

# Chapter 1 Introduction

## Introduction

Located east of Toledo, Ohio, the Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge Complex is a unique slice of marshland on the southwestern shore of Lake Erie. As a major migration corridor, the area is vital to migratory birds including waterfowl, shorebirds, raptors and songbirds that need rest and food either after crossing Lake Erie on their way south or before they head back north to their breeding grounds. As much as 70 percent of the Mississippi flyway's population of black ducks use Lake Erie marshes for migration.

The Ottawa Refuge Complex includes three national wildlife refuges: the Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge, Cedar Point National Wildlife Refuge and West Sister Island National Wildlife Refuge (Figure 1).

## Refuge Purpose

Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge was established in 1961 under the authority of the Migratory Bird Conservation Act “....for use as an inviolate sanctuary, or for any other management purpose, for migratory birds.” 16 U.S.C. 715d. The Refuge was also established to preserve a portion of the remaining Lake



Photo by Sharon Cummings

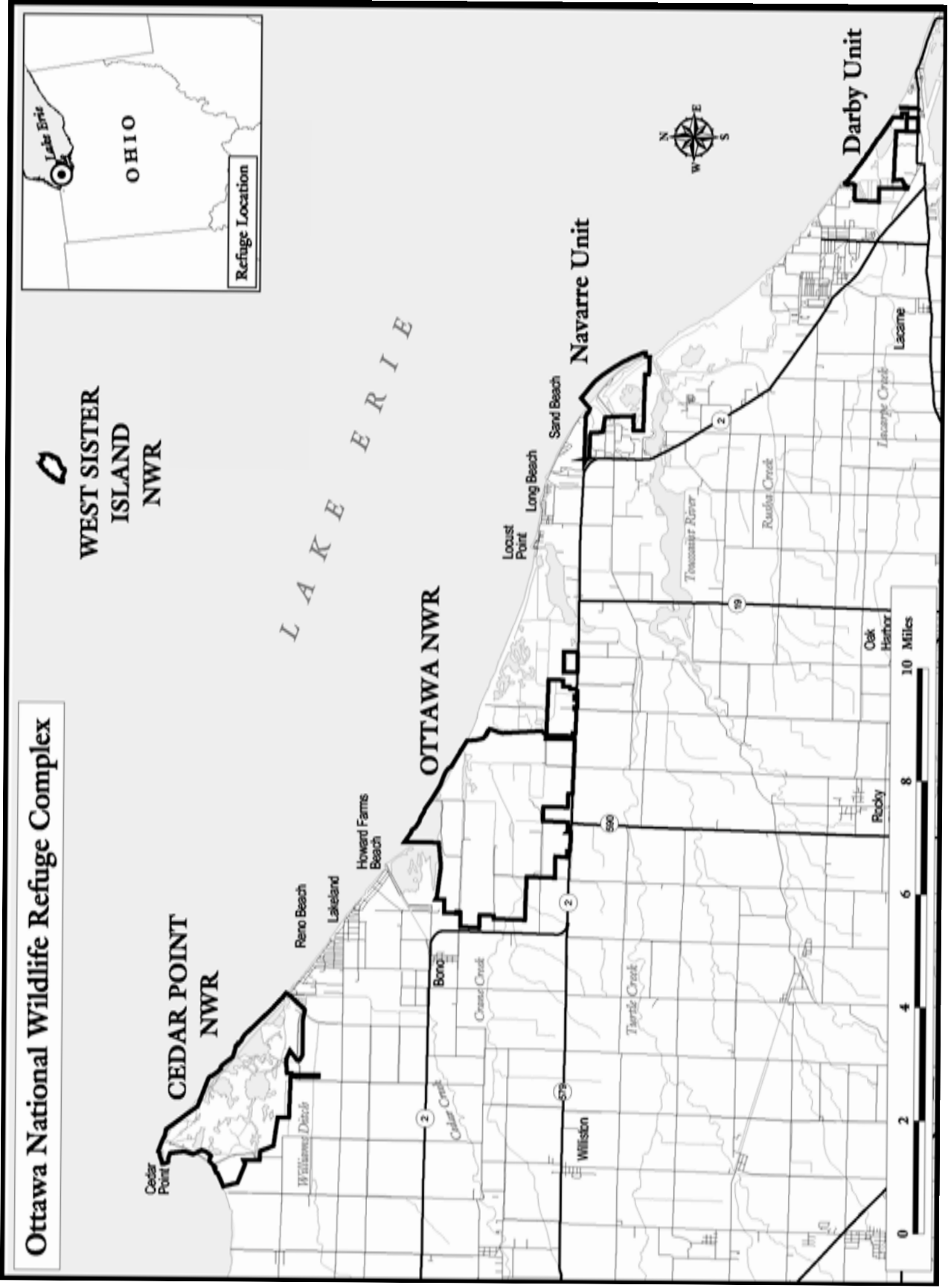
Erie marshes. Cedar Point National Wildlife Refuge was established in 1964 under this same authority and purpose. Today the Refuge Complex consists of three separate refuges (Ottawa, Cedar Point and West Sister Island) that total approximately 8,316 acres. The focus of the Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge Complex is to protect, enhance, and restore habitat for *threatened* and *endangered species*; provide suitable nesting habitat for migratory birds; provide spring and fall migra-

