

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

# Fulfilling the Promise

*The National Wildlife  
Refuge System*



# The Mission

*“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

# Fulfilling the Promise



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

The National Wildlife Refuge System is a promise to preserve wildlife and habitat for the benefit of all Americans.

The promise began at Pelican Island, a small, unassuming island filled with pelicans, ibises, herons, and roseate spoonbills, in Florida's Indian River. After nearly a century, the system has grown from this humble beginning to more than 93 million acres. Today the sun is almost always shining on part of a refuge network of more than 500 refuges and 3,000 waterfowl production areas spread across every state and several U.S. territories. Refuges conserve a stunning array of our nation's landscapes and provide lifelines for millions of migratory birds, open spaces for elk, pronghorn and caribou, and places for rare and endangered species.

Each refuge or waterfowl production area is land; living, breathing places filled with rhythms of life. They provide a sense of place, a connection to barely discernible instincts, and a tie to a natural world, nourishing our spirit. Refuges are treasures like monuments in Washington D.C., boyhood homes of presidents, sequoias in California, vast western mountain forests, or expansive Everglades swamps. Yet, they can help rescue species from extinction, safeguard breeding and resting areas for millions of birds, and slow the loss of wild areas and open spaces, squeezed by a growing country.

At refuges, the music of life is rehearsed to perfection, nature's colors are most vibrant, time is measured in seasons, and a crane's dance takes center stage. They are gifts to ourselves and to generations unborn.

This report on the National Wildlife Refuge System (System) is based on the work of many U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) employees and outside experts. It is the culmination of a year-long process that involved teams of Service employees who examined the System within the framework of Wildlife and Habitat, People, and Leadership. The report was the focus of the first-ever System Conference held in Keystone, Colorado in October 1998, attended by every refuge manager in the country, other Service employees, and scores of conservation organizations.

This abbreviated version includes a reflection on where the System has been, a review of the present, a vision for the future, and a summary of the vision statements and recommendations included in the full report. We expect the full report to become a well-worn document through continual reference and use. By the System's 100th Anniversary in 2003, the System will be well on its way toward fulfilling its promise for wildlife, habitat and people through effective leadership.

*“Wild beasts and birds are by right not the property merely of the people who are alive today, but the property of unknown generations, whose belongings we have no right to squander.”*

Theodore Roosevelt

# Wildlife and Habitat

From one-ton bison to half-ounce warblers, the National Wildlife Refuge System contains a priceless gift — the heritage of a wild America that was, and is. Refuges are home to at least 700 species of birds, 220 mammals, 250 reptiles and amphibians, more than 1,000 fish, and countless species of invertebrates and plants. Also, nearly 260 threatened or endangered species are either beginning their recovery or holding their own against extinction.

The way we nurture this diversity of life and habitat is the foundation of our mission. Without healthy and diverse habitat, there is no wildlife — without wildlife, our mission is not achieved and the trust with the American people is broken.

Keeping wildlife first in the Refuge System will require increased emphasis on sound objective setting, population and habitat monitoring, and adaptive management. Wilderness refuges will serve as reservoirs for biodiversity and natural processes. In the future, growth of the Refuge System will be strategic and consistent. We will manage refuges in the context of, and in concert with, surrounding public and private lands, and become models for others to emulate.

## **Our Vision:**

*Refuges are places where wildlife comes first;*

*Refuges are anchors for biodiversity and ecosystem-level conservation;*

*System lands and waters will be biologically healthy;*

*The Refuge System will be a national and international leader in habitat management;*

*We will add strategically located lands and waters to the System, in partnership with others, to ensure that it represents America's diverse ecosystems and sustains the nation's fish, wildlife, and plant resources; and*

*We believe the Refuge System will be a model and demonstration area for habitat management fostering broad participation in natural resource stewardship.*





*“We need the tonic of wildness—to wade sometimes in the marshes where the bittern and meadow hen lurk, and hear the booming of the snipe; to smell the whispering sedge where only some wilder and more solitary fowl builds her nest.”*

Henry David Thoreau



# People

In the early 1900's National Wildlife Refuges were sanctuaries with citizen wardens guarding and protecting them from poachers and plume hunters. The only visitors were occasional scientists, photographers, or bird watchers.

