



*Celebrating a
Century
of Conservation!*

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

America's National Wildlife Refuge System

Wilderness Areas on National Wildlife Refuges

The National Wildlife Refuge System is the world's most unique network of lands and waters set aside specifically for conservation of fish, wildlife and plants. President Theodore Roosevelt established the first refuge, 5.5 acre Pelican Island Bird Reservation in Florida's Indian River Lagoon, in 1903. Roosevelt went on to create 55 more refuges before he left office in 1909; today the refuge system encompasses more than 500 units spread over nearly 94 million acres.

National wildlife refuges are places where wildlife comes first, and where people can experience the beauty of the natural world in a truly wild place. Some parts of the refuge system are designated as wilderness areas.

Wilderness is a special designation applied by Congress to federal lands "...where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man is a visitor who does not remain."

More than 20 million acres on 66 refuges has been designated by Congress as wilderness—approximately 22 percent of the total acreage of the National Wilderness Preservation System.

Great Swamp NWR in New Jersey was the first national wildlife refuge to receive wilderness designation—3,660 acres in 1968. Most recently, more than 8000 acres on Havasu and Imperial national wildlife refuges on the California-Arizona border were designated as wilderness.

The very first national wildlife refuge also represents the smallest wilderness area in the National Wildlife Refuge System. Pelican Island, established as a refuge in 1903, was designated as a 5-acre wilderness area in 1970.

The largest wilderness area in the refuge system is 8 million acres on Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Of the 3.5 million acres that comprise the Alaska Maritime NWR, 2.5 million acres (11 islands) are designated as wilderness. Other maritime island refuge wildernesses include two that span the 320 mile Oregon coastline, Oregon Islands and Three Arch Rocks. Washington's 100 mile-long coast is designated as wilderness at Flattery Rocks, Quillayute Needles, and Copalis refuges. The Farallon Islands NWR off the California coast is also a refuge with maritime wilderness designation.

In designated wilderness, refuge staff carry out their management activities in a way that preserves the wild and undeveloped character of the land, and the public can enjoy solitude and the beauty of nature without many of the intrusions of modern, industrial society.

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