tional habitat for waterfowl and other migratory birds; provide habitat for native resident flora and fauna; and provide the public with wildlife-dependent recreation opportunities.

\*Italicized words are defined in a glossary located in Appendix B of this plan.



Figure 1: Ottawa Refuge Complex Location



West Sister Island National Wildlife Refuge was established by Executive Order 7937 on August 2, 1937 "... as a refuge and breeding ground for migratory birds and other wildlife:..." and specifically to protect the largest wading bird nesting colony on the U.S. Great Lakes. On January 3, 1975, 77 acres of the 82-acre island was designated as a wilderness, part of the National Wilderness Preservation System (Public Law 93-632).

## Refuge Vision

The Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge Complex will be managed for the conservation, management and restoration of fish and wildlife habitats. In its unique position on the shore of Lake Erie, the Refuge will encourage and nurture diverse native plant communities to provide resting, feeding and breeding sites for migrant and non-migrant birds, resident mammals, reptiles, amphibians, and fish. It will provide a place for people to enjoy wildlife-dependent activities and learn about the complexities of the natural world through high-quality education and interpretive programming. It will add to the richness of the community by holding in trust a portion of the natural heritage of the Great Lakes *ecosystem* for the continuing benefit of the American people.

## Purpose of and Need for the Plan

This *Comprehensive Conservation Plan*, or CCP, identifies the role the Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge Complex will play in supporting the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System and provides guidance for Refuge management. The plan articulates management *goals* for the next 15 years and specifies *objectives* and *strategies* that will achieve those goals. Several legislative mandates within the *National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act* of 1997 have guided the development of this plan. These mandates include:

- Wildlife has first priority in the management of refuges.
- Wildlife-dependent recreation activities, including hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, environmental education and interpretation, are the priority public uses of refuges. We will facilitate these activities when they do not interfere with our ability to fulfill the Refuge's purpose or the mission of the Refuge System.
- Other uses of the Refuge will only be allowed when they are determined to be appropriate and compatible with Refuge purposes and mission of the Refuge System.

This CCP will enhance the management of the Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge Complex by:

- Providing a clear statement of direction for future management of the Refuge.
- Giving Refuge neighbors, visitors, and the general public an understanding of the Service's management actions on and around the Refuge.



- Ensuring that the Refuge's management actions and programs are consistent with the mandates of the National Wildlife Refuge System.
- Ensuring that Refuge management is consistent with Federal, state and county plans.
- Establishing continuity in Refuge management.
- Providing a basis for the development of budget requests on the Refuge's operation, maintenance, and capital improvement needs.

## The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the primary Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing fish and wildlife and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. Specific responsibilities include enforcing federal wildlife laws, managing migratory bird populations, restoring nationally significant fisheries, administering the Endangered Species Act, and restoring wildlife habitat such as *wetlands*. The Service also manages the National Wildlife Refuge System.

