

# Keeping Wildlife First In Our National Wildlife Refuge System





## DEFENDERS OF WILDLIFE

Defenders of Wildlife is a national, nonprofit membership organization dedicated to the protection of all native wild animals and plants in their natural communities.

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Cover photo: FWS/Tom Koerner  
Seedskaadee National Wildlife Refuge, Wyoming

## FOREWORD

It wasn't supposed to be this way.

Twenty years ago, during my tenure as director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, President Bill Clinton signed the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act into law. Passage of the act was a major highlight of my career and a turning point for the then 94-year-old National Wildlife Refuge System. Under the act, a collection of habitat designations finally became a conservation system, putting the nation on a path to correct abuses of these lands and waters that arose following President Theodore Roosevelt's establishment of the first refuge unit in 1903. Now we're at risk of veering off that path.

In the decades preceding the Refuge Improvement Act, special interests would regularly lean on refuge managers to allow activities that really had no business occurring in wildlife refuges, including drilling, mining, grazing and high-impact recreation like jet skiing and off-road vehicle use. These abuses weren't isolated but pervasive throughout the Refuge System. Refuge managers simply did not have the authority to say "no" and to do what was best to conserve the wildlife and public lands and waters in their charge. The Refuge Improvement Act empowered the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to put wildlife first on our national wildlife refuges, greatly diminishing the ability of special interests to pressure local managers to make poor resource management decisions. The law also fundamentally unified and strengthened the National Wildlife Refuge System, a network of conservation areas designated somewhat opportunistically over the previous decades.

Today the historic conservation gains made under the Refuge Improvement Act are threatened by a growing number of piecemeal political attacks by fringe groups, members of Congress and the current administration. This extreme social and political movement is seeking to seize land, waters and resources from public ownership or management. Recent examples include the prolonged occupation of Malheur National Wildlife Refuge and subsequent attempt by Congress to dispose of thousands of acres of the Vieques National Wildlife Refuge in Puerto Rico and the continued push for a road through the wild heart of Izembek National Wildlife Refuge and oil drilling in our spectacular Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Rather than vigorously enforcing conservation laws and regulations, the Trump administration has exacerbated threats to our natural heritage, eliminating policies intended to protect, restore and connect habitats and seeking to expand haphazard fossil fuel development both onshore and offshore.

If not defeated, these efforts will damage individual refuges and the law that protects them, fundamentally weakening the National Wildlife Refuge System and reversing two decades of conservation progress. We can't let this happen and must fight every attempt to undermine the Refuge Improvement Act.

We must maintain the biological integrity, diversity and environmental health of the Refuge System as mandated by the act and continue to protect, strengthen and grow our incredible network of conservation lands.

That's the way it's supposed to be.



Jamie Rappaport Clark



## Introduction

More than a century ago, a squat but oddly elegant bird drew a visionary president into an unprecedented compact with wildlife and the future of conservation in America. President Theodore Roosevelt recognized that the existence of the brown pelican and the experience of watching this otherwise unassuming bird ruffling its fine feathers in the ocean breeze was at least as valuable as the price its plumage fetched in a fashion industry decimating bird populations to make women's hats. In 1903, Roosevelt set aside our country's first national wildlife refuge, Pelican Island in southern Florida, as a preserve and breeding ground for its namesake species.

While it did not start out as such, Roosevelt's noble idea of setting aside federal public lands and waters as reserves for wildlife ultimately became a national system of wildlife refuges—at least one in every U.S. state and territory. As our only network of public lands and waters dedicated to wildlife conservation, the National Wildlife Refuge System is vital to

ensuring that imperiled species and diverse wildlife populations are secure and thriving.

A conservation concept unparalleled in the world, the Refuge System today protects hundreds of millions of acres of habitat essential to an astounding diversity of plants and animals. Our wildlife refuges also provide countless recreational and educational opportunities and generate billions of dollars in sustainable economic revenue for local communities. The system of public lands and waters protects our rich biological diversity and upholds the United States' commitment to wildlife conservation.

This mission and commitment was only fully affirmed by Congress two decades ago with the passage of the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 (Refuge Improvement Act).

The Refuge Improvement Act fundamentally strengthened the integrity of the system, providing an overarching “wildlife first” mission and structure for science-based decision-making. The law firmly established wildlife conservation as the Refuge System's core purpose, helped insulate refuge management from external political pressures and prevented incompatible uses. The act also ensures public access to an array of outdoor activities by prioritizing compatible, wildlife-dependent recreation on refuges.

The Refuge Improvement Act became law on October 9, 1997. This report marks the 20th anniversary of the act with an examination of how a new series of political attacks threatens the incredible conservation progress the act has made possible over two decades. It begins with a celebration of the many benefits refuges offer for wildlife and people thanks to the act. It reviews the evolution of the Refuge System and the legal framework that culminated in passage of the act and details some of the attacks mounted to undermine this cornerstone law and the integrity of the system, despite its tremendous value to wildlife, ecosystems and all Americans. Finally, this report offers recommendations for countering the attempts by special interests and legislators to divest refuges from public ownership, exploit their natural resources, subvert refuge management and override protections for imperiled species on refuges across the country.



*“The Refuge Improvement Act fundamentally strengthened the integrity of the system, providing an overarching ‘wildlife first’ mission and structure for science-based decision-making.”*

—Jamie Rappaport Clark

FWS/GREG THOMPSON

MONARCH BUTTERFLY, GREAT BAY NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE, NEW HAMPSHIRE

## An Invaluable System

The National Wildlife Refuge System encompasses more than 850 million acres of habitat dedicated to the conservation of our nation’s wildlife. Our largest network of public lands and waters, the Refuge System conserves a stunning array of ecosystems, including forests, rivers and mountains; swamps, marshes and prairie potholes; rocky shorelines, remote islands and deep ocean. Managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), the system includes 566 national wildlife refuges—at least one in every state and U.S. territory and within an hour’s drive of most major cities—50 wildlife coordination areas, and 38 wetland management districts that administer 3.9 million acres of waterfowl production areas.<sup>1</sup> In addition to approximately 100 million terrestrial acres, the Refuge System includes five expansive marine national monuments in the Atlantic and Pacific oceans.

