

# Prime Hook National Wildlife Refuge

## *Habitat Management - Planning for the Future*

### Overview

Situated along the western shore of the Delaware Bay, Prime Hook National Wildlife Refuge protects more than 10,000 acres of wetlands and other coastal wildlife habitat along the Atlantic Flyway. It is one of the most productive waterfowl areas in the state, attracting hundreds of thousands of ducks and geese during peak migration each fall.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service manages Prime Hook and all national wildlife refuges for the benefit of migratory birds, threatened and endangered plants and animals, and other species protected under federal law. Habitats are managed at Prime Hook according to Service mandates and policies, and management activities are continually modified to adapt to changing environmental conditions, habitat requirements, and evolving science. These activities presently include cooperative farming, hunting, and controlling water levels in managed wetland impoundments.

### Public Involvement Opportunities

A public meeting has been scheduled in Milton, Delaware, to provide a forum for discussion between Service managers and concerned citizens about existing wildlife habitat management programs at Prime Hook.

#### *Public Meeting*

Wednesday, July 13, 7:00 p.m.  
Milton Fire Hall, Milton, Delaware

As part of ongoing efforts to build community awareness and support for its management programs, the Service in November will involve the public as it develops a long-term comprehensive conservation plan for the refuge.



### Farming

Some of the lands now part of the refuge were used historically for crop production. Some of these areas have remained in agricultural use through a cooperative farming program to produce a winter food source for waterfowl. Refuge staff work with farmers and in consultation with agricultural experts to ensure that the program achieves habitat management goals while providing economic benefits to the community.

Since 1999, farming on the refuge has decreased primarily for two reasons. Farmers have withdrawn from the cooperative farming program as crop yields in marginal fields have not met production expectations. In addition, the refuge now conducts research projects on other former fields. Native plant communities have revegetated many of these areas.

The number of acres farmed on the refuge in any given year will fluctuate in response to changes in agricultural conditions and habitat needs for priority wildlife species.

### Water level control

More than 4,000 acres of freshwater marshes are managed at Prime Hook National Wildlife Refuge to provide feeding and resting areas for migratory birds. Using a system of dikes and impoundments, water levels are lowered in the spring to allow the growth of wild rice, millet, and other marsh plants that provide food and cover. These plants are a major food source for the tens of thousands of geese and ducks found on the refuge during peak migration. It has been found that wetlands at Prime Hook provide quality habitat for a diversity of waterfowl species in comparison to croplands, which are used primarily by geese and mallards.

For many years, the refuge in cooperation with the State of Delaware cut ditches on an as-needed basis to improve water flow for mosquito control and to provide access to water control structures and established waterfowl hunting blinds. The ditches haven't been cut in recent years because the resulting siltation had negative effects on water quality and anadromous fish habitat. Heavy use by snow geese has accelerated the rate at which the ditches are filling in.

### Hunting

Hunting is one of the most important public uses at Prime Hook. The refuge's hunting program is among the largest in the National Wildlife Refuge System, attracting thousands of hunters each year for waterfowl, small game, and deer seasons.

Hunting opportunities increased at the refuge last year. The September archery season was expanded from half-days to full-days, and waterfowl hunting was permitted on Mondays, adding a total of seven days to the season.

Despite the considerable amount of time and resources required to manage the hunting program, the refuge supports hunting not only as a wildlife management practice but as a traditional recreational activity on Prime Hook lands.



### Wood duck nest boxes

The installation of artificial nest boxes became an established wildlife management practice in the 1940s at Prime Hook and throughout the refuge system as part of efforts to reverse drastic declines in wood duck populations. The refuge installed and maintained the boxes until recently, when research showed that the boxes produce less than five percent of the wood duck population in the Atlantic and Mississippi flyways. Based on this data and the fact that wood duck populations have rebounded, the refuge has discontinued its artificial nest box program with the exception of several boxes that are maintained for educational purposes.

### For further information

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