*The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people.*

## The National Wildlife Refuge System

Managing the National Wildlife Refuge System has evolved into a significant role for the Service. Founded in 1903 by President Theodore Roosevelt with the designation of Pelican Island as a refuge for brown pelicans, the National Wildlife Refuge System is the world's largest collection of lands specifically managed for fish and wildlife. The System is a network of more than 500 national wildlife refuges encompassing more than 93 million acres of public land and water. The majority of these lands – 82 percent – is in Alaska, with approximately 16 million acres spread across the lower 48 states and several island territories. Refuges provide habitat for more than 5,000 *species* of birds, mammals, fish, and insects.

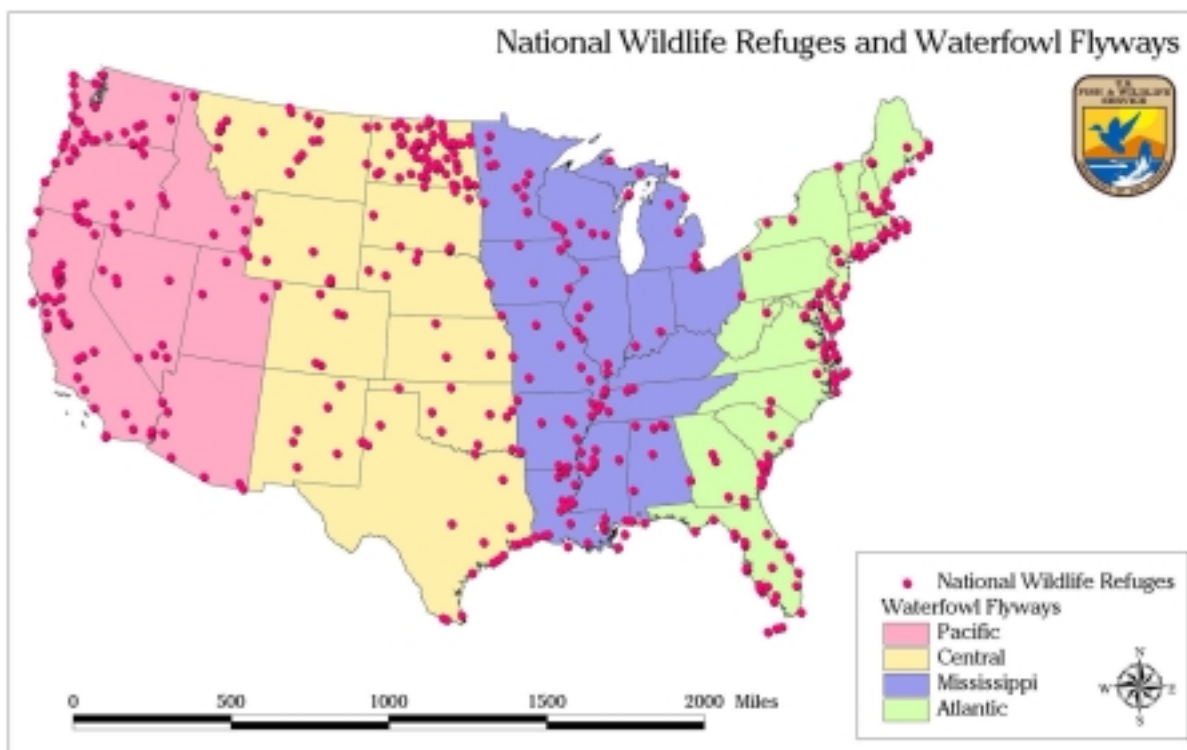
Like Pelican Island, many early national wildlife refuges were created for herons, egrets and other water birds. Others were set aside for large mammals such as elk and bison. Most refuges, however, have been created to protect migratory waterfowl. This is a result of the United States' responsibilities under international treaties for migratory bird conservation as well as other legislation, such as the Migratory Bird Conservation Act of 1929. A map of the National Wildlife Refuge System shows refuges dotting the four major flyways that waterfowl follow from their northern nesting grounds to southern wintering areas (Figure 2).

*