

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

# Clarks River

*National Wildlife Refuge*



*Unmatched anywhere in the world, the National Wildlife Refuge System is an extensive network of lands and waters protected and managed especially for wildlife and their habitat. This unique system encompasses over 100 million acres of lands and waters from north of the Arctic Circle in Alaska to the subtropical waters of the Florida Keys and beyond to the Caribbean and South Pacific. The National Wildlife Refuge System is managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which manages and protects over 540 refuges for the benefit of both wildlife and present and future generations of Americans. The lands managed as the Clarks River National Wildlife Refuge are a part of this system.*

## Clarks River National Wildlife Refuge



*This blue goose, designed by J.N. "Ding" Darling, has become the symbol of the National Wildlife Refuge System.*

### Refuge Mission Statement:

*The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System is to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans."*

### National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997

Clarks River National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) is a beautiful bottomland hardwood forest located in western Kentucky. The refuge lies along the East Fork of the Clarks River, and is a seasonal home to over 250 different species of birds. The refuge currently consists of 8,500 acres and is the only National Wildlife Refuge located solely within the bounds of the state of Kentucky. The city of Benton, Kentucky can be found near the southeastern end of the refuge, whereas the city of Paducah, Kentucky is situated near the refuge's northwestern boundary.

The U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Bottomland Hardwood Preservation Program first identified the present-day Clarks River NWR as a high priority site for protection in 1978. In 1991, the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources asked the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to consider the site for protection as a unit of the National Wildlife Refuge System. The refuge was established in July of 1997 under the Emergency Wetland Resources Act of 1986, with a proposed acquisition of 18,000 acres. The first tract of land was purchased in August of 1998.

### Refuge Habitat

The East Fork of Clarks River is a comparatively slow-moving river due to the area's low topography and flat floodplains. It is also one of the few rivers in the area that has not been dammed or channelized. Localized flooding for short periods is common in the region, as moderate rains frequently cause streams to flood over their





banks. The Clarks River meanders for about 6 miles, from the East and West Fork convergence, until it reaches the Tennessee River.

The most significant resources of Clarks River NWR are the wetland habitat complexes formed by river, creeks, beaver ponds and natural ponding. These bottomland hardwood forests are extremely diverse and especially valuable in terms of providing wildlife habitat, preventing soil erosion, and ensuring water quality. Bottomlands flood anywhere from several inches to several feet seasonally, typically in winter and spring months.



The bottomland hardwood forests of the Clarks River NWR are composed of overcup oak, pin oak, bald cypress, and tupelo gum trees. Slightly higher, better drained areas are covered with willow oak, swamp chestnut oak, red oak, sweet gum, sycamore, ash, and elm.

Bottomland forests have declined significantly throughout the past century due to human influences. Only a small percentage of this habitat type still exists intact today, making places like Clarks River NWR even more vital for species that are dependent on this habitat.





## Managing for Wildlife

The primary management objectives of the Clarks River NWR are to provide habitat for a diversity of wildlife species associated with the Clarks River and its floodplain while providing opportunities for wildlife-dependent recreation.



*Water birds* – Levees and water control structures are used on the refuge to impound water on standing crop fields or managed moist soil areas in order to provide wintering habitat for migratory waterfowl. Water management activities begin in late summer to early fall, in preparation for waterfowl migration, and continue throughout winter. This type of management also provides habitat for other water birds such as herons, killdeer, and sandpipers.



*Songbirds* – Since 2003, Clarks River NWR has been involved in an important migratory songbird monitoring endeavor, the MAPS (Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survivorship) program. During the summer breeding season, a banding station is operated where songbirds are captured by means of a fine gauge mist net, banded with a small numbered leg band, and released. Data such as age, sex, and condition are recorded for each bird captured to determine their status, movement, and productivity over time. The results of these monitoring efforts help determine population trends in many species of migratory songbirds, a great number of which are declining.



