REFUGES PROFILED

SEEDSKADEE / BOSQUE DEL APACHE / DETROIT RIVER INTERNATIONAL / SHELDON-HART MOUNTAIN

NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGES:

A HUNTING AND FISHING PERSPECTIVE
Originally set aside to conserve habitat, these landscapes provide more than a haven for fish and wildlife—they provide equitable outdoor opportunities for all Americans.

National Wildlife Refuges span every corner of the United States and its territories—from Selawik NWR in northwest Alaska to Vieques NWR in Puerto Rico, and from to Aroostook NWR in northeast Maine to Guam NWR in the western Pacific. Today, there are 567 refuges, totaling more than 150 million acres—larger than the states of Washington, Nebraska, and South Dakota combined. Every state and U.S. territory has at least one refuge, ranging from the half-acre islands of Mille Lacs NWR in central Minnesota to the massive Arctic NWR at more than 19 million acres.

These vast public lands have been set aside to prioritize the conservation of fish and wildlife, and refuges provide habitat for more than 220 species of mammals, 700 species of birds, and 1,250 species of fish, reptiles, and amphibians. Among these are numerous game species, plus nearly 400 endangered and threatened species for which these places are critical to recovery.

Like our national parks and monuments, the National Wildlife Refuge System was the brainchild of concerned hunters and anglers in the early 20th century. Instead of setting aside places because of their unique geology like Yellowstone and the Grand Canyon, these conservation-minded sportsmen set aside areas of essential habitat for wildlife, both terrestrial and aquatic. Historically, the vast majority of refuges have been created by executive or administrative action, while the rest were established by acts of the United States Congress. Each individual refuge is established for a specific purpose, and managing these places for that purpose is the responsibility of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, an agency of the Department of the Interior. While the system’s main priority is the conservation of our fish and wildlife, many units allow other uses like crop production, livestock grazing, and—perhaps most notably—wildlife-dependent recreation, including hunting and fishing.

In fact, more than 75 percent of national wildlife refuges are open to the public with 50 million Americans visiting annually, participating in what are known as the “Big Six” refuge-compatible recreational activities of hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, environmental education, and interpretation. Currently, 427 refuge units are open to hunting and 376 are open to fishing.

To some, it might seem counterintuitive to allow hunting and angling within refuges for fish and wildlife. But these activities have been an important part of the system from its very inception. When compatible with the primary purpose of a refuge, hunting and fishing are important tools for managing wildlife populations, connecting people to nature, and generating local economic revenue.

Looking ahead, strategic and locally supported expansion of the National Wildlife Refuge System would help to provide all Americans with increased access to nature regardless of their income or background, to conserve biodiversity, and to sustain fish and wildlife habitat connectivity. Sportsmen and sportswomen have been the system’s earliest champions, its strongest advocates, and its most generous contributors; no doubt they will continue to have a central role in its future.
For more than a century, America’s strongest advocates for the future of fish, wildlife, and healthy habitat have been hunters and anglers. The first step toward a system of wildlife management was established as an agency under the Department of the Interior in 1840, but it wasn’t until 1906 that the habitat previously set aside for fish and wildlife conservation received official recognition as the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Four years earlier, the Refuge Recreation Act had established what would become one of the system’s underlying principles: that any recreational use of a refuge must be compatible with its management plan. Yet in 1899, a federal report outlined the need for major reform in the National Wildlife Refuge System. Mining, off-road vehicles, airboating, waterskiing, and military aviation exercises within refuges were having an adverse effect on fish and wildlife. Local pressures and a lack of jurisdiction over many refuge resources hampered the Fish and Wildlife Service from addressing these issues.

In response, a bipartisan group of lawmakers and various stakeholders worked toward a solution. With a primary sponsor and seven co-sponsors in the House—five Democrats and three Republicans—the bill passed with only one dissenting vote. The bill passed the Senate unanimously.

The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 established a management framework for the system as well as comprehensive guidance on how refuges should be managed and used by the public. It recognized hunting and fishing as among six priority uses for these areas, by legislative action. Congress amended the Duck Stamp Act in 1958 to allow the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to protect wetlands and uplands identified as WPAs. Today, there are nearly 5,000 WPAs covering 780,000 acres of vital waterfowl habitat. And every acre was paid for by duck hunters.

From hunting and fishing licenses to excise taxes on their equipment, hunters and anglers have always paid their way, including more than $1 billion in Duck Stamp purchases alone.
National wildlife refuges are integral to the conservation of America’s fish and wildlife. They also provide a place for Americans to relax and recreate—from birding and hiking, to hunting and fishing. To continue these traditions, new or expanded refuges need a framework to garner broad support from the fishing and hunting community. The following tenets must be followed to secure the sporting community’s support for additions and expansions.

