

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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THREE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGES FOR MIGRATORY WATERFOWL TO BE ESTABLISHED IN SOUTH'S MISSISSIPPI RIVER DELTA

Mallards, wood ducks, and other migratory waterfowl will find the South more hospitable this fall with the establishment of three new national wildlife refuges in the birds' diminishing bottomland forest habitat in Mississippi, Tennessee, and Arkansas.

The \$7.3 million in funding for the three initial tracts, which total 8,372 acres, was authorized May 20 by the Migratory Bird Conservation Commission. Under the Migratory Bird Conservation Act, the Commission approves proposed waterfowl refuges and their purchase prices.

The refuges--Mathews Brake in central Mississippi, Lower Hatchie in west Tennessee, and Overflow Bottoms in southeast Arkansas--are all part of the lower Mississippi River Delta, which has been steadily drained and cleared for agricultural purposes since the arrival of the pioneers. This conversion from forest to cropland is continuing at a rate of approximately 260,000 acres annually, and it is estimated that by 1985 less than 5 of the original 24 million acres will remain of this unique ecosystem and vital habitat. The Service has identified this rapid decline as a top priority problem for action in the 1980s.

Mathews Brake National Wildlife Refuge in Mississippi will be established with the purchase of 850 acres. The Service plans to acquire a total of 4,079 acres as negotiations with landowners proceed and funds become available. Mathews Brake is an important wintering area for mallards and includes exceptional nesting habitat for wood ducks. Peak wintering populations there often exceed 30,000 waterfowl.

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