A small portion of the refuge is upland and managed in native warm season grasses for songbirds associated with early successional habitats. Native warm season grass habitat, made up of grass species such as big bluestem, little bluestem, and switchgrass, is maintained by prescribed burning or mowing.



*Other Wildlife* – The refuge also participates in a cooperative farming program where farmers plant crops in a share system. In return for using refuge land for agriculture, farmers are required to leave a percentage of their crops for wildlife. This provides a supplement to the natural foods provided on the refuge that helps replenish energy reserves of migrating waterfowl during stopover. Many other species of wildlife benefit from this practice as well, including white-tailed deer, turkey, and quail.



### **Refuge Residents**

*Migratory Waterfowl* – Arriving in early autumn and usually peaking in late December, many species of migratory waterfowl, such as mallards, black ducks, ring-necked ducks, hooded mergansers, and common mergansers, utilize Clarks River NWR as winter habitat. An autumn visit to the refuge can be an extraordinary event revealing both the remarkable species of migratory waterfowl and the beautiful colors of fall leaves!



*Migratory Songbirds* – Neotropical songbirds spend approximately six months a year wintering in Central and South America and the remaining months on breeding grounds in North America's temperate latitudes.

Over 200 species of neotropical songbirds can be found at Clarks River NWR. Species such as the increasingly rare cerulean warbler, the Swainson's warbler, and the prothonotary warbler are three of the five birds on the Service's list of highest priority neotropical migratory bird species. All of these species are dependent on forested wetlands, and each can be found in the Clarks River NWR area. Other neotropical songbirds, such as summer and scarlet tanagers,

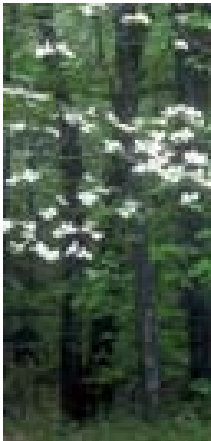




Kentucky warblers, indigo buntings, and Acadian flycatchers utilize the refuge for breeding and migration habitat. Because of protected lands like the Clarks River NWR, the music and beauty of the songbirds can still be heard.



*Other Wildlife* – Clarks River NWR is also home to a wide variety of upland game species, small mammals, reptiles, amphibians, and fish. Some of the more commonly seen wildlife includes white-tailed deer, raccoons, beavers, and coyotes. A closer look, however, reveals many of the more inconspicuous species of small mammals such as mink, mice, rabbits, and squirrels that can be easily overlooked.



A walk through the refuge during spring, summer, and fall months can be a delightful experience because of the trees and flowers in bloom. Some of the more common trees include overcup oak, swamp chestnut oak, willow oak, bald cypress, and sycamore. Some of the more colorful and stunning flowering plants include the orange spotted touch-me-not, passion-flower, partridge pea, and Indian pink.











During the warm summer months, the refuge's wet areas provide the perfect habitat for many frogs, salamanders, and snakes. The calls of frogs can serve as a different, yet fascinating, new type of music to the ears. Unfortunately, the summer months also provide wonderful habitat for some of the more annoying insects including ticks, mosquitoes, and chiggers, which can be troublesome if you are not properly prepared. Remember to pack bug spray to avoid contact with these critters!





**LEGEND**

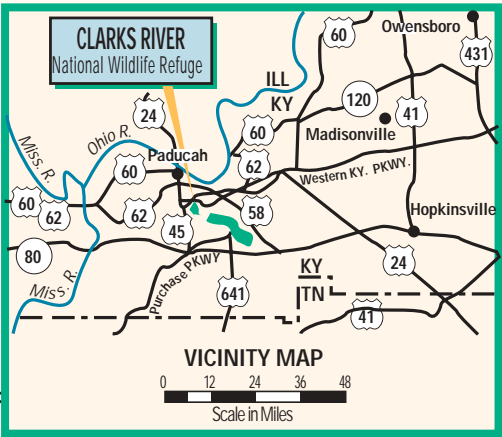
-  Refuge Boundary
-  County Boundary
-  Major Highways
-  Paved Roads
-  Unpaved Roads
-  Abandoned Railroad
-  Sharpe-Elva Water Management Unit
-  Refuge Office



**Clarks**  
National Wildli









**Enjoy the Refuge**  
Wildlife viewing, photography, fishing, hunting, and hiking are all popular uses of the refuge. The refuge is open to the public year-round, except for some designated areas that may be closed seasonally.

