining the opposite shore are used by bald eagles and other birds for roosting.

The next stop is 1.8 miles ahead.

Nesting in the Cattails

Overlooking the marshes of upper Sand Lake, you can see some of the Refuge's most important cattail habitat for waterfowl that nest overwater, including redheads and ruddy ducks. Both redheads and ruddy ducks make their nests among these cattails. Once the ducklings are hatched, the open waters of upper Sand Lake are ideal for brood rearing.

Colonial nesting birds also nest in the cattail habitat, including Franklin's gulls, black-crowned night-herons, cattle and great egrets, and white-faced ibises.

The next stop is 1.5 miles ahead.

Deep Water + Food = Diving Ducks

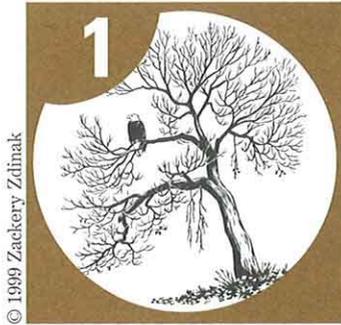
The pond in front of you is Sandell Pool. This deep pool is a good place to watch for diving ducks, such as redheads and ruddy ducks. These ducks feed on invertebrates that live in the thick mat of submerged vegetation (sago pondweed) in the water.

The next stop is 1.2 miles ahead.

Crops and Cover

Crops are planted in this area to supplement the natural foods available for wildlife. Resident wildlife, such as deer, grouse, and pheasants, use these fields for food year-round, but especially during the harsh winter months.

The next stop is 0.4 miles ahead.



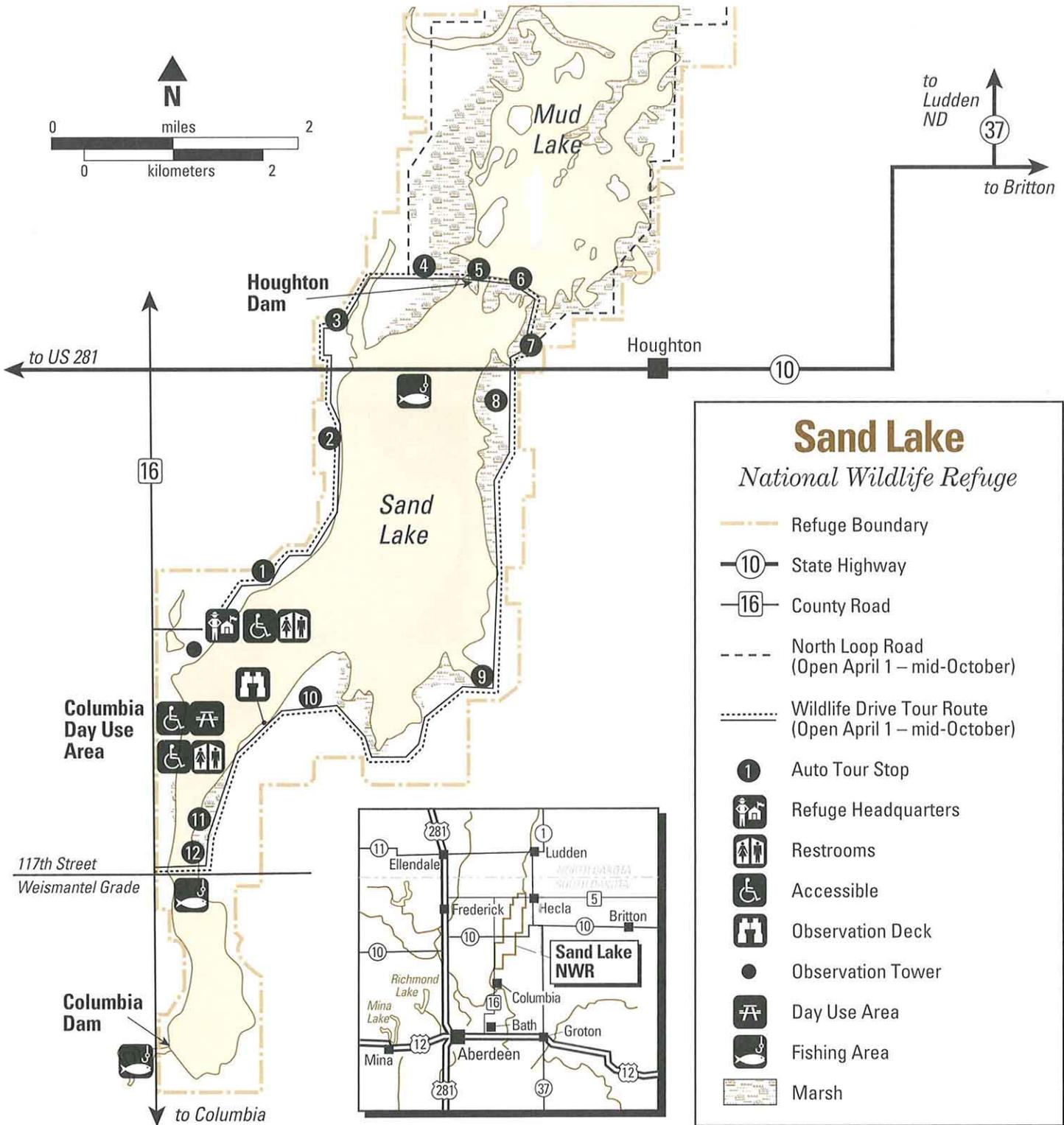
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Mud Lake Dike