### Havens for wildlife

Presidents, Congress and the American public have worked together to create the Refuge System, setting aside havens to conserve numerous iconic and imperiled species—polar bears and salmon in Alaska, manatees and panthers in Florida, and resident and migratory birds across the country, to name a few. Refuge lands and waters protect seasonal stopovers for waterfowl; winter forage and breeding grounds for elk, pronghorn and mule deer; nesting beaches for sea



FWS/KEITH RAMIS

MANATEE, CRYSTAL RIVER NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE, FLORIDA

turtles; vibrant coral reefs for tropical fish; and critical habitat for numerous endangered species. The Refuge System also protects more than 20 million acres of congressionally designated wilderness on 63 refuges in 25 states.<sup>2</sup>

The Refuge System is home to more than 8,000 species of mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, fish and marine life, and at least 380 threatened and endangered plants and animals.<sup>3</sup> Refuges are also habitat for native bees, monarch butterflies and other pollinators vital to food production and economies valued at billions of dollars. The system safeguards “America’s Serengeti,” the coastal plain of Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska, shelters the only known habitat for 29 rare species at Ash Meadows National Wildlife Refuge in Nevada,<sup>4</sup> and sustains one of the most diverse and threatened ecosystems on Earth, Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument.

Nearly every refuge conserves at least one plant or animal listed under the Endangered Species Act. Fifty-nine refuges were established with the primary purpose of protecting imperiled wildlife,<sup>5</sup> including Bitter Creek National Wildlife Refuge to conserve the California condor, Pilot Knob National Wildlife Refuge in Missouri for the Indiana bat, and Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge, a crucial stronghold for one of the most endangered mammals in the United States.

### WILDLIFE OF THE REFUGE SYSTEM

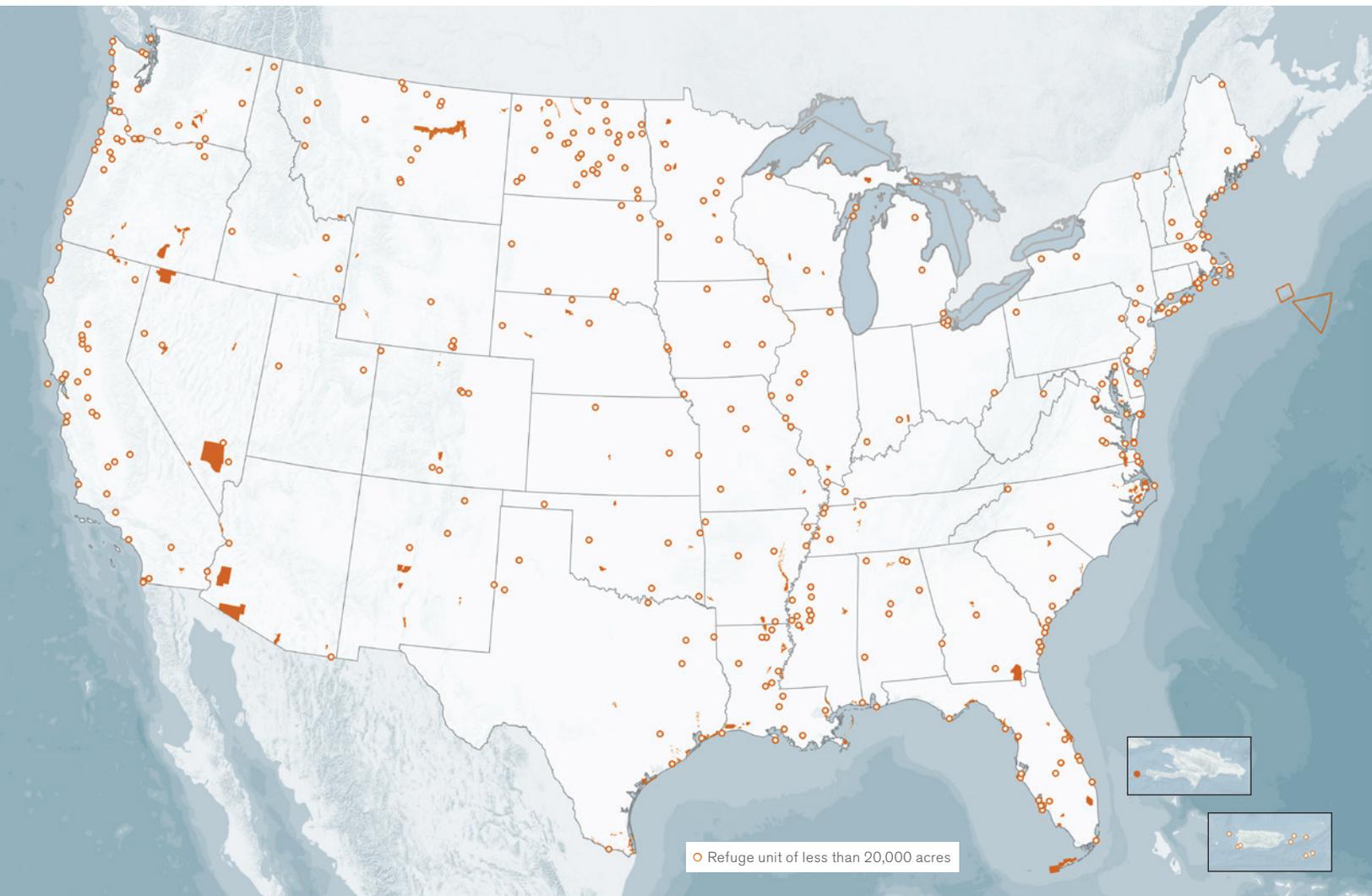
- 220 mammal species
- 700 bird species
- 250 reptile and amphibian species
- 1,100 fish species
- More than 7,000 marine species
- Hundreds of pollinators and insect species