Few public use facilities currently exist on the refuge and most access is unimproved at this time. The refuge is working to improve these as opportunities become available. Current facilities consist of an office building located on Hwy 641 between Benton and Draffenville, Kentucky, and a public use area off of Hwy 408. Contact the refuge office before visiting to determine if additional facilities and trails have been developed.



*Wildlife Observation/Photography* – Wildlife is plentiful throughout the refuge and is easily observed. Vehicles are allowed on designated roads only. Foot traffic is permitted year around throughout the refuge, except for seasonally closed areas.



*Fishing* – Refuge waters are open year-round for fishing. Some areas may be closed seasonally to provide sanctuary for waterfowl and other wildlife. A public fishing lake has been developed just outside the city limits of Benton, Kentucky, along Hwy 408 and will be open daily. The waters associated with this seven acre lake are accessible to individuals with limited mobility. Fish species one could expect to catch are catfish, bass, and bluegill. More information



is available in a fishing regulations brochure at the refuge office.

*Hiking* – Hiking/ walking trails are being developed as suitable locations are identified. One of the more developed and popular locations currently available is located at the public fishing lake off of Hwy 408.



*Hunting* – The refuge is open to hunting for waterfowl, white-tailed deer, turkey, and small game during designated seasons. A permit is required. Please contact the refuge for additional information.



*Environmental Education* - Environmental education is an important objective of the refuge. Activities are conducted to promote environmental awareness and wildlife conservation. On-refuge sites are currently being developed to increase these opportunities.

### **Wildlife Viewing Tips**

Dawn and dusk are the best times to see wildlife.

Observe from the sidelines. Leave all “abandoned” young animals alone. The parent is probably close by waiting for you to leave. Don’t offer snacks; it could disrupt their digestive systems or lead to undesirable behavior, therefore feeding of wildlife is prohibited.



Cars make good observation blinds. Drive slowly and stop to scan places where wildlife may be taking cover. Use binoculars or a long lens for a closer look.



Try sitting quietly in one location. Allow hiding wildlife to get used to your presence. Many animals that have hidden will reappear once they think you are gone. Walk quietly in designated areas, be aware of sounds and

smells. Often you will hear more than you will see.



Teach children quiet observation. Other wildlife watchers will appreciate your consideration.

Look for animal signs. Tracks, scat, feathers, and nests left behind often tell interesting stories.



## Refuge Regulations

Refuge signs define refuge boundaries. "Area closed" signs are erected to minimize disturbance to waterfowl or other wildlife and for public safety.

Pets on a leash are permitted.

Bicycling is permitted on established roads during normal public use hours.

Horseback riding permitted only on improved access routes.

Searching for and removal of objects of antiquity is prohibited.

Firearms are prohibited on the refuge except during authorized hunting seasons.

Firearms must be unloaded and encased when traveling through the refuge.

Disturbing or feeding wildlife and collecting plants is strictly prohibited.

Camping is prohibited.

Open fires are prohibited.

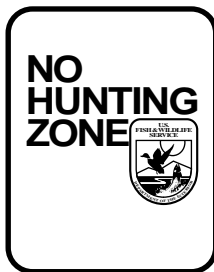
ATV's are not allowed.

Use of artificial lights, including vehicle lights, to observe wildlife is prohibited.

