



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

# Rice Lake and Mille Lacs

*National Wildlife Refuges*

## Summary

### Comprehensive Conservation Plan

*January 2008*

## Comprehensive Conservation Plan Approved!

A planning effort that involved neighbors, American Indian tribes, non-government organizations, local officials and many interested citizens has concluded with the completion of a comprehensive conservation plan (CCP) for Rice Lake and Mille Lacs National Wildlife Refuges (NWR) in north central Minnesota. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service approved the plan in December 2007.

The comprehensive conservation plan articulates management goals for the next 15 years and specifies the objectives and strategies needed to accomplish these goals.

While comprehensive conservation plans guide management and are used in strategic planning and prioritizing programs, they do not constitute a commitment for staffing increases or operational and maintenance increases that may be detailed in the plan.



*Rice Lake, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service photograph*

## Where to Find the CCP

The CCP is available in a variety of formats and places.

If you have access to a computer, you can see the plan in portable document format (pdf) at the Refuge's planning website:

<http://www.fws.gov/midwest/planning/RiceLake>

Paper copies and an electronic version of the plan are available at four libraries in the area:

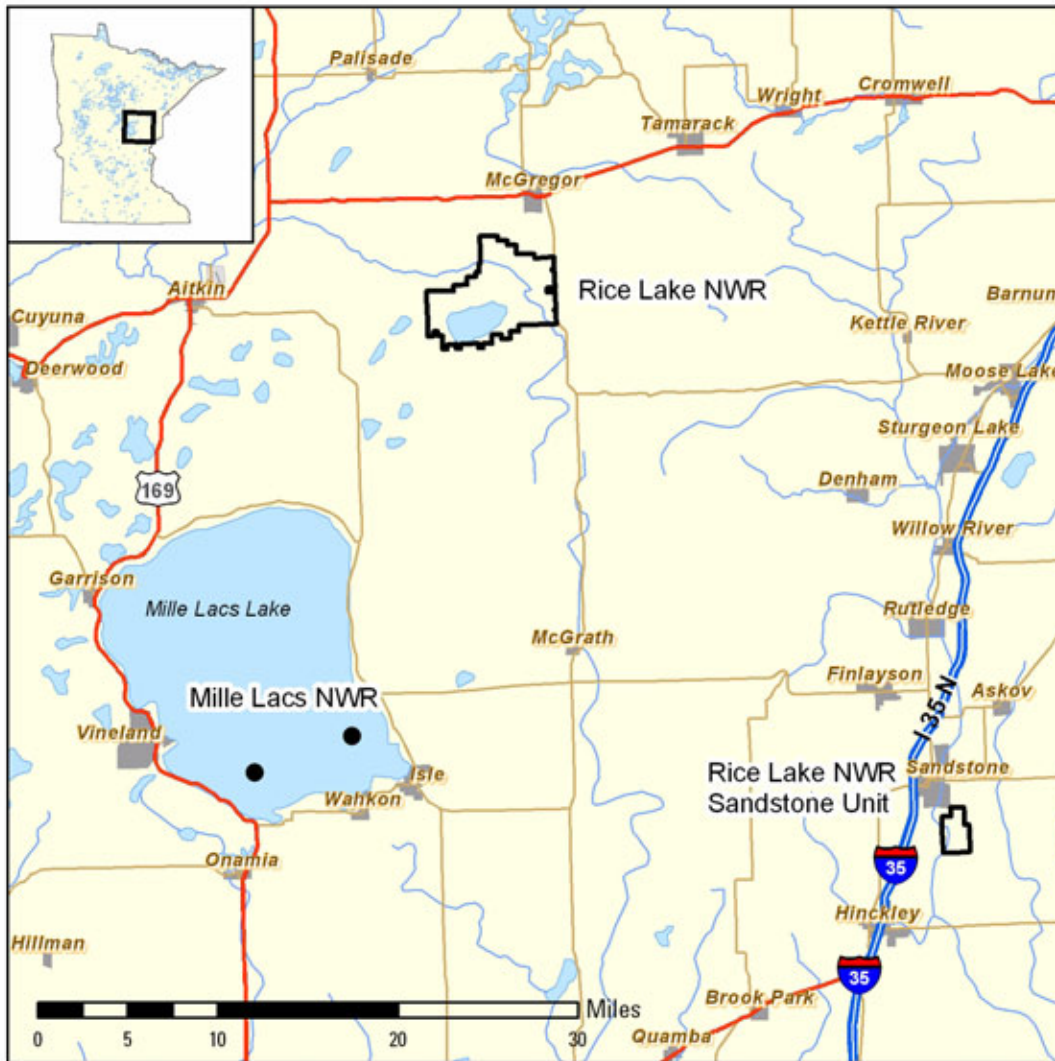
- Aitkin Public Library
- McGregor Public Library
- Sandstone Public Library
- Mille Lacs Lake Community Library