Source: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2017. Meet the National Wildlife Refuge System for Wildlife and People

## NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM



ABOVE: PACIFIC ISLANDS, INCLUDING HAWAII; RIGHT: ALASKA;  
BELOW: MAINLAND U.S. INCLUDING CARIBBEAN ISLANDS





FWS/KLAUS NIGBE

## REFUGES AND RECOVERY

The Refuge System is instrumental to the recovery of imperiled species. For example:

- The Aleutian Canada goose bounced back through restoration of summer breeding habitat at Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge and protection of wintering habitat at Nestucca Bay Maritime National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon and San Joaquin River National Wildlife Refuge in California.
- The endangered whooping crane defied extinction at Aransas National Wildlife Refuge on the Texas Gulf Coast, which protects the majestic bird's last remaining wintering habitat.
- Imperiled loggerhead and green sea turtle numbers are improving at Archie Carr National Wildlife Refuge, which preserves vital nesting habitat for these ancient creatures along a 20.5-mile stretch of sandy beach in Florida.

## Benefits for people

Refuges are living, breathing places that preserve a timeless connection to the natural world and provide premier wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities.

Wildlife lovers, bird watchers, sportsmen, scientists, photographers, and outdoor enthusiasts benefit from a strong National Wildlife Refuge System. These public lands and waters offer unparalleled nature experiences, including grand spectacles like thousands of ducks and geese arriving to feed at refuges along U.S. flyways, herds of caribou migrating across the Arctic tundra and manatees swimming in crystal-clear springs. Wildlife viewing, photography, hunting, fishing, environmental education and interpretation are hallmarks of the Refuge System, deemed priority public uses when compatible with wildlife conservation.

ABOVE: WHOOPING CRANES, ARANSAS NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE, TEXAS



FWS/USA.GOV

**REFUGE SYSTEM PUBLIC USE (2016/2017)**

**Wildlife Observation and Photography**

- Over 31 million annual visitors for wildlife observation
- 10 million annual visitors for photography

**Hunting and Fishing**

- 337 refuges open to hunting, hosting 2.4 million annual visitors
- 275 refuges open to fishing, attracting 6.9 million annual visitors

**Environmental Education and Interpretation**

- Over 70 percent of refuge units offer quality environmental education programming
- Nearly 3.4 million annual participants in nature interpretation and environmental education programs

Source: U.S. Department of the Interior. 2017. Budget Justifications and Performance Information, Fiscal Year 2018

Each year, whether they come to hike the trails, cast the waters, click a shutter, set a decoy, learn about or just enjoy a refuge, the 50 million annual visitors to national wildlife refuges reflect a shared interest in conserving wildlife and their habitat.<sup>6</sup> The Refuge System fosters American stewardship values through outstanding recreational activities and education programs such as the Urban Wildlife Conservation Program, a visionary partnership that helps urban constituencies discover, appreciate and care for wildlife in their communities. Refuges further connect communities with nature by providing outdoor classrooms for our children and offering career-building opportunities for more than 40,000 citizens per year to volunteer their time and expertise.<sup>7</sup>

Recreational use of the Refuge System is also a boon to state, local and national economies. Refuge visitation generates more than \$2.4 billion annually in sustainable local economic activity, supporting more than 37,000 jobs<sup>8</sup> and accounting for \$792 million in annual employment income.<sup>9</sup> This income contributes more than \$342 million in tax revenues for all levels of government combined, generating a total of \$4.5 billion to the economy overall.<sup>10</sup> All considered, refuges are an outstanding investment for taxpayers. Every dollar Congress appropriates to the Refuge System produces an average return of \$4.87,<sup>11</sup> a 387 percent rate of return based on the current Refuge System budget.



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## ECONOMIC BENEFITS OF THE REFUGE SYSTEM

- **Contributes more than \$2.4 billion to local economies**
- **Supports over 35,000 jobs and more than \$792 million in annual employment income**
- **Provides more than \$342 million in annual tax revenue**
- **Generates \$4.87 for local communities for every \$1 appropriated by Congress**

Sources: U.S. Department of the Interior. 2016. Budget Justifications and Performance Information, Fiscal Year 2017; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2016. Annual Performance Report FY2015: National Wildlife Refuge System

Western rural communities particularly benefit from the presence of wildlife refuges. Research shows that employment, personal income, per capita income and population all increase in rural areas with more protected federal public lands compared to areas with less.<sup>12</sup>

In addition, the Refuge System enhances the natural features and processes of healthy ecosystems that clean our air, improve water and soil quality, buffer coastal areas from hurricanes and other storms, decrease erosion and sequester carbon. The estimated value of these refuge ecosystem services is \$32.3 billion,<sup>13</sup> an average return of \$65, or about 6,575 percent, for every dollar appropriated to the Refuge System based on current budget allocations.

President Roosevelt set us on the path to establishing our invaluable National Wildlife Refuge System, but it took almost another 100 years for Congress to pass a legislative mandate to put wildlife first on these conservation lands and provide the legal framework for managing them to preserve the remarkable benefits they provide to wildlife, people and economies.

THIS PAGE: WICHITA MOUNTAINS WILDLIFE REFUGE, OKLAHOMA; OPPOSITE PAGE: CLASS TRIP, SAN DIEGO BAY NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE, CALIFORNIA

## The Evolution of a Conservation System

Conceived on the simple promise to protect things wild and free, the collection of conservation areas that is now our National Wildlife Refuge System was for decades a “system” in name only. Unlike our National Park System or National Forest System, during its formative years the Refuge System functioned without a true “organic act,” a foundational statute articulating a mission statement, policy direction and set of management standards for the system and its individual units.