1. Proposals for new or expanded national wildlife refuges should be developed through a public process—one that includes hunters and anglers, state fish and wildlife agencies, agricultural producers, as well as appropriate State, Tribal, and local governments, and the general public.

2. For refuges created out of public lands administered by a separate land management agency, state fish and wildlife agencies should retain authority over the management of fish and wildlife populations to the maximum extent allowed by law.

3. The input of hunters and anglers should inform all applicable management plans for national wildlife refuges.

4. Protection of important fish and wildlife habitat should be the highest priority of any refuge.

5. Proposals for new or expanded national wildlife refuges will require support from the public, including hunters and anglers.

6. Hunting and fishing opportunities should be prioritized as “wildlife-dependent recreational uses” to the maximum extent, and public access should be enhanced or expanded where compatible with the objectives of any new or existing refuge to ensure no net loss of hunting and fishing opportunities across the refuge system.

7. Reasonable public access should be established or retained to enable continued hunting, fishing, and other recreational opportunities, as compatible with refuge objectives.

8. Funding should be dedicated to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to secure the resources, staffing, and expertise required to effectively manage the refuge system, including any new or expanded refuge units.

9. New or expanded refuge units should bolster ecosystem health by conserving year-round, seasonal, and migratory habitats for both game and non-game species, including “species of greatest conservation need” that have been identified by state fish and wildlife agencies.

10. Consistent with National Wildlife Refuge System policies, cooperative agriculture such as haying and grazing on refuge lands should continue to the extent that it meets specific wildlife or habitat management goals and objectives.

11. New or expanded refuges should prioritize opportunities to add unique fish, wildlife, or ecological values and hunting and angling opportunities that are underrepresented in the refuge system.

12. To the maximum extent practicable and consistent with refuge purposes, regulations governing hunting and fishing on new or expanded refuges should remain consistent with state regulations and limit additional restrictions on hunting and fishing opportunities.
A TROUT OASIS IN THE DESERT

Tucked between two dams in southwest Wyoming, the habitat here is a boon for wildlife and a playground for anglers.

Described by many as an oasis in the desert, the 27,230-acre Seedskadee National Wildlife Refuge in southwest Wyoming serves as a haven for wildlife and people alike. Bordering the north by Fontenelle Dam and to the south by Flaming Gorge Dam, the habitat nestled in between and on either side of the Green River is home to greater sage grouse and iconic big game species such as pronghorn and Shiras moose. In fact, the refuge takes its name from the Shoshone language and translates to “river of the prairie hen.”

In 1965, Seedskadee was established to mitigate the impacts of reservoir development on wildlife habitat in various drainages of the Colorado River. Thirty-six miles of the Green River, a Colorado River tributary, flow through the heart of Seedskadee and comprise the lifeblood of the refuge. Waterfowl and wetland birds such as Canada geese and common goldeneye nest here, while golden eagles, mountain bluebirds, and countless other avian species call the refuge home. In short, it’s a birder’s paradise.

Hunting, too, is encouraged on the refuge. Waterfowl hunters ply the marshes for ducks, coots and geese, while big game hunters stalk the plains and coulees for elk, mule deer, white-tailed deer, moose, and pronghorn. As is the case on refuges, hunters and anglers must comply with regulations set by the state wildlife agency, as well as those established by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for the specific refuge.

While birders and hunters recreate here, the fishery is a major lure because it’s nothing short of unreal. Here, the Green River is considered a tailwater fishery, meaning the waterflows and subsequent water temperature are controlled by the dam. The refuge features a variety of sportfish, including Snake River and Bonneville cutthroat, and rainbow and brown trout—all of which can grow insanely large. In the fall, Kokanee salmon migrate into the waters of the refuge from Flaming Gorge Reservoir to spawn. While it may be tucked away in a far corner of Wyoming’s high desert, Seedskadee National Wildlife Refuge is a special place. For the migratory birds, massive fish, big game, and upland birds that call this place home, and for the people who depend on this place for its sporting opportunities, it is an oasis in every sense of the word.

SEEDSKADEE

WYOMING

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A restored landscape once again harbors healthy fish and wildlife

For thousands of years, the area we now call the Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge was shaped by the cyclical flooding of the Rio Grande. Each spring, the river would swell with snowmelt from the mountains, then recede, and then swell again with summer rains. The ebb and flow of the water level created ponds, marshes, and other habitat for tens of thousands of migratory birds and other wildlife. The fertile soil sustained many centuries of indigenous settlement in pueblos along the river.

As early as the 1700s, however, the face of the river and floodplain began to change. The Rio Grande was dammed, dried, and diverted until it was just a shallow stream. The dynamic nature of the river had been reduced to a trickle. Prior to this development, the area of the Bosque del Apache, only 80 miles south of Albuquerque, was the winter home for an estimated 15,000 to 20,000 migrating sandhill cranes. By 1940, though, sandhill crane populations were thought to total only around 1,000 birds with only 17 spotted wintering in the Bosque. Without the floods, food for sandhill cranes and other bird species disappeared.