A limited number of paper copies are available for individuals who want one. The CCP is also available as a pdf document on compact disk. To request either one, please call the Refuge at 218/768-2402.

### Contents

Comprehensive Conservation Plan Approved! .....	1
Where to Find the CCP .....	1
The Planning Process .....	2
Vital Statistics .....	3
Who We Are.....	3
Our Vision for the Refuges .....	3
Our Refuge Goals .....	4
Highlights From the Plan .....	4
Plan Implementation, Monitoring and Evaluation .....	6
Into the Future .....	7

**Figure 1: Location of Rice Lake NWR and Mille Lacs NWR**



## The Planning Process

Public involvement has been part of every stage of CCP development. Planning began with three open house events in April 2005 to give Refuge neighbors, organizations, local government units, and interested citizens an opportunity to share their thoughts on issues and opportunities at the two refuges. People were asked to provide written comments within 30 days. Twenty-six written comments were received during the comment period.

The Draft CCP was released for public review and comment on June 25, 2007. The Draft CCP or a summary of the document was sent to more than 250 individuals, organizations, and local, state, and

federal agencies and elected officials. The Draft CCP was sent to 29 federally recognized Indian tribes. The Draft CCP and the summary were both available on the planning website. An environmental assessment was included with the Draft CCP.

An open house was held on July 10, 2007, at the Rice Lake NWR Headquarters following release of the draft document. Five people attended the open house. We received a total of 15 comment letters and e-mails during the 30-day review period. Appendix K of the CCP includes a summary of each comment and the Refuge's response.

## Vital Statistics

Mille Lacs NWR is the smallest refuge in the National Wildlife Refuge System, which includes more than 545 refuges. The 0.57-acre Refuge consists of two islands, Hennepin and Spirit, in Mille Lacs Lake, and is about 30 air miles southwest of the Rice Lake NWR office. The islands are covered with jumbled rock, boulders, and gravel. Hennepin Island is managed as a nesting colony for the State-listed threatened Common Tern. Spirit Island is used by other colonial nesting species including Ring-billed Gulls, Herring Gulls, and Double-crested Cormorants.

The 20,253-acre Rice Lake NWR is a mosaic of lakes, marshes, forests, and grasslands that provide a variety of habitats for migrant and resident wildlife. Abundant natural foods, particularly wild rice, have attracted wildlife to the area for centuries. The Refuge is especially noted for its fall concentrations of Ring-necked Ducks, which often number over 150,000 birds. Other important migrants include Mallards, Wood Ducks, Canvasback, Canada Geese, and Woodcock. White-tailed deer, black bear, river otter, beaver, Sandhill Cranes, Bald Eagles, Ruffed and Sharptail Grouse inhabit the Refuge. Songbirds, raptors, and nearly all other species associated with the bogs and forests of northern Minnesota, including gray wolves and an occasional moose, are also found on the Refuge.