After World War II, Americans started traveling, and on the hot prairies of the plains and in the salt marshes of the south, they discovered their National Wildlife Refuge System. They came for many reasons; most for the wonders of the living world and the sights and sounds of wildlife.

After nearly a century of growth, a Refuge System for wildlife and people is emerging. Thousands of schoolchildren visit refuges in the shadows of skyscrapers, while seals and seabirds visit in remote corners of the Pacific Ocean. Refuges have a wildlife conservation mission, but the people of America receive the ultimate benefits, today and for generations to come.

To fulfill our mission we must have staff capable of managing people on refuges, and invest in visitor services and facilities that showcase, but do not intrude, upon our wildlife treasures. We must involve more people, communities, and organizations in decisions affecting the System and work to communicate the value of refuges to all Americans. By working together to meet these challenges and sharing a passion for wildlife and habitat, the System's future is more secure.

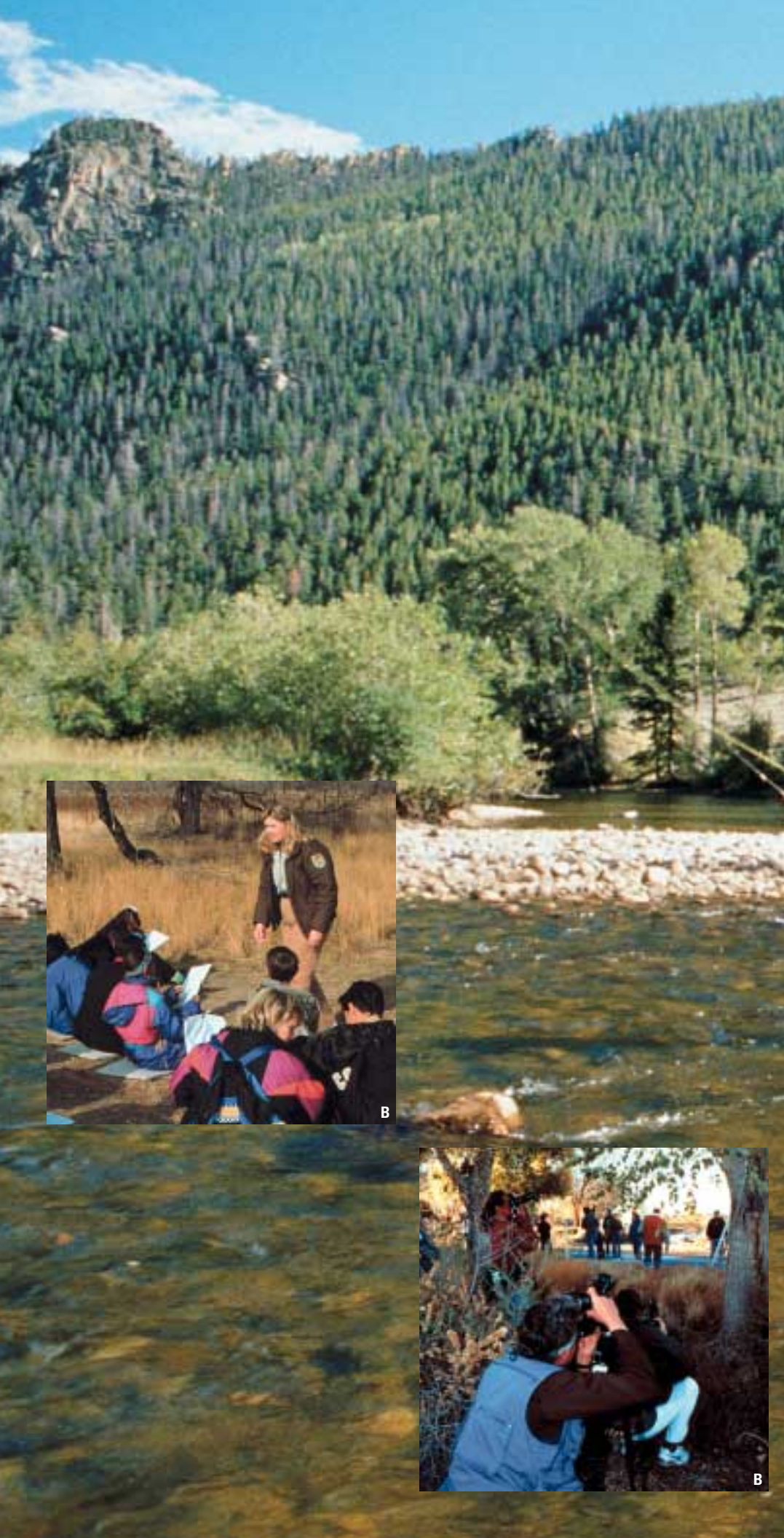