## Directions

*Getting There . . .*

From I-24 take exit 25, south on Purchase Parkway. Take exit 43 off the Purchase Parkway, go right (east) on Hwy 348. Take Hwy 641 north and go 1.2 miles to Refuge Headquarters at 91 U.S. Hwy 641 North. The Refuge office is open Monday – Friday from 7:30 am to 4:00 pm. To reach the office by phone, call 270/527 5770.





## **Wildlife Calendar**

### *January*

- Great horned owl breeding  
mid January to early March
- White-tailed bucks begin to shed  
antlers

### *February*

- Barred owl nesting  
late February to late March
- Wood duck nesting begins  
late February
- Chorus frogs start singing and  
warm rains bring out peepers  
and spotted salamanders,  
mid February

### *March*

- Killdeer nesting  
late March to mid May
- Red-shouldered hawk nesting  
early March to early April
- Rabbits begin breeding  
mid March
- Winter wild turkey flocks  
breaking up late March

### *April*

- Migrant songbirds begin to reappear locally
- Wild turkey nesting late April to mid May
- Wild turkey season opens
- Quail nesting begins
- Northern parula nesting late April to mid May

### *May*



- Eastern meadowlark breeding early to late May
- Blue-gray gnatcatcher nesting early to late May
- Whip-poor-will breeding early May to early June
- Summer tanager breeding mid to late May
- Ruby-throated hummingbird & wood thrush nesting mid May to early June



- Northern bobwhite nesting mid May to mid June
- Kentucky warbler breeding late May to early June
- Scarlet tanager breeding late May to mid June
- Raccoons being born early to mid May

### *June*



- Yellow-billed cuckoo breeding early June to early July
- Peak of wild turkey hatches
- Free fishing weekend occurs



- Peak white-tailed deer fawning occurs
- Box and snapping turtles lay eggs

#### *July*

- American goldfinch breeding late July to mid August
- Black racers, king snakes, and rat snakes lay eggs



#### *August*

- White-tailed bucks molt to winter coat mid to late August
- Quail at peak populations
- Gray squirrel birthing peaks
- Migrant songbirds begin staging for southward migration



#### *September*

- Monarch butterflies migrating
- White-tailed fawns lose spots early to mid September
- White-tailed bucks lose antler velvet late September to mid October
- Teal migrating
- Fall hunting seasons begin to open
- Mature female American eels begin spawning runs to Atlantic Ocean



#### *October*

- Increase in waterfowl migration
- White-tailed buck rutting late October to mid November
- Snakes begin moving to hibernation sites





*photo Charles Mills*



- Bald eagles begin migrating into state

*November*

- Groundhogs begin hibernating
- Modern gun deer hunting season begins

*December*

- Squirrel breeding begins



### **Volunteers**

The refuge offers a wide variety of volunteer opportunities. To receive more information or an application, please contact the refuge office.

### **Friends of Clarks River National Wildlife Refuge**

The Friends of Clarks River NWR is a nonprofit group formed to give assistance and support for refuge projects and educational programs. To obtain more information or a membership form, contact the refuge office 270/527 5770.



**For more information about the refuge or information contained in this publication, contact the Refuge Manager**

Clarks River National Wildlife Refuge  
91 US Hwy 641 North

P. O. Box 89  
Benton, Kentucky 42025.

Phone: (270) 527 5770

Fax: (270) 527 5052

Kentucky Relay Service by dialing 7-1-1

[fw4rwclarksriver@fws.gov](mailto:fw4rwclarksriver@fws.gov)

### **Accessibility Statement:**

*The U.S Fish and Wildlife Service does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, religion, age or disability in employment or the provision of services and provides, upon request, reasonable accommodation including auxiliary aids and services necessary to afford individuals with disabilities an equal opportunity to participate in all programs and activities of the Clarks River National Wildlife Refuge. Discrimination complaints should be filed with the U.S. Department of the Interior, Office of Equal Opportunity, 1849 C Street, NW, Washington, D.C. 20240 or (800) 344-WILD.*



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