Rice Lake NWR includes the 2,045-acre parcel known as the Sandstone Unit (Unit), located approximately 40 miles southeast of the main part of the Refuge near the town of Sandstone, Minnesota. The majority of the Unit is upland forest with smaller components of grassland, forested wetland, shallow marshes, bogs, and riverine wetlands. The State-designated Wild and Scenic Kettle River traverses the west side of the Unit, offering spectacular bluffs and rock outcroppings. The State and Aitkin County manage significant lands in the vicinity of Rice Lake NWR.

## Who We Are

Rice Lake and Mille Lacs NWRs are a part of a system of refuges administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service), the primary federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing the nation's fish and wildlife populations and their habitats. The National Wildlife Refuge

System was founded in 1903 when President Theodore Roosevelt designated Pelican Island in Florida as a sanctuary for Brown Pelicans.

Today, the Refuge System is a network of 547 refuges in all 50 states.

## Our Vision for the Refuges

### Rice Lake National Wildlife Refuge

Rice Lake NWR will be an area treasured by neighbors and visitors alike for its bountiful wild rice, clean water, well-managed forests, abundant wildlife and wildlife recreational opportunities. A towering canopy of red and white pine will intermingle with aspen stands, majestic old growth oak forests, and tamarack-spruce bogs. This mosaic of northern forest types will support a great diversity of neotropical migrants, mammals and unique plant species. The bogs will be free of invasive brush species and home to countless marshbirds, amphibians and species not commonly seen. Rice Lake will be the prominent natural wild rice producing lake in the state. In the fall, people will be captivated by the sight of rice heads swaying in the wind as far as the eye can see and the sounds of hundreds-of-thousands of ducks, geese and swans feasting on the bounty. American Indians will hand-harvest the rice from their canoes, passing on a tradition to the next generation. Visitors will understand the importance of the Refuge, not only for the wildlife but for its history. They will feel welcome, oriented and relish the serenity at hand.



Scarlet Tanager; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service photograph.

## Mille Lacs National Wildlife Refuge

Mille Lacs NWR will be a cornerstone in maintaining the Common Tern population in the Great Lakes Region. Caspian Terns, Ruddy Turnstones, Sanderlings, Dunlin, Least Sandpipers, and Semipalmated Sandpipers, will continue to use this small but important Refuge for resting and feeding during their lengthy migration. Hennepin Island will be managed in a manner that demonstrates scientifically proven techniques in Common Tern production while Spirit Island will be managed in a way that balances the needs of colonial nesting birds. Management will be in cooperation with the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe and the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources.

## Our Refuge Goals

We have established the following goals for Rice Lake NWR and Mille Lacs NWR. They will set the direction for the Refuge over the next 15 years.

### Rice Lake National Wildlife Refuge

- The Refuge will contain a diversity of habitats typical of historical north-central Minnesota.
- Fish and migrating and resident wildlife populations on the Refuge will be naturally diverse, healthy, and self sustaining.
- Visitors will enjoy wildlife-dependent recreation and they, along with residents of the local community, will appreciate the value and need for fish and wildlife conservation.
- The American Indian community and the Refuge will preserve American Indian cultural values through communication, consultation, and cooperation.
- Funding, staffing, facilities, and public support will be sufficient to accomplish the purposes, vision, goals, and objectives of the Refuge.

### Mille Lacs National Wildlife Refuge

- An optimum nesting population of Common Terns will exist on Hennepin Island and we will know the productivity and chronology of species using Spirit Island.



*Rice Lake NWR, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service photograph.*

## Highlights From the Plan

Water levels on Rice Lake will be manipulated by the existing control structure or by re-establishing the natural outlet to Rice Lake. The lake will be allowed to function more as a natural system with natural fluctuations. For American Indian tribe members, this could result in poor access for wild rice harvest in some years if the water level is low in the fall. Wild rice production is expected to increase over the long term, however.