## **The Vision:**

*A strong and vibrant Refuge System provides an enduring legacy of healthy fish, wildlife, and plant resources for people to enjoy today and for generations to come;*

*We will make refuges welcoming, safe, and accessible, with a variety of opportunities for visitors to enjoy and appreciate America's fish, wildlife, and plants;*

*We will help visitors and local communities recognize refuges as national treasures, actively participate in their stewardship, and stand firm in their defense; and*

*Americans will know that each wildlife refuge is a part of an enduring national system. They will understand and support the System's tremendous contribution toward fish, wildlife, and plant conservation.*



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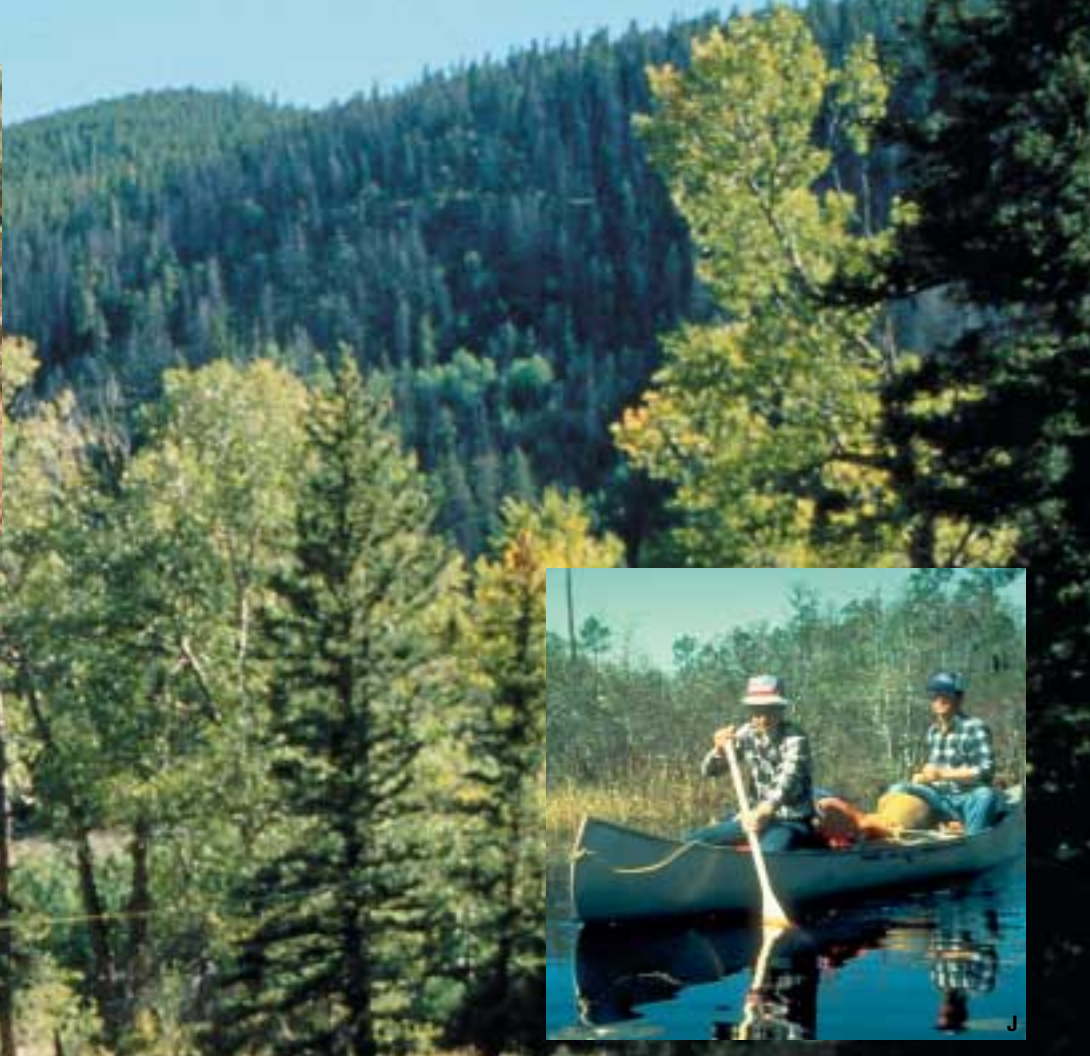
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*“And it is your obligation to...move forward... in a way that does not denigrate, dilute or diminish in the slightest degree that which came before you, because many thousands of men and women gave their careers, and some even gave their lives, for what you are working toward— saving dirt.”*

