

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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75th BIRTHDAY OF NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM THIS MONTH

Seventy-five years ago this month, a Presidential decree to protect some strange-looking brown birds created Pelican Island Bird Sanctuary, the beginning of what is now the world's greatest network of lands managed for the benefit of wildlife--the National Wildlife Refuge System.

"The refuge system is this Nation's insurance policy for an enduring rich and diverse wildlife heritage for future generations of Americans," said Secretary of the Interior Cecil D. Andrus.

"I urge every citizen to visit a national wildlife refuge in this, the diamond anniversary year of the system's founding. It's ironic that many of us visit zoos, drive through animal parks, and watch countless programs about wildlife on television, but relatively few of us take advantage of the unparalleled opportunities our refuges provide for observing wild creatures in their natural habitat. Such experiences are not only enjoyable in themselves, they also demonstrate the foresight of past generations and impress on us our own responsibility for protecting and perpetuating our wildlife resources," Andrus said.

In addition to providing opportunities to view wildlife, many refuges are outdoor classrooms with environmental education programs to interpret the wildlife and their habitats to visitors. Walking trails, visitor centers, auto tour routes, and other facilities are provided on many

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refuges along with fishing, hunting, and other outdoor activities when appropriate. Last year, Americans made about 30 million visits to national wildlife refuges.

On March 14, 1903, President Theodore Roosevelt signed the Executive order, seemingly insignificant at the time, that set aside a 3-acre island off the east coast of Florida as a bird sanctuary. A brown pelican rookery on the island was declining because of human harassment on its nesting grounds. Herons and egrets, which nested near the pelicans, were the targets of people hunting plumes for the millinery trade who disturbed and slaughtered all three species.

Roosevelt's action--the first Federal move to protect wildlife by safeguarding habitat--in effect established the land management responsibility of what would later become the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service of the Department of the Interior.

The refuge system stands to gain 40 to 50 million acres of new wildlife refuges by the end of the year, when Congress settles the land claims of Alaska's Natives according to the 1971 Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act. This would more than double the current size of the refuge system and would preserve entire ecosystems with their watersheds intact, their rivers and streams clean and pure and their wildlife populations healthy.

"As the country grows and more and more wild things are replaced by the inanimate hallmarks of progress," Andrus said, "our refuges and parks will always be there to uplift dismal spirits, to renew faith in life itself, and for a while at least, these Federal lands will allow us to go back and see the best part of the past. And it's a good feeling."

Today, 386 national wildlife refuges range from the Arctic Ocean to the South Pacific, from Maine to the Caribbean. They vary in size from half-acre parcels to areas covering thousands of square miles and encompass 32.5 million acres of the Nation's best habitats for wildlife. The refuge system also includes more than 1.5 million acres of waterfowl production areas in the Northern Prairie States. Refuges occur in every one of the 17 major life zones of North America, and in all but one of the 50 States. The kinds of natural areas they protect are as diverse and complex as the wildlife species that live on them.

Numerous refuges and waterfowl production areas are located in the prairie pothole region of the North-Central United States where hundreds of thousands of water-filled depressions, created by retreating glaciers during the last Ice Age, are found. These potholes, lakes, and marshes make this region one of the most productive waterfowl breeding areas in North America.

The freshwater marshes and swamps of the South are another important habitat type which refuges preserve. The meandering bayous, flooded hardwood flats, and permanently flooded swamps of this region are critical

production and wintering grounds for wood ducks and support some of the largest mallard concentrations in North America.

Coastal and estuarine refuges include fresh and salt water marshes, rocky seashores, sand spits, beaches, and offshore islands. These refuges were established mainly as resting, feeding, and nesting areas for migratory birds and marine mammals.

The western game ranges are an entirely different type of refuge. Some consist of arid desert lands; some are rugged mountains and alluvial outwash plains--ideal sanctuaries for the desert bighorn sheep, white-winged doves, and Gambels quail.

The refuges in Alaska represent other unique areas of the continent. These huge refuges sometimes encompass entire towns and villages as well as glaciers, rugged mountain ranges, volcanoes, vast marshes, glacial lakes and streams, tidal lagoons, and arctic tundra.

Ocean island refuges range from the tropical islands of Hawaii and American Samoa to the inhospitable Aleutian Islands of Alaska. They vary from flat, sandy coral atolls to rocky pinnacles and small volcanic peaks.

"Our national wildlife refuges are often thought of as self-operating wildlife paradises from the time they are established," said Andrus. "Many are. But more often than not they have been developed from areas that were misused in the past by drainage, lumbering, burning, or overgrazing and have required restoration by wildlife managers to become first-class wildlife habitat."

Management on refuges consists mostly of manipulating plant communities and water levels to create the most favorable habitat for wildlife species. Because each species occupies a particular ecological niche and has its own specific food, water, and living requirements, management programs and techniques vary considerably from refuge to refuge to accommodate the wildlife present at any particular time. Other management activities which are sometimes used on refuges include farming to supplement natural food supplies, regulated livestock grazing to improve habitat for wildlife, planting of cover vegetation, soil conservation techniques, controlled burning, forestry programs, or rough-fish control. Since people enjoy and benefit from refuges, public use management is also an important activity.

When not in conflict with the management objectives of a refuge, hunting, fishing, and trapping are allowed in accordance with State law, often as important wildlife management tools. For example, deer herds may be managed to keep them from becoming too large for an area to support and thereby threatening to destroy the habitat for themselves and other species. This deer management may include controlled hunting.

After the refuge system's modest beginning at Pelican Island, other parcels of land and water were soon dedicated to save America's dwindling

wildlife. Most of the early units were designated as sanctuaries for colonial nesting birds or big game species such as elk, antelope, and buffalo.

Migrating waterfowl came under Federal jurisdiction in 1918 as a result of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act which protected birds migrating between Canada and the United States. Although the law made no direct provision for refuges, it stimulated conservation activities and offered the birds protection during both the nesting and wintering cycles.

As the Depression and Dust Bowl of the early 1930's developed, much of the migratory waterfowl population appeared doomed. In 1929, the Migratory Bird Conservation Act provided authority for the purchase of lands needed for migratory bird refuges, but because of the Depression, insufficient funds were appropriated for the purpose. Then, in 1934 the Migratory Bird Hunting Stamp Act bolstered the refuge program by providing urgently needed additional funds derived from the annual sales of the "duck stamp," now officially called the Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp. More than \$188 million spent by hunters and other conservationists to buy the stamps have been used to purchase 2.3 million acres of migratory bird habitat.

As the refuge concept continued to grow, so did the acreage of lands managed specifically for wildlife. Refuges for the conservation and protection of all kinds of wildlife were authorized by the Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956. The Endangered Species Conservation Act of 1966 provided the first specific authority to establish refuges for the protection of vanishing wildlife, and today a number of refuges exist to protect specific endangered species such as the whooping crane, Key deer, and California condor. In 1966, the collection of national wildlife refuges was officially named the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Although refuges are popular places to find large numbers of wildlife, they harbor more than just birds and mammals. Protection is also given to many species of plants, fish, insects, amphibians, and reptiles that each year become more difficult to find elsewhere.

The National Wildlife Refuge System is slightly larger than its older cousin, the National Park System, and many people confuse the two.

The National Park Service administers an extensive system of national parks, monuments, historic sites, and recreation areas. Its objectives are to administer the properties under its jurisdiction for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of Americans and to protect the natural environment of the areas.

The refuge system is oriented toward the management of wildlife, although the fine scenic and historical values that are preserved along with the wildlife also attract visitors.