In an effort to restore this habitat, the Civilian Conservation Corps worked to emulate what nature had perfected. They built canals, gates and ditches, allowing managers to manipulate water levels as a means of recreating the flooded fields and marshes. It worked, and in 1939, President Franklin Roosevelt officially designated the refuge. Now, tens of thousands of sandhill cranes and snow geese as well as hundreds of other bird species depend on those human-made marshes and ponds. In addition, the refuge and surrounding lands provide recreational opportunities for birders, hunters, and anglers. Rio Grande turkeys attract sportmen and sportswomen in the spring, while fall brings opportunities to pursue mule deer, javelina and oryx. Anglers fish for catfish and carp, while gigging American bullfrog—which offer excellent table fare—is encouraged as they are a non-native species.

Change has been a constant on the Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge. It’s what has defined the area, and what continues to shape it. Looking to the future, those who care about this landscape—sportmen and sportswomen in particular—will ensure that whatever changes may come will be for the benefit of fish, wildlife, and the habitat on which they depend.

Matthew Monjaras moved a lot with his family when he was a kid. The one constant in his life was fishing and the outdoors. “The river’s been a big part of my life,” he says. “Fishing and the outdoors have always been my safe harbor.”

Now, at 35, Monjaras has found his calling in life as an educator. He’s closing in on a degree in elementary education and hopes that places like Bosque will still be a haven for fish and wildlife when his son Carter is old enough to hunt. The outdoors is the perfect classroom, he says.

Sharing his knowledge of the landscape with others is important to Monjaras. He founded the nonprofit organization Impact Outdoors in New Mexico, which helps military veterans get out in the field and on the water, while also teaching them about conservation. “If you can take someone out for the day, if that’s what they need, and they have a great day, then that’s a win. If they come back and want to do it again, that’s another win and a win for the community. It’s just a big thank you.”

Monjaras and his guests don’t hunt the refuge much. Rather, they hunt the adjacent lands, but he says the waterfowl and turkeys depend on the habitat the Bosque provides. And if he and a couple veterans get to take home a few for the freezer, all the better.

An educator at heart, Monjaras isn’t one to pass up an opportunity to explain the conservation model responsible for this incredible resource. “On the Bosque, I see birders and photographers the most,” he says. “I ask them if they bought their Duck Stamp. And nine out of 10 have never heard of it.”

Matthew Monjaras
Founder of Impact Outdoors in New Mexico

Matthew Monjaras
Founder of Impact Outdoors in New Mexico
Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge

Smokestacks and Habitat

Against the backdrop of cooling towers and barge traffic, fish and wildlife thrive in an oasis of opportunity for hunters and anglers.

Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge

Surrounded by industry and nuclear and coal-fired power plants, while only an hour’s drive from 7 million souls, there is a place where people and wildlife can get away to nature. Only 20 miles south of Detroit and 50 miles north of Toledo, Ohio, visitors to the Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge can bird, kayak, hunt, and eat most of the fish they catch. That wasn’t always the case.

Rapid industrialization in the early twentieth century polluted the area’s waterways with waste and sewage. Killing thousands of birds and fish, these toxins made the water unsafe for human consumption and even recreation. In 1961, Michigan lawmaker John Lesinski Jr. worked to create the 304-acre Wyandotte National Wildlife Refuge, establishing a model for future protections in the area.

In 2000, Michigan Congressman John Dingell spearheaded a movement to protect an even larger swath of habitat on the Detroit River. Bringing together local stakeholders, as well as regional, state, and federal agencies, Dingell introduced legislation that would usher in a new era for the sporting community, fish, and wildlife. In 2001, President George W. Bush signed it into law.

The refuge is the first wildlife refuge to boast international management status as it shares a border with Canada. More than 6,200 acres owned and cooperatively managed by the Refuge extend along 48 miles of shoreline, and the refuge’s islands, wetlands, marshes and waterfront are an angler’s diamond-in-the-rough. Eight different management units are open to hunters.

Opportunities for whitetailed deer, turkey, ring-necked pheasant, and small game, rabbits, squirrels, and migratory birds are managed cooperatively by state and federal agencies.

Recently, the Detroit River made national headlines when a fisheries survey crew caught a 6-foot 10-inch, 240-pound lake sturgeon from its waters. Estimated to be more than 100 years old, the prehistoric fish was measured and released back into the river to live out the rest of her days. With proper management and protections for the area’s fish and wildlife, chances are she won’t be the last century-old sturgeon to break the surface.