Lynn Greenwalt

# Leadership

Leadership turns resources into accomplishments. Without leadership, our dollars and staff never reach their full potential. With leadership, these resources present infinite possibilities.

Peter Drucker and Warren Bennis distinguish management from leadership: “Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right things.” In his book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey observes that while blazing a trail through the jungle, determining the most efficient way to sharpen machetes can often occupy many managers. But, a leader climbs the tallest tree, surveys the situation and shouts “wrong jungle.”

In the next century, our leaders will strive to do the right things in an environment of constant change. They will require agility, vision, passion, and outstanding communications skills. They will need to reconcile the rapidly changing landscape of politics and public service with the unchanging laws of nature.

Extending our legacy of leadership into the future requires a higher priority for leadership development. We must ensure organizational vitality by bringing new and diverse talent into the System, keeping employee pride high, and administering our lands as a true system by paying attention to the consistency of organizational structure and management policies.

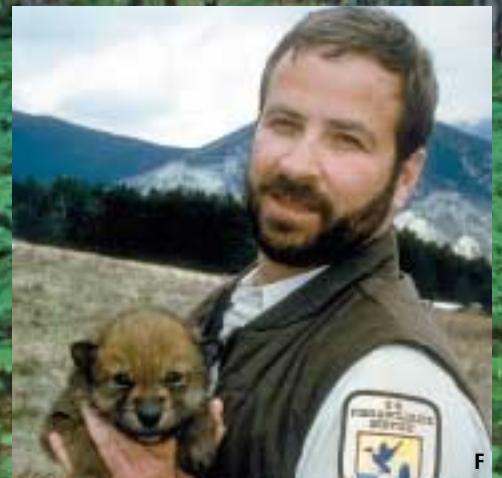
Meeting the needs and carrying out the recommendations for improving leadership for the System and the Service will, in the end, pay huge dividends for fish, wildlife, and plant resources. And doing right by the resource is what doing the right thing is all about. Without leadership, the System visions for wildlife, habitat, and people cannot be achieved. With effective leadership, they cannot be denied.

## **The Vision:**

*We will identify and mentor America's best and brightest to staff refuges and be future leaders within the System and the Service.*

*We will instill Esprit de Corps and passion for refuges and the System will be embraced by refuge employees and throughout the Service.*

*We will provide a stable organizational structure and clear policy framework promoting integrity, adaptability, and creativity in managing the System.*





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*We hope that by our centennial anniversary in 2003 we will be well on our way toward fulfilling the promise of the National Wildlife Refuge System for wildlife, habitat, and people.*

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