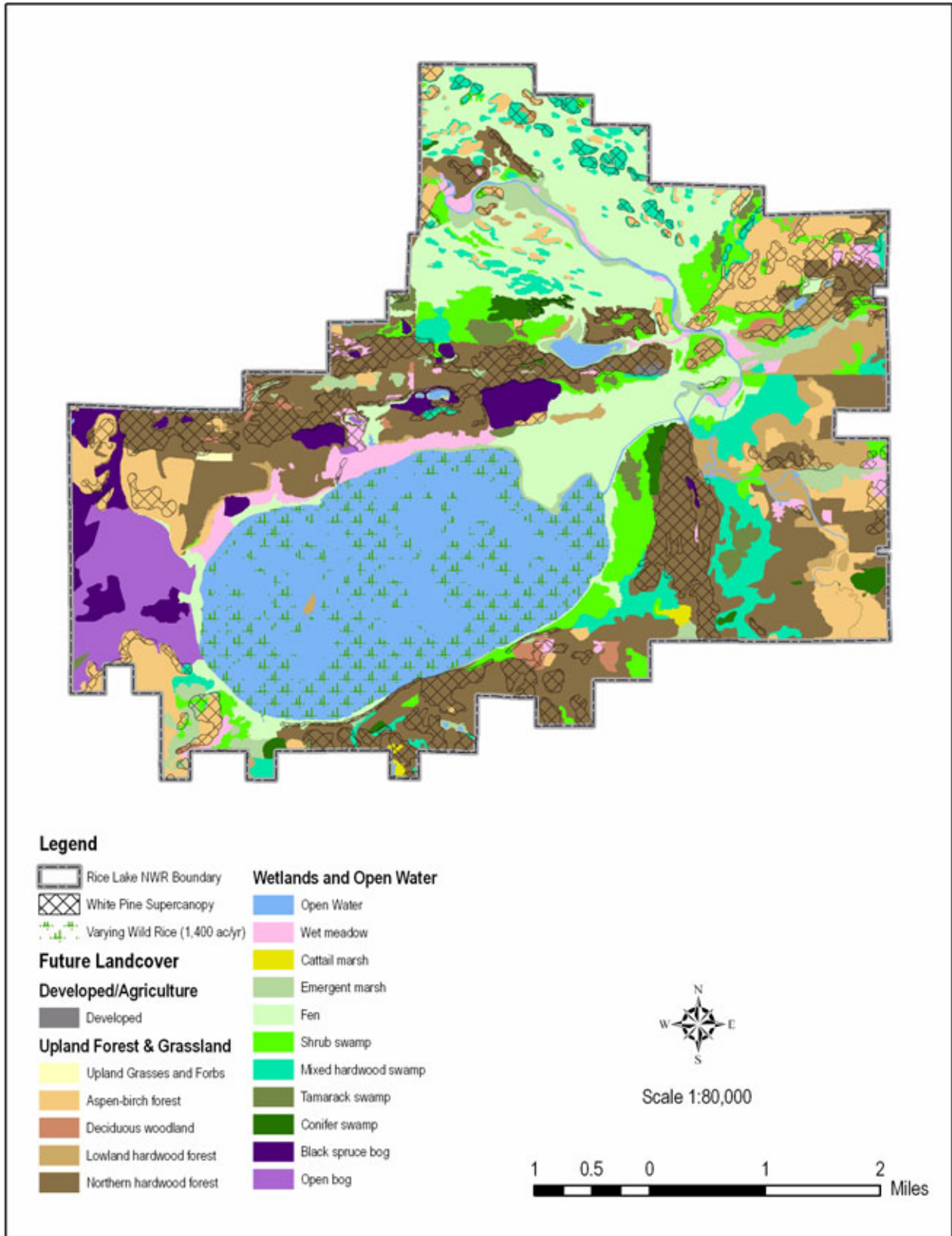
The Refuge will enhance its forested area while maintaining some grassland for bird species as well as for public viewing. A portion of the old crop and hay fields will be reforested to establish a forest corridor while an 85-acre block next to the auto-tour route will be maintained as open grassland. The 85 acres will be converted to native grasses and forbs in the future (Figure 2).