Access for All

Situated in close proximity to densely populated urban centers, the refuge plays an important role in providing access to outdoor recreational opportunities for the surrounding communities, thanks in large part to significant pollution reduction and habitat restoration efforts on the Detroit River and western Lake Erie.

Brian Preston

Veteran and frog leg connoisseur

Brian Preston likes to coat his frog legs with a little olive oil, sear them on both sides, and then add a little white wine, before steaming them to perfection. “They just fall off the bone,” he says. Preston loves to catch frogs with his sons in the marshes of the Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge.

Preston acknowledges that the refuge’s industrial surroundings might seem strange to some. “And yet we shot eight duck species one opening day off Woodtick Peninsula.”

Preston, 60, was raised five miles from the refuge. In cut-off shorts and an old pair of tennis shoes, he’d fish for crappie as a kid and later took up waterfowl hunting. After 40 years in the military, he now works as a healthcare consultant looking forward to retirement. The refuge, he says, provides vital habitat for an amazing array of wildlife, as well as the hunting and fishing opportunities that come with it.

“It ain’t going to win any beauty contests,” Preston admits. “But it’s a wonderful place that gives all kinds of people access to the outdoors. And the great thing is that no one has to buy a plane ticket. You put the kids in the car, grab a picnic lunch, and go fish for bluegill.”

Brian Preston

Veteran and frog leg connoisseur

Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge

South of Detroit, Michigan & Ontario

Ontario

Michigan

Area of Detail

Size: 6,202 Acres

Why: Urban Wildlife Habitat, Migratory Birds, Fishing
WHERE THE ANTELOPE PLAY

This refuge complex in the Northern Great Basin provides a home for America’s fastest land animal and outstanding big game hunting

Comprised of two separate refuges managed as one individual administrative unit, the 851,000-acre Sheldon-Hart National Wildlife Refuge Complex in the high desert of south central Oregon and northern Nevada is one of more than 100 so-called complexes managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Hot springs remind visitors of the area’s geologic roots, and petroglyphs offer a glimpse of the more recent past.

Located within the Great Basin, the Sheldon-Hart complex features rugged canyons and sagebrush flats, providing habitat for hundreds upon hundreds of plant and animal species, including greater sage grouse, California bighorn sheep, and mule deer. The refuge complex may be best known for its star attraction and North America’s fastest land animal, the pronghorn.

Three hundred years ago, 30-40 million pronghorns were estimated to roam from southern Canada to northern Mexico. By 1924, the population had plummeted to only 20,000 animals. While pronghorn can reach speeds of up to 60 mph, they are hesitant to leap over barbed wire fences, which can impede their ability to move across the landscape. But thanks to conservation measures like the 1936 establishment of Hart Mountain NWR, to protect seasonal habitats for migratory pronghorn, the species’ numbers are now up to 1 million across the West.

Roughly 4,000 pronghorn summer on Hart’s shrub steppe ecosystem, enough animals for managers to hold a popular, carefully managed hunt in the fall. Refuge managers work with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife to ensure that these herds continue to thrive. Recently, chukar and quail hunting seasons were opened by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Like a handful of other National Wildlife Refuges—including the National Elk Refuge in Wyoming and the Charles M. Russell NWR in Montana—the Hart and Sheldon refuges represent a type of refuge that is sometimes referred to as a “game range” refuge. These refuges were originally created for the conservation of large mammals like deer, elk, bison, bighorn sheep, and pronghorn. Among their many similarities to state wildlife management areas, game range refuges have served as an effective tool to conserve migratory big game habitats and winter range.

FOR MORE ON THE ANTELOPE PLAY, READ LOCAL VOICE.

LOCAL VOICE

NANCY DORAN
Traditional archer and dedicated hunter

WHEN NANCY DORAN’S HUSBAND Dave finally drew an antelope tag for the Hart Mountain National Antelope Refuge in 2014 they weren’t going to let Dave’s cancer stop them. Nancy drove him around the refuge to scout during the preseason and, when the time finally came, they packed the truck with hunting gear, complete with a generator for Dave’s dialysis machine.

Each morning, the 200-yard hike from the truck to the blind would take them the better part of an hour. While they hunted every day of the season and had a few pro horn come within range of Dave’s longbow, they left without filling the tag. Nancy says that’s okay. “It’s the memory of the hunt that she appreciates.”

“Each night when we’d drive back to camp in the dark, there were miles and wildlife everywhere,” she says. “Hart is a special place because of the pronghorn population. I love the desert, especially there. The geology and the landscape is so unique with the hot springs and the sage. There’s so much to see.”

Dave passed away in 2017, but not before teaching Nancy how to hunt with a traditional bow. In turn, she taught him how to hunt with a muzzleloader. A board member of Traditional Archers of Oregon, Nancy embraces the added challenge of getting close to her quarry. “I like to practice, I like being invested in it,” she says. “There’s a passion and dedication in that.”