



# The National Wildlife Refuge System

Protecting wildlife for future generations

The National Wildlife Refuge System is the only system of federal lands dedicated specifically to wildlife conservation. Teddy Roosevelt established the first refuge unit in 1903 to protect birds from market hunting on a small island in Florida. The System has since grown to encompass more than 150 million acres of habitat essential for the survival of America's astounding diversity of wildlife. Refuges protect seasonal stopovers for millions of birds migrating up and down the Americas, winter forage and birthing grounds for elk, caribou and other large mammals, nesting beaches for sea turtles and critical habitat for endangered species.

## The Scale and Impact of the Refuge System

Refuges are found in arctic tundra, tropical rainforests, coral reefs, coastal marshes, arid deserts, and tall-grass prairies. There is a national wildlife refuge in every state and within an hour's drive of most major metropolitan areas. While the primary mission is for wildlife conservation, wildlife-dependent recreational uses are also prioritized when compatible with the conservation purposes of each refuge. Additionally, there are more than 20 million acres of designated wilderness in the Refuge System spread out in 75 refuges over 25 states.

There are over 560 national wildlife refuges in the United States and territories. More than 420 of these refuges are open to the public, and more than 350 allow hunting.

National wildlife refuges are home to more than 220 species of mammals, 700 bird species and over a thousand different species of fish. Refuges provide habitat for over 380 threatened and endangered plants and animals and are crucial stopovers for millions of migratory birds. Several refuges were developed to protect endangered species. These include Bitter Creek National Wildlife Refuge (NWR), which was established to protect the California



Florida Panther ©SuperStock

condor, Florida Panther NWR, and Sandy Point NWR in the U.S. Virgin Islands that was established to protect the leatherback turtle.



Izembek National Wildlife Refuge • US FWS

## Conservation Benefits of the Refuge System

Our National Wildlife Refuge System has incredible historic and enduring value. It helped America's ducks and geese recover from the Dust Bowl of the 1930's. Now national wildlife refuges form virtual highways for birds along the major flyways used in annual migration. The system also protects the last remaining wintering grounds for the endangered whooping crane at Aransas NWR in Texas, and provides the only known habitat for 24 species of flora and fauna found nowhere else but Ash Meadows NWR in Nevada. The Refuge System has supported the recovery of the Aleutian Canada goose through the protection and restoration of summer breeding grounds in Alaska and wintering habitat in Oregon. Archie Carr NWR protects 25-35 percent of loggerhead and green sea turtle nests in the United States on a 20.5 mile stretch of beach in Florida. The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, the crown jewel of the system, protects the largest on-shore denning habitat for polar bears in the United States.

## Economic Benefits of the Refuge System

Tens of millions of people visit and enjoy national wildlife refuges from California to Maine and from New Mexico to Alaska every year. In 2011, visitors to national wildlife refuges generated more than \$2.4 billion in sustainable annual revenue to local economies, supporting more than 35,000 jobs. These jobs produced \$792.7 million in employment income that contributed to \$342.9 million in tax revenue for all levels of government combined. For every dollar appropriated to the Refuge System by Congress, there is an average of an average return of \$4.78, a rate of return of 388 percent. Additional ecosystem services, like clean water,

and wildlife values provided by refuges for local communities are valued at \$32.3 billion, an average return of \$65 for every \$1 appropriated by Congress to the Refuge System.

Despite these clear benefits, the system remains woefully underfunded. In FY 2010, the Refuge System only received \$503 million of the minimum \$900 million needed for operations and maintenance. The funding levels have subsequently decreased. Most refuges are forced to operate with only minimal staffing, and one third of refuges have no staff on site.

*The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System is to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans.*

## Management of the Refuge System

The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 provides greater direction for managing refuges. The act directs the Secretary of the Interior to carry out the mission of the system by managing units in the following manner:

- **Require uses be compatible with conservation**  
All uses of refuges must be deemed compatible with the primary conservation mission of the Refuge System. Uses cannot “interfere with or detract from” achieving refuge conservation purposes.
- **Prioritize wildlife-dependent uses where compatible**  
Wildlife-dependent recreational uses of refuges, including wildlife observation and photography, hunting and fishing, and environmental education and interpretation, are given priority consideration in the planning process when compatible with conservation.
- **Maintain biological integrity, diversity and environmental health**  
The Fish and Wildlife Service is required to maintain the biological integrity, diversity and environmental health of its refuges.



Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge • Richard C. Hager, USFWS

- **Administer refuges according to conservation plans**  
The Fish and Wildlife Service is required to prepare comprehensive conservation plans (CCPs) to manage each refuge and to involve the public in their preparation. Refuges must be managed in accordance with their CCP.

Congress also encouraged continued growth of the Refuge System in a manner best designed to accomplish the system mission, to conserve the ecosystems of the U.S., and to complement the conservation efforts of state and other federal agencies.