Following the establishment of Pelican Island National Wildlife Refuge in 1903, President Roosevelt’s conservation vision blossomed over the course of the century as the federal government worked to preserve wildlife and habitat that are essential to our national character. Roosevelt set aside more than 50 refuge units by the end of his administration in 1909.<sup>14</sup> Spurred by the public’s support for conserving wildlife habitat, Congress followed suit, preserving cherished wild places like Oklahoma’s Wichita Mountains, Montana’s

National Bison Range and Wyoming’s National Elk Refuge within the Refuge System’s first decade.

In the 1930s, Congress passed conservation laws to preserve migratory birds, providing authority and funding to support continued growth of the Refuge System. Congress also mandated additional protections for our nation’s public lands, waters and wildlife as industrial development put our natural resources at risk in the decades that followed.

### An emerging legal framework

The National Wildlife Refuge System we know today emerged gradually as Congress enacted the legal framework to administer it. The Refuge Recreation Act of 1962 authorized recreational use of refuges in response to growing public demand for such opportunities. The National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act (Refuge Administration Act) of 1966 helped unify the system by providing basic management guidelines for refuges. Laws like the Endangered Species Act

### THE FEDERAL DUCK STAMP PROGRAM: REVENUE FOR REFUGES

The federal Duck Stamp is an innovative and popular program to fund wildlife habitat acquisition and conservation on the Refuge System. Hunters are required to purchase an annual Duck Stamp to hunt waterfowl, and bird watchers and stamp collectors also purchase the stamps. Ninety-eight percent of Duck Stamp revenue is used to directly support refuge conservation priorities. The Duck Stamp has generated over \$800 million since passage of the Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp Act in 1934, adding more than 5.7 million acres to the Refuge System in the form of 300 new or expanded refuges.

Source: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, “History of the Federal Duck Stamp;” “Duck Stamp Dollars at Work”

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FWS/RYAN MCDERLING

of 1973, which authorized establishment of new refuges to protect and restore imperiled species, bolstered the system. Passage of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act in 1980 entrusted world-class ecological treasures to the Refuge System, nearly tripling its size.

While the national commitment to this exceptional network of public lands and waters remained strong, during the latter half of the 20th century national wildlife refuge management began to falter under increased pressure for oil and gas development, mining, agriculture, livestock grazing, public recreation and military training activities. Motorboats and water skiers overran waterfowl breeding areas, mining and oil production contaminated land and water, military flyovers disrupted wildlife behavior patterns, and water diversions desiccated wetlands.

By the 1990s, the Refuge System's immense conservation potential was eroding and its promise going unfulfilled. Harmful uses were occurring on more than 300 refuge units—over 60 percent of the system—degrading habitat, jeopardizing sensitive species and diverting scarce resources

THIS PAGE: BLACK-FOOTED FERRET, ROCKY MOUNTAIN ARSENAL NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE, COLORADO; OPPOSITE PAGE: MALHEUR NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE, OREGON

away from wildlife management.<sup>15</sup> Many of these threats were the result of tremendous political pressure exerted on the Refuge System by powerful local political and commercial interests. Without stronger legal mandates to shield refuge management, refuges were vulnerable to demands for activities incompatible with wildlife conservation, putting the integrity of the entire system at risk.

Congress eventually acknowledged that the Refuge System needed an organic act. In response to a combination of litigation,<sup>16</sup> executive direction and growing concern from legislators, conservationists, sportsmen and outdoor enthusiasts, Congress took action, pursuing a new policy to ensure wildlife comes first on national wildlife refuges.

### Landmark legislation puts wildlife first at last

In 1997, Congress overwhelmingly passed the landmark National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act.<sup>17</sup> This comprehensive, bipartisan legislation amended the Refuge Administration Act to provide an overarching mission and management direction for the system. Congress finally gave the Refuge System its foundational statute and secured the future of America's refuges for wildlife.

**“The mission of the 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.”**

—*National Wildlife Refuge Improvement Act of 1997*

The Refuge Improvement Act sets forth the principles by which the secretary of the interior carries out the wildlife conservation mission of the Refuge System for all Americans:

- **Compatible use:** All refuge uses must be compatible with the primary purpose of the individual refuge and the wildlife conservation mission of the system. Refuge uses must not materially “interfere with or detract from” fulfillment of either.

- **Prioritization of compatible wildlife-dependent recreational use:** The “Big Six” wildlife-dependent recreational uses—hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, environmental education and interpretation—are the priority general public uses of the Refuge System. When compatible with conservation, these activities must receive enhanced consideration in refuge planning and management.
- **Ecological integrity mandate:** The biological integrity, diversity and environmental health of the Refuge System must be maintained.
- **Conservation planning requirement:** Each refuge must be managed consistent with a comprehensive conservation plan (CCP) developed with robust public involvement and revised every 15 years.

- **Strategic growth criteria:** Continued growth of the Refuge System must be planned and directed in a manner that best conserves the ecosystems of the United States and complements the conservation efforts of state and other federal agencies.

With the enactment of the Refuge Improvement Act, Congress confirmed Roosevelt’s enduring legacy, granting refuge lands and waters one of the strongest-ever legislative charters for a system of nature preserves. The adoption of a compatibility framework depoliticized refuge uses, strengthening the hand of refuge managers to assure consistent wildlife stewardship. Prioritizing the Big Six recreational activities ensured the public’s ability to enjoy our natural heritage. The ecological integrity requirement established a statutory commitment to science-based ecosystem management. The comprehensive conservation planning process offers the public the opportunity to participate in refuge decision-making. The Refuge Improvement Act solidified the Refuge System as the world’s premier wildlife conservation network.