The Refuge will withdraw its recommendation to designate a portion of the Refuge as Wilderness, allowing staff to more actively manage and restore habitats on 1,406 acres.

More than 5,000 acres of bog will be restored with more dedicated use of prescribed fire to inhibit brush invasion.

All of the buildings will be removed from Headquarters Ridge. The facilities are below Service standards and need considerable work, including expansion of some facilities, which could result in further degradation of cultural resources. Headquarters Ridge has some of the most significant cultural values that are known to occur on the Refuge, and the American Indian community has requested the removal of the buildings. A

**Figure 2: Future Desired Landcover, Rice Lake NWR**





*Fishing program at Rice Lake NWR, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service photograph.*

relocation site has not yet been identified. Relocating the buildings is expected to have a one-time cost of \$3.9 million.

The Refuge will explore exchanging the Sandstone Unit with the State of Minnesota for State lands closer to a national wildlife refuge. The intent will be to increase management efficiency for both the Refuge and the State and more closely align lands with the agencies' missions. Land exchanges are very complex, however, and take years to complete. If a land exchange is pursued, the Service will complete an environmental review of the proposed exchange and there will be public notification and an opportunity for the public to comment on the proposal.

In the meantime, the Sandstone Unit will be managed with prescribed burns with the goal of maintaining the landcover as it was in 2005 while allowing for forest succession.

American Indian ceremonies will be held under a special use permit, not the perpetual agreements sought by the American Indian community.

Public use on Rice Lake NWR will consist of wildlife-dependent recreation. More Refuge infrastructure will be related to interpretation,

wildlife observation, and nature photography with more pull-offs on the auto-tour route, more interpretive signs, and more programming. The Refuge will develop education curricula that will be linked to state standards, and the Refuge will continue to host school groups and participate in educational programs away from the Refuge. The hunting program will be managed to accommodate more hunters while maintaining quality opportunities.

The Refuge will consult with Ojibwe and Dakota peoples about the interpretation of and environmental programming related to American Indian history.

The Refuge will seek staffing increases from 6.35 full-time-equivalents to 9.3 full-time-equivalents, which reflects the addition of two full-time positions, a refuge operations specialist and a biological technician, and part-time positions including a park ranger, a biological technician, and a maintenance mechanic.

On Mille Lacs NWR, management will continue to emphasize Common Tern production and deterring Gulls from nesting. In addition, the Refuge will rebuild Hennepin Island where it has eroded and improve protection of the island by constructing a reef.

## **Plan Implementation, Monitoring and Evaluation**

The CCP outlines an ambitious but achievable course of action for the future management of Rice Lake NWR and Mille Lacs NWR. Pursuing and ultimately achieving goals set out in the CCP will require considerable staff and partnership commitment. Throughout the life of the CCP we will monitor our progress in achieving the goals, objectives and strategies. On a periodic basis, the Service will evaluate Refuge activities in light of the CCP. Additional "step-down" management plans will also be necessary to provide more details on Refuge programs such as visitor services, hunting, habitat management, water management and law enforcement.

## Into the Future

Throughout the comprehensive conservation planning process, many people have contributed time and ideas to make the Rice Lake NWR and Mille Lacs NWR CCP a better document. We are grateful to everyone who cared enough about the Refuges and their future to participate in this planning effort. We will continue to welcome your thoughts on Refuge management.

To succeed, a refuge management plan has to adapt to nature's ever changing conditions. Although the plan is complete, we expect to review it and, if needed, update it every 5 to 10 years in response to conditions that could not be anticipated in planning.

Rice Lake NWR is a place for both wildlife and people to use and enjoy, now and in the future. We hope that you will continue to care about and participate in conserving the Refuge's wildlife and habitat.