



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

Fish and Wildlife Service

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NEW NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE PROTECTS LOUISIANA WETLANDS

Lake Ophelia National Wildlife Refuge (NWR), a planned 30,000-acre expanse of bottomland hardwood backwater swamp in Avoyelles Parish, Louisiana, has been dedicated as the 448th unit of the National Wildlife Refuge System, Secretary of the Interior Manuel Lujan, Jr. announced today.

"President Bush and I are committed to the preservation of wetlands and recreational areas for the American people and have made this one of four top priorities," Lujan said.

The refuge was dedicated February 14 at ceremonies at the Mansura Bank Camp on Old River. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director Frank Dunkle attended the ceremonies along with United States Senator J. Bennett Johnston; Representative Clyde C. Holloway; Nancy Jo Craig, Louisiana Executive Director of The Nature Conservancy; Raymond J. Laborde of the Louisiana House of Representatives; Fish and Wildlife Service Assistant Director Sam Marler; and Southeast Regional Director James W. Pulliam, Jr.

Located about 30 miles southeast of Alexandria, Louisiana, Lake Ophelia NWR will provide wintering habitat for an anticipated 100,000 mallard and pintail ducks. Many other duck species, including blue-winged teal, gadwalls, and wood ducks, also use the area. The new refuge also provides habitat for American alligators, the endangered bald eagle, and many other species.

"We want to thank the Louisiana Congressional delegation, The Nature Conservancy, and all the groups and individuals who have worked so diligently in recent months to make this refuge a reality," Dunkle said.

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The new refuge was the Fish and Wildlife Service's number one acquisition priority under the Lower Mississippi Joint Venture of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan, according to Dunkle.

The North American Waterfowl Management Plan is an international conservation agreement signed in May 1986 by the United States and Canada to rebuild continental waterfowl populations and preserve and restore key habitats for waterfowl and other wetland-dependent species. The fall flight index of ducks in 1988 was only 66 million, the second lowest on record, compared to 100 million during the mid 1970's.

The Service acquired the initial tract of land for the refuge, encompassing 1,536 acres, on June 30, 1988. The Nature Conservancy (TNC), a private, national conservation organization that acquires and protects habitats of significant wildlife or botanical values, is currently purchasing a tract totalling more than 7,874 acres of wetlands habitat in the vicinity of Lake Ophelia. Of this, the Fish and Wildlife Service is scheduled to acquire in fee title 5,150 acres and lease with option to buy the remaining 2,724 acres from The Nature Conservancy. The Service has also tentatively reached agreement to acquire through a lease/purchase from a private landowner an additional 3,200 acres. Funding for the Lake Ophelia acquisition came from Land and Water Conservation Fund monies authorized and appropriated by the 100th Congress.

Altogether, the Fish and Wildlife Service intends to acquire approximately 30,000 acres to comprise Lake Ophelia NWR and 12,000 acres for the proposed nearby Grand Cote NWR. The Nature Conservancy also is assisting the Service with acquisition for Grand Cote NWR.

"The role of The Nature Conservancy in establishing the Lake Ophelia and Grand Cote National Wildlife Refuges underscores the importance of public and private partnership in the protection of important habitats," said TNC's Nancy Jo Craig. "The Nature Conservancy was able to respond quickly to the request of the Service to negotiate and acquire both Lake Ophelia and the Grand Cote areas."

Bottomland hardwood and cypress swamp habitats in the lower Mississippi Valley are important wintering areas for migratory waterfowl and host rich and diverse fish, wildlife, and plant communities. Since signing of the North American Plan in 1986, the Fish and Wildlife Service has accelerated efforts to locate and protect such areas in order to ensure environmental quality as well as quantity in wintering waterfowl habitat.