



Celebrating a  
*Century*  
of Conservation!

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

# America's National Wildlife Refuge System

## *A Century of Conservation*

In 1903, President Theodore Roosevelt ordered that a small shell- and mangrove-covered island in Florida's Indian River be forever protected as a "preserve and breeding ground for native birds." Paul Kroegel, a local man, was hired to watch over the 3-acre sanctuary named Pelican Island Bird Reservation. His mission was clear: protect the island's pelicans from poachers and plume hunters.

With this simple promise of wildlife protection, the National Wildlife Refuge System was born. Nearly a century later, the refuge system has grown to nearly 94 million acres and includes more than 530 refuges—at least one in every state—and more than 3,000 waterfowl production areas.

Here's a look at some of the defining moments in the history of the National Wildlife Refuge System and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which administers the system.

**1903:** On March 14, President Theodore Roosevelt establishes Pelican Island Bird Reservation in Florida as the nation's first bird sanctuary. During his time in office, Roosevelt would create 51 bird reservations and 4 big game preserves in 17 states and three U.S. territories.

**1905-1912:** The first refuges established for big game animals are Oklahoma's Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge in 1905; the National Bison Range in Montana in 1908; and Wyoming's National Elk Refuge in 1912.

**1918:** The Migratory Bird Treaty Act between the United States and Great Britain (on behalf of Canada) becomes the foundation for future legislation that will greatly expand the refuge system.

**1924:** Upper Mississippi Wild Life and Fish Refuge, which runs through four states from Iowa to Wisconsin, is the first refuge established specifically for waterfowl management.

**1934:** With Midwestern prairie potholes drying up and waterfowl populations at an all-time low, President Franklin D. Roosevelt convenes a committee to determine how to save waterfowl. Composed of conservationist Aldo Leopold, cartoonist J.N. "Ding" Darling and publisher Thomas Beck, the committee suggests a migratory bird stamp to raise funds for acquiring wetlands habitat. Congress soon passes the Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Act.

**1935-1936:** Biologist J. Clark Salyer travels the country buying prime wetlands for the refuge system. The 600,000 acres Salyer purchased became more than 50 national wildlife refuges, including Red Rock Lakes in Montana established for trumpeter swans and Minnesota's Agassiz NWR, for waterfowl conservation.

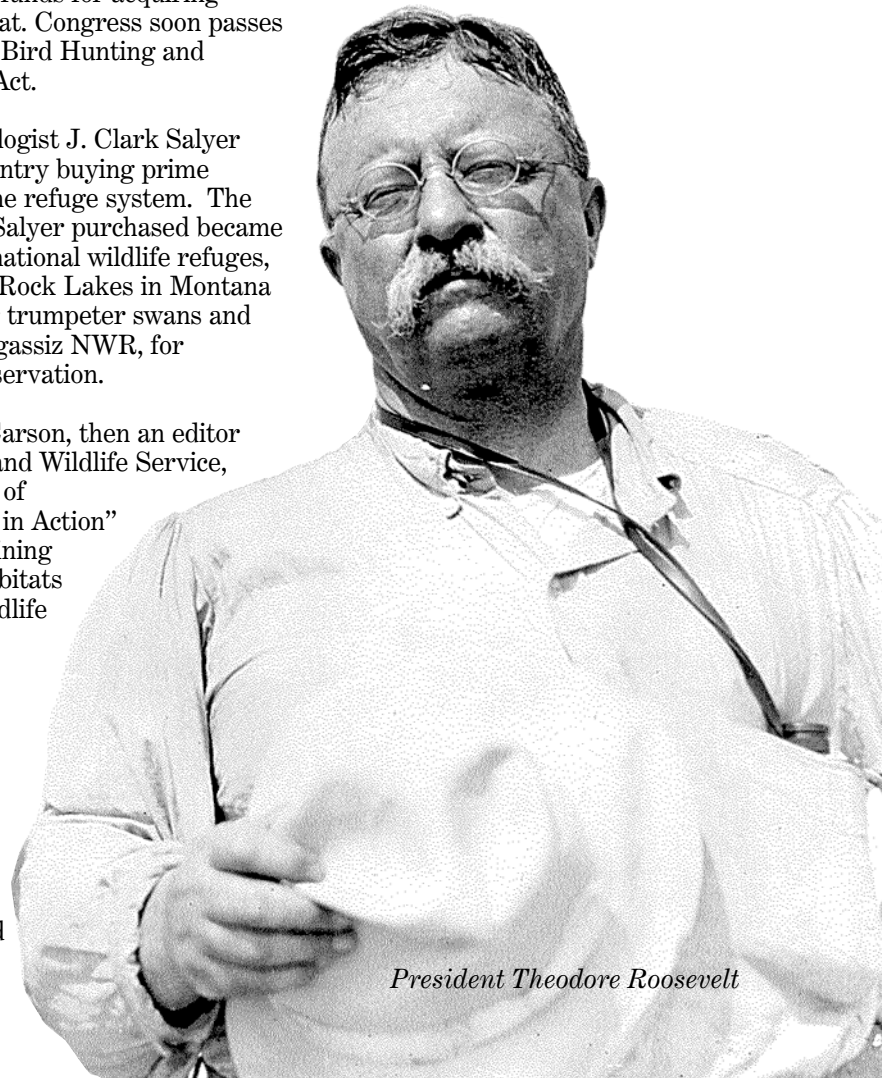
**1940:** Rachel Carson, then an editor with the Fish and Wildlife Service, writes a series of "Conservation in Action" booklets examining wildlife and habitats on national wildlife refuges.

