

NEWS *from the National Wildlife Refuge System*

September 6, 1996 Kevin Kilcullen 703-358-2029

LIGHTHOUSES: PROTECTING WILDLIFE AS WELL AS SAILORS

The 1996 Federal Duck Stamp depicts a pair of surf scoters with the historic Barnegat Lighthouse, located at **Edwin B. Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge**, in the background. This combination is more than a matter of pleasing design. While everyone knows lighthouses keep sailors safe, fewer realize that lighthouses also play a major role in protecting migratory birds.

Often located on deserted islands or stretches of coast, lighthouse property provides important bird nesting habitats as other coastal areas become developed. As early as 1860, the Smithsonian Institution asked lightkeepers to help collect specimens and protect bird populations. Beginning in the 1970s, as lighthouse automation eliminated the need for stations staffed by keepers and their families, some light stations were transferred to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for management as wildlife refuges.

Although its primary mission is to protect wildlife, the Service maintains the lighthouses as a way of preserving our cultural heritage, much as the lighthouse keepers once protected our natural heritage from human encroachment. Today, more than a dozen lighthouses exist on national wildlife refuges throughout the country, protecting areas beneficial to both our natural and cultural heritage.

Petit Manan Light at **Petit Manan National Wildlife Refuge** in Maine was built in 1855. Because the light is on an island, lighthouse keepers and their families led an unusual life, one that required a close community. Doors were never locked and, as a result, a keeper's daughter recalled how her mother came downstairs one morning to discover two sailors sleeping by the kitchen fire. They had developed engine trouble and come ashore during the night, making themselves at home and knowing that they would be made welcome. At present, the Fish and Wildlife Service and the Coast Guard co-manage the light station, which is listed on the National Register for Historic Places.

Monomoy Point Light at **Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge** in Massachusetts was established in 1823, though the current lighthouse was built later, in 1855. Monomoy Point used to host a community as well as a lighthouse. The people of Whitewash Village prospered through lobster fishing and salvaging the cargo from wrecked ships. When the fishery diminished in 1860, the people left. After 1923 when the lighthouse was purchase by a private individual, the island came to be used by hunters, then by the Navy as a practice bombing range during World War II, and



AMERICA'S NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGES...

where wildlife comes naturally!

finally became a national wildlife refuge. In 1954, a large colony of terns settled on the island, which was also home to 246 species of birds. The lighthouse is listed on the National Register.

Sea Horse Key Light at Cedar Key National Wildlife Refuge in Florida was built in 1854. Sea Horse Key Light's history dates back to 1801 when a man named Bowles, who received a commission in the Royal Navy for his loyalty during the Revolutionary War and then turned pirate, proclaimed himself the "Director General of the State of Muskogee," located between the Apalachicola River and St. Marks in the panhandle. His self-declared state included many pirates, some of whom used Cedar Key as a lookout point for Spanish warships and potential prey. The Spanish, impatient with Bowles and his followers, routed them in 1802. In the mid-19th Century, the U.S. government established the lighthouse on the site of the watchtower but with a more legitimate purpose: to facilitate trade along the Suwannee River. The refuge protects more than 100 of the endangered brown pelicans native to the area and the light, which is listed on the National Register as a part of the Cedar Keys Historic and Archeological District. The light can be reached by boat although access is limited by the University of Florida.

Thacher's Island Light, North Tower, at Parker River National Wildlife Refuge in Massachusetts was built in 1861. The island was named for a couple who survived a 1635 shipwreck in which their children and 17 other passengers died. Despite a large number of shipwrecks, no light was established until 1771. Problems persisted even after the light was built. One of the keepers was dismissed for encouraging shipwrecks by extinguishing the light and then taking a share of the wreckers' profits. Although dismissing the dishonest lightkeeper ensured that the light would remain lit, scandal persisted. At the death of one keeper, his wife assumed his duties, only to have the previous keeper contest her appointment. When the government upheld her appointment, the disgruntled former keeper resorted to slander although he never regained his position. The Fish and Wildlife Service maintains the tower through a cooperative agreement with the Thacher Island Association of the Town of Rockport. The light is now listed on the National Register as part of the Twin Lights Historic District.

Kilauea Point Light at Kauai Point National Wildlife Refuge in Hawaii was built in 1913. In a blend of mainland and island culture, the light's opening celebration included the usual speech-making as well as a luau and a shark shoot. The keepers, many of whom were Hawaiian natives, spent much of their free time in Kilauea Town, even though roads were so limited that keepers had to bring supplies to the lighthouse by water. Perhaps because of its isolation, the Kilauea Light Station supported an

extensive and varied bird population even when it served as a lighthouse. The light is listed on the National Register.

Assateague Light at Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge in Virginia was built in 1867 and is listed on the National Register. It was painted with distinctive red and white bands so that sailors could differentiate it from nearby lighthouses during the daytime, much as the specific series of flashes identified each light station at night. This practice was applied only to the lighthouses between New York and Florida. As a rule, the tall lighthouses were painted with patterns of black and white, some in diagonal stripes, some, like at Assateague Light, horizontal, and others in diamonds. The light station, which the Fish and wildlife Service co-manages with the Coast Guard, can be seen as visitors enter the refuge. The refuge is further distinguished because it provides habitat for the piping plover and Delmarva Peninsula fox squirrel, as well as the world-famous Chincoteague ponies.

Want to know more about your National Wildlife Refuges or get involved? Call 1-800-344-WILD; visit the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service home page at <http://www.fws.gov> and click on National Wildlife Refuge System; or better yet, visit some of your 500-plus national wildlife refuges across the country!