**REFUGE IMPROVEMENT ACT SUCCESS STORY: DING DARLING NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE**

Located on the subtropical barrier island of Sanibel, Florida, J.N. Ding Darling National Wildlife Refuge was created in 1945 to safeguard pristine coastal wetland habitat, imperiled species and migratory birds. The refuge is part of the largest undeveloped mangrove ecosystem in the United States and is world famous for its teeming bird life—more than 245 magnificent species. By 1990, this highly popular refuge had the distinction of being the unit most plagued by uses incompatible with wildlife conservation. Buses, motorboats and commercial fishing caused frequent disturbances, repeatedly flushing migratory birds from their feeding, nesting and roosting areas and otherwise disrupting wildlife behavior, degrading habitat and threatening sensitive species. After passage of the Refuge Improvement Act in 1997, the refuge eliminated or modified uses detrimental to its conservation purposes. The act empowered the refuge manager with the legal authority to stand up to special interest incursions and to ensure that all refuge activities were compatible with wildlife management. Today, Ding Darling is home to thriving species and a robust visitor program that provides safe refuge experiences for people and wildlife.

*“The [Refuge Improvement Act] is proof that when there is a shared commitment to do what is right for our natural resources, partisan and ideological differences can be set aside...”*

—President William Clinton

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ROSEATE SPOONBILLS, DING DARLING NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE, FLORIDA

## A New Era of Attacks on the System

For two decades, the Refuge Improvement Act has ensured that wildlife comes first on national wildlife refuges while conserving these public lands and waters for generations to enjoy. However, despite its incredible value to species, ecosystems and communities, today the National Wildlife Refuge System is facing unprecedented threats and the act's conservation protections are at risk of being circumvented.

### Extremists and legislators take aim

The illegal occupation of Malheur National Wildlife Refuge by anti-government extremists in January 2016 harkened back to the Sagebrush Rebellions of the 1970s and 1980s and portended a new era of destructive political proposals targeted at national wildlife refuges. The recent barrage of political attacks could undermine the integrity of the Refuge System and undo nearly 100 years of work to grow and unify the system and firmly establish that wildlife should come first on our wildlife refuges for the benefit of all Americans.

In contrast to past abuses, many of the recent attacks are now advancing in the halls of Congress. At the bidding of special interests and fueled by fringe politics, anti-conservation legislators have launched an onslaught of bills to sell-off and sell-out our natural heritage. These bills

POLAR BEARS, ARCTIC NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE, ALASKA

### TOP OF BIG OIL'S WISH LIST: ARCTIC NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is a place of singular natural beauty and untouched, rugged wildness. At 19.6 million acres, this spectacular landscape in Alaska provides vital habitat for a diverse array of unique and imperiled species.

The coastal plain is the biological heart of the refuge. This expanse of tundra, lakes, streams and wetlands is the principal calving ground for one of North America's last great caribou herds, our country's most important onshore denning habitat for polar bears, and a nursery for migratory birds that arrive from all 50 states and six continents. This wild sanctuary is so special that a comprehensive scientific assessment recommended it receive the highest level of protection—congressional wilderness designation.

Unfortunately, the coastal plain has long been a target for oil development. Although most Americans are opposed, the 115th Congress, Big Oil and the state of Alaska—which would likely receive 90 percent of any government revenues generated from drilling in the refuge—are again intent on opening the coastal plain to destructive resource extraction. The Trump administration has also proposed that legislators sacrifice this world-class wildlife preserve to short-sighted fossil fuel development and is attempting to open it to seismic exploration.

Drilling in the refuge would have catastrophic consequences. Wilderness and wildlife values would be forever destroyed by a vast industrial complex and associated oil spills, leaks and pollution. Authorizing drilling in our crown jewel refuge could also open the door for similar attacks on other refuges.



seek to dismantle the federal estate or reduce environmental protections to allow indiscriminate drilling, logging, mining and other commercial uses of our public trust resources. This extreme agenda threatens the very concept of public lands and waters—its goal is to seize control of our treasured national parks, forests, monuments and refuges for states and industry to plunder, and the Refuge System is a prime target.

Misguided members of Congress have backed legislation to remove wildlife refuge lands and waters from public ownership, open refuges to industrial development, and subvert wildlife conservation and management on refuges across the country. Examples include the unsuccessful attempt to divest the heart of Vieques National Wildlife Refuge in Puerto Rico, an effort to cede control of more than half of Desert National Wildlife Refuge in Nevada to the military, and the ongoing pursuit of oil drilling in Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Equally egregious are proposals to thwart bedrock

environmental laws and void major initiatives intended to protect sensitive refuge ecosystems. These include bills to strip commonsense oil and gas regulations for the Refuge System and to build a road through wilderness wetlands in Izembek National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska.

Many of these attacks would weaken the Refuge Improvement Act, threatening the strength and effectiveness of the Refuge System and risking a return to the bad old days when harmful, incompatible uses crippled the ability of individual refuges to fulfill their conservation purposes. The success of any of these damaging proposals could set a dangerous political precedent for the entire Refuge System by circumventing its cornerstone law.

Moreover, these unwarranted congressional incursions further burden a Refuge System already starved by a woefully inadequate budget. Annual appropriations for the operations and maintenance budget for the 850-million-acre system are

## NATIONAL AND NATURAL SECURITY: DESERT NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

Congress has repeatedly proposed to hand over control of more than 800,000 acres of Desert National Wildlife Refuge to the Air Force. Doing so would reduce the largest refuge in the contiguous United States to less than half its size.

This refuge of imposing mountains and broad desert basins in Nevada provides the highest quality, intact habitat for desert bighorn sheep, mule deer, mountain lions, 300 species of birds and other wildlife that depend on Great Basin and Mojave Desert ecosystems. It is almost entirely proposed wilderness and lies within an ancestral homeland of Native Americans, preserving cultural antiquities and tribal history.

Transferring control of refuge lands to the military would strip FWS of its authority to conserve species and habitats, further reduce public access, waive environmental protections and threaten wildlife survival. The Air Force hopes to use the lands for combat exercises that include aerial bombing and other harmful activities. In addition to the ongoing legislative threat, the Air Force is pursuing control of the refuge by manipulating an administrative process that is otherwise intended to balance military needs with conservation and other public values.