For the next mile, you will be driving along the Mud Lake dike. This dike



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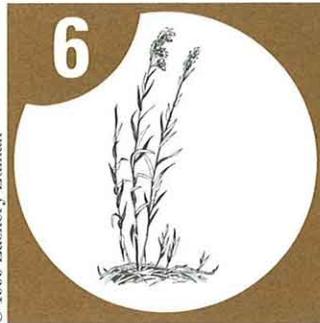
was built in the late 1930s by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) to control water levels in Mud Lake and Sand Lake. The stop-log structure underneath the bridge is used to both hold and release water.

Notice the difference in plant life and habitat on each side of the dike. Sago pondweed, a submerged plant, grows in the open water above the dike. It is an important food source for up to 3,000 tundra swans during the fall migration. Below the dike, the thick stands of cattails support western grebes and other species that have different habitat needs.

The next stop is 0.9 miles ahead.

Phragmites

The tall, plumed plants growing in the marsh around you are called phragmites, or common reeds. The phragmites "islands" in Mud Lake provide important nesting areas for several species of marsh and water birds. For example, grebes and diving ducks build floating nests among the stalks, while herons bend the stalks over to build nests above the water.



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The next stop is 0.5 miles ahead.

Restored Prairie

This area is a remnant of the once vast native prairie landscape. Two hundred years ago, this area was open, wild prairie as far as the eye could see. There were no trees, houses, or roads – just a sea of grasses, wildflowers, and forbs crossed by the slow-flowing James River and herds of grazing bison.



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Today, this habitat is important to upland nesting waterfowl and other migratory birds such as meadowlarks, bobolinks, and shorebirds. While the vast expanses of wild prairie are gone, the remaining grasslands are critically important to migratory birds that nest in the uplands.

The next stop is 0.5 miles ahead.

Watch for Birds

At this stop, you may see several different species of songbirds flitting through the willow trees, including yellow warblers, common yellowthroats, and American redstarts. Watch the tree tops for movement, and listen for their songs. You may even catch a glimpse of a great horned owl. As you drive the next mile, watch for a variety of ducks, including mallards, pintails, and blue-winged teal.



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The next stop is 3.1 miles ahead.

Waterfowl Production Ponds

Shallow ponds, like the one to the right, provide both the nesting and brood-raising habitat vital for the survival of many duck species. Ponds like this one are full of small aquatic insects, a choice food source for both adult ducks and ducklings. Look for duck broods in this pond during the summer.

The next stop is 2.4 miles ahead.



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Trees On The Prairie

Most of the trees in this area are not native to South Dakota. They were planted in the 1930s to protect crops from wind erosion and benefit wildlife. Commonly called “shelterbelts,” these areas provide habitat for woodland wildlife.

Just ahead, you will pass through a shelterbelt. Watch for hawks, owls, and

woodpeckers. Also, on your way to the next stop, take a few minutes to enjoy the observation deck that overlooks Sand Lake.

The next Wildlife Drive stop is 1.6 miles ahead.



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Winter Shelter

Cattail marshes are very important for wintering deer and pheasants in eastern South Dakota. Without these dense stands of marsh vegetation, both of these species would have a tough time surviving the harsh South Dakota winters.

The next stop is 0.8 miles ahead.



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Native Prairie

The area on your left has been reseeded with several native grass species – primarily bluestem, switchgrass, and Indiangrass. Still, the biological diversity of native prairie can never be fully restored once it has been broken for cropland. Because of this, it is important to conserve tracts of original prairie grasses for future generations.



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Other Recreational Opportunities

The Columbia Day Use Area is 1.5 miles north of 117th Street / Weismantel Grade on Brown County Highway 16 and offers accessible parking, restrooms, shelter, tables, and interpretive kiosks. You are invited to hike the ¾-mile nature trail found in this area.

You may also climb the historic observation tower near the headquarters. It was built in the 1930s by the Civilian Conservation Corps.

Accessibility Information

Equal opportunity to participate in and benefit from programs and activities of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is available to all individuals regardless of physical or mental ability. Dial 711 for a free connection to the State relay service for TTY and voice calls to and from the speech and hearing impaired. For more information or to address accessibility needs, please contact the Refuge staff at 605 / 885 6320, or the U.S. Department of the Interior, Office of Equal Opportunity, 1849 C Street, NW, Washington, D.C. 20240.

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