**1949:** Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* is published the year after his death. This body of work has been called "the closest

text to a bible the conservation movement has ever produced," and it introduced the concept of managing natural resources in ecosystems.

**1956:** The Fish and Wildlife Act establishes a comprehensive national fish and wildlife policy and broadens the Service's authority to acquire and develop national wildlife refuges.

**1958:** To support the Fish and Wildlife Act, Congress passes the Duck Stamp Act to authorize acquisition of small



*President Theodore Roosevelt*

wetland “potholes” as waterfowl production areas. The Service has since acquired more than 2 million acres of wetland and grassland habitat in 8 north-central states. The resulting waterfowl production areas vary in size from one acre in Lake County, Montana, to 20,840 acres in Edmunds County, South Dakota.

*1962:* The Refuge Recreation Act permits recreational activities on refuges where they do not conflict with refuges’ primary wildlife purpose and when there is funding to manage recreational activities.

This same year, Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* awakens the world to the dangers of the pesticide DDT on migratory birds and creates a new awareness of human impacts on nature and wild places.

*1964:* Several legislative actions benefit the National Wildlife Refuge System:

- The Land and Water Conservation Act authorizes appropriations of Land and Water Conservation Funds derived from off-shore oil leases to acquire wildlife habitat.
- The Wilderness Act establishes guidelines for designating wilderness areas to protect unspoiled habitat within national parks, wildlife refuges and other public lands. Some 20 million refuge acres are designated wilderness areas.
- The National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act creates the standard that secondary uses must be consistent with the major purposes for which refuges are established.

*1966:* The National Wildlife Refuge System Act includes measures to preserve ecosystems for endangered species, perpetuate migratory bird species, preserve natural diversity and create public appreciation for wildlife protection.

*1967:* The Endangered Species Preservation Act is passed, allowing listing of native animal species as endangered and providing means—though limited—to protect listed species. Land acquisition for protection of endangered species was also authorized.

*1971:* The Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, an outgrowth of the Alaska Statehood Act, is a law of great importance to the National Wildlife Refuge System. Among other provisions, ANCSA authorized the addition of many acres of highly productive, internationally significant wildlife lands to the system.

*1973:* The Endangered Species Act is passed, considerably strengthening previous provisions and redirecting management emphasis on some national wildlife refuges to focus on recovering species. More than 25 refuges have been added to the refuge system under the act’s authority, including Attwater Prairie Chicken NWR in Texas, Mississippi Sandhill Crane NWR in Mississippi and Washington State’s Columbian White-tailed Deer NWR. *1980:* The Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act adds some 54 million acres to the refuge system in that state—expanding seven existing refuges and adding nine new ones, and nearly tripling the acreage of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

*1994:* The nation’s 500th national wildlife refuge is established at Canaan Valley, West Virginia.

*1997:* The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act provides the first comprehensive organic legislation for the refuge system. The act establishes fish, wildlife and plant conservation as the mission of the system. Management priority is given to certain recreational activities that encompass wildlife—hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation—when they are compatible with the refuge’s purposes and the system’s mission.

*Rachel Carson, author of Silent Spring.*

*2000:* The National Wildlife Refuge System Centennial Act of 2000 names 2003 as “Year of the Wildlife Refuge,” charges the Secretary of the Interior with recruiting a commission of distinguished citizens to rally public support, and requires the Department of the Interior to develop new benchmarks for Congress to evaluate progress on the system’s maintenance, operations and construction backlog.

*2003:* Happy 100th birthday National Wildlife Refuge System!

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