© DAVID LAMFROM  
DESERT BIGHORN SHEEP



FWS/MORISTINE SOWIL

## A ROAD TO RUN THROUGH IT: IZEMBEK NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

Izembek National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska is an internationally recognized wetland and world-class habitat for migratory birds, marine life and mammals.

On behalf of local interests, the Trump administration and the Alaska delegation are pursuing separate proposals to remove the heart of the refuge from federal public ownership to force construction of a destructive road that would undoubtedly be used for commercial purposes. Both proposals would sacrifice some of the most ecologically important wetlands on the planet, stripping

them of wilderness designation and refuge protections, and undermining conservation of imperiled species.

The Department of the Interior has studied this boondoggle road project exhaustively and repeatedly rejected it. Taxpayers have already paid over \$50 million to provide alternative transportation options to the local community of fewer than 1,000 people. This egregious attempt to sell out Izembek is a precedent-setting threat to wildlife refuges and wilderness protections on public lands across the country.

IZEMBEK NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE, ALASKA

less than \$490 million, only about half of what the system needs. By comparison, the National Park System received \$2.93 billion in Fiscal Year (FY) 2017 to administer its approximately 84 million acres.<sup>18</sup> This deficient budget has forced the Refuge System to cut over 440 full-time employees since FY 2011.<sup>19</sup> Law enforcement is operating at an all-time low, visitor services are reduced, infrastructure is falling into disrepair and habitat management is suffering, even as the number of annual visitors to refuges continues to increase.<sup>20</sup>

The Trump administration has also advanced proposals that undermine the integrity of the National Wildlife Refuge System. The president's 2018 budget proposal—which further cuts funding for refuges—also called for Congress to open the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to oil and gas

development. The administration's "review" of national monuments threatens to downsize and eliminate protections for marine refuge units in the Atlantic and the Pacific. The president's fervent effort to construct a border wall would bisect refuges, destroying habitat, harming endangered species and preventing public use of refuges like Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge. Both the president and the secretary of the interior have also issued orders eliminating conservation programs and policies and threatening regulatory rollbacks that would have dire consequences for the Refuge System.

Between the proliferation of legislative and extremist attacks, insufficient funding and executive misdirection, the entire Refuge System—and the future of wildlife conservation in the United States—are in jeopardy.

## Keeping Wildlife First

From the Arctic to the Caribbean, the Atlantic to the Pacific, the National Wildlife Refuge System is key to the survival of wildlife in America. There is perhaps no greater symbol of the significance and success of our wildlife refuges than the recovery of the bald eagle. In 2007, FWS removed the bald eagle from the endangered species list, a victory in no small part due to protected habitat like that at Rappahannock River Valley Refuge in Virginia, where dozens of bald eagles raise their young along forested river banks.

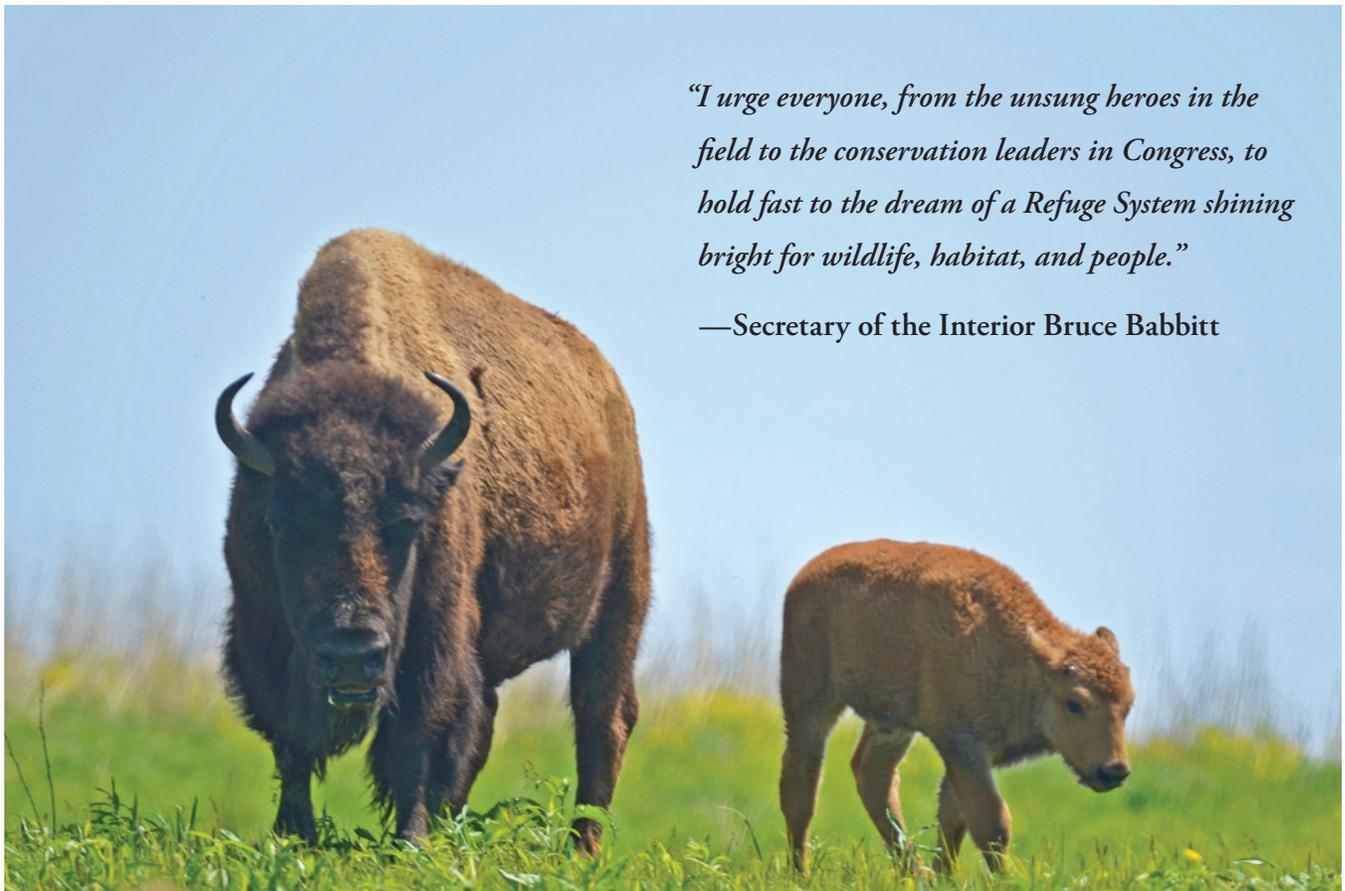
The continued survival of sensitive species and the future health of wildlife everywhere depends on a consistent and intelligent approach to habitat conservation. The incalculable value of conserving refuge lands and waters lies not only in

their importance to wildlife, but also in balancing conservation with public access to compatible outdoor recreation. Congress was acutely aware of this when it overwhelmingly passed the landmark Refuge Improvement Act 20 years ago. To quote FWS, “The National Wildlife Refuge System is a promise to preserve wildlife and habitat for the benefit of all Americans.”<sup>21</sup> The Refuge Improvement Act enshrined this sentiment in law.

Today we must stand up for the Refuge System and defend the Refuge Improvement Act from the political forces that threaten our premier wildlife conservation network and its mission. It is up to us to reaffirm Roosevelt’s historic legacy to guarantee that refuges are protected for our children to enjoy and forever remain places where wildlife comes first.

*“I urge everyone, from the unsung heroes in the field to the conservation leaders in Congress, to hold fast to the dream of a Refuge System shining bright for wildlife, habitat, and people.”*

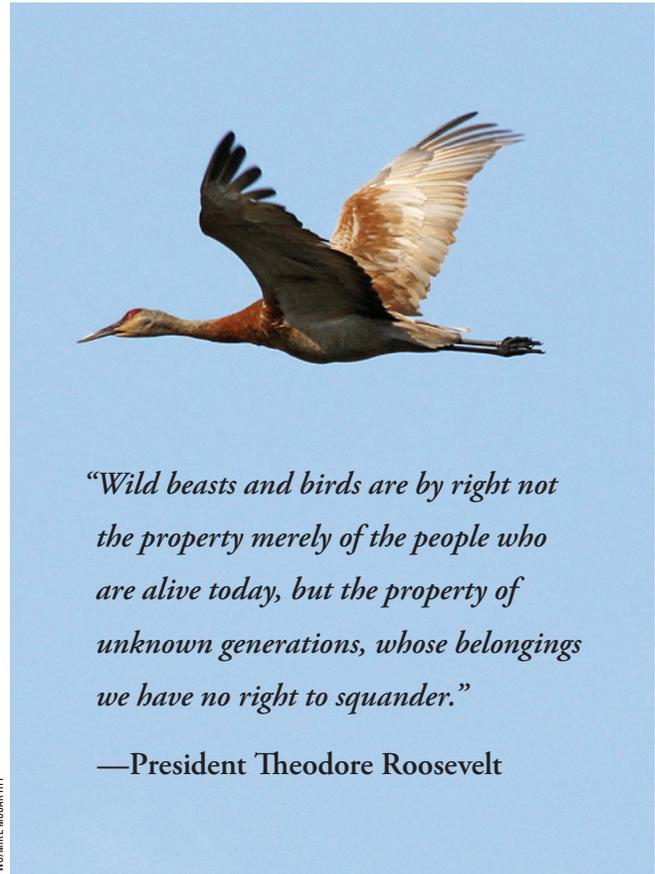
—Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt



## Recommendations for a Strong Refuge System

To ensure a strong National Wildlife Refuge System, Defenders of Wildlife recommends the following measures:

- 1. Uphold the Refuge Improvement Act.** Support congressionally mandated direction for managing the Refuge System. Oppose any efforts to authorize refuge uses that are incompatible with wildlife conservation.
- 2. Oppose efforts to sell-off or sell-out national wildlife refuges.** Reject all proposals to divest or transfer control of vital wildlife habitat to states or special interests. Additionally, reject efforts to increase resource extraction on refuges. These public lands and waters should remain in public hands for all Americans to enjoy.
- 3. Increase funding for the Refuge System.** Secure adequate funding to support the Refuge System at a level commensurate with its benefit to ecosystems and communities. The Refuge System needs \$900 million per year, which should be provided through incremental increases in appropriations over the next four years.
- 4. Encourage public use and engagement with the Refuge System.** Prioritize connecting young people and diverse communities to refuge lands and waters. Support and fund outdoor education, public use and interpretive efforts like the Urban Wildlife Conservation Program.
- 5. Support the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge Wilderness Bill.** Support legislation to designate the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge as wilderness. Passage of this bipartisan bill would permanently protect this irreplaceable wildlife haven from destructive oil drilling.
- 6. Enact the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Resource Protection Act.** Support passage of the Resource Protection Act, which would give FWS, like other federal agencies, authority to collect compensation from parties responsible for harming or destroying Refuge System resources and use the recovered funds to repair the damage, avoiding the need for further appropriations from Congress.



*“Wild beasts and birds are by right not the property merely of the people who are alive today, but the property of unknown generations, whose belongings we have no right to squander.”*

—President Theodore Roosevelt

FWS/MIKE MCCARTHY

## Conclusion

The American public has an historic commitment to conserving wildlife on national wildlife refuges. But today that legacy is seriously threatened. Political pressures Congress so effectively put in check two decades ago with the passage of the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act once again jeopardize the very law that enabled FWS to prioritize species conservation in refuge management. In its second century, the National Wildlife Refuge System remains essential to protecting wildlife and habitat, providing recreational and educational opportunities and generating billions of dollars in local, sustainable revenue. Yet the Refuge System can only continue to provide these benefits if the legal framework protecting it is respected, defended and adequately funded to uphold our shared ethic of strong wildlife stewardship.

THIS PAGE: SANDHILL CRANE, SENEY NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE, MICHIGAN; OPPOSITE PAGE: BISON, NEAL SMITH NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE, IOWA

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI). 2017. Budget Justifications and Performance Information, Fiscal Year 2018 at NWRs-2. Available at <https://www.fws.gov/budget/2018/FY2018-FWS-Greenbook.pdf>.
- <sup>2</sup> U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS). 2017. *Meet the National Wildlife Refuge System for Wildlife and People*. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Washington, DC at 42.
- <sup>3</sup> FWS. *Meet the National Wildlife Refuge System for Wildlife and People* at 3, 38; U.S. Department of the Interior. 2016. Budget Justifications and Performance Information, Fiscal Year 2017 at NWRs-2. Available at [https://www.fws.gov/budget/2016/FY2017\\_FWS\\_Greenbook.pdf](https://www.fws.gov/budget/2016/FY2017_FWS_Greenbook.pdf).
- <sup>4</sup> FWS. “Ash Meadows” (webpage), available at [https://www.fws.gov/refuge/Ash\\_Meadows/about.html](https://www.fws.gov/refuge/Ash_Meadows/about.html) (viewed July 9, 2017).
- <sup>5</sup> FWS. “National Wildlife Refuge System” (webpage), available at <https://www.fws.gov/midwest/refuges/whatwedo.html> (viewed July 9, 2017).
- <sup>6</sup> FWS. *Meet the National Wildlife Refuge System for Wildlife and People* at 4. See also DOI Budget Justifications and Performance Information, Fiscal Year 2018 at NWRs-3.
- <sup>7</sup> DOI. Budget Justifications and Performance Information, Fiscal Year 2018 at NWRs-17.
- <sup>8</sup> DOI. Budget Justifications and Performance Information, Fiscal Year 2018 at EX-1.
- <sup>9</sup> DOI. Budget Justifications and Performance Information, Fiscal Year 2017 at NWRs-16 (citing E. Carver and J.C. Caudill. 2013. *Banking on Nature: The Economic Benefits to Local Communities of National Wildlife Refuge Visitation*. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, available at <https://www.fws.gov/refuges/about/refugereports/pdfs/BankingOnNature2013.pdf>).
- <sup>10</sup> DOI Budget Justifications and Performance Information, Fiscal Year 2017 at NWRs-16 (citing E. Carver and J.C. Caudill, 2013).
- <sup>11</sup> U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2016. Annual Performance Report FY2015: National Wildlife Refuge System at 1. Available at [https://www.fws.gov/refuges/about/RefugeReports/pdfs/RAPP\\_Rpt\\_2015\\_final.pdf](https://www.fws.gov/refuges/about/RefugeReports/pdfs/RAPP_Rpt_2015_final.pdf).
- <sup>12</sup> Headwaters Economics. 2012. *West Is Best: Protected Lands Promote Jobs and Higher Incomes*; available at <https://headwaterseconomics.org/economic-development/trends-performance/west-is-best-value-of-public-lands> (accessed Jan. 26, 2015).
- <sup>13</sup> Southwick Associates. 2011. *The Economics Associated with Outdoor Recreation, Natural Resources Conservation, and Historic Preservation in the United States*. A report for the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation. Fernandina Beach, FL at 3. Available at [https://www.fws.gov/refuges/news/pdfs/TheEconomicValueofOutdoorRecreation\[1\].pdf](https://www.fws.gov/refuges/news/pdfs/TheEconomicValueofOutdoorRecreation[1].pdf)
- <sup>14</sup> FWS. 2015. *Meet the National Wildlife Refuge System: Special Places Where Wildlife and People Thrive*. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Falls Church, VA at 6; R.L. Fischman. 2003. *THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGES: COORDINATING A CONSERVATION SYSTEM THROUGH LAW*. Island Press, Washington DC at 35.
- <sup>15</sup> FWS. Compatibility Task Group. 1990. Report to the Director: A Review of Secondary Uses Occurring on National Wildlife Refuges. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service at 25.
- <sup>16</sup> National Audubon Society v. Babbitt, Civil No. C92-1641 (W.D. Wash) (filed Oct. 22, 1992, settled Oct. 20, 1993) (requiring agency to conclude compatibility determinations for refuge uses). The litigation culminated in a broad-based settlement in 1993 that led to a significant decrease in incompatible refuge uses.
- <sup>17</sup> National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997. Public Law 105-57, Oct. 9, 1997. 111 Stat. 1252, codified at 16 U.S.C. §§ 668dd *et seq.*
- <sup>18</sup> House Appropriations Committee. *FY 2017 Omnibus Summary-Interior and Environment Appropriations* at 3, available at [https://appropriations.house.gov/uploadedfiles/05.01.17\\_fy\\_2017\\_omnibus\\_-\\_interior\\_-\\_summary.pdf](https://appropriations.house.gov/uploadedfiles/05.01.17_fy_2017_omnibus_-_interior_-_summary.pdf) (viewed July 10, 2017); see also Senate Appropriations Committee. *Omnibus Summary* at 25, available at <https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/1%20Compiled%20Press%20Summaries--FY17%20Omni.pdf> (viewed July 10, 2017).
- <sup>19</sup> FWS. 2016. Annual Performance Report FY2015: National Wildlife Refuge System at 5. Available at [https://www.fws.gov/refuges/about/RefugeReports/pdfs/RAPP\\_Rpt\\_2015\\_final.pdf](https://www.fws.gov/refuges/about/RefugeReports/pdfs/RAPP_Rpt_2015_final.pdf).
- <sup>20</sup> FWS. Annual Performance Report FY2015: National Wildlife Refuge System at 6-12.
- <sup>21</sup> FWS. *National Wildlife Refuge System Archives: Fulfilling the Promise*, available at <https://www.fws.gov/refuges/whm/promises/index.html> (viewed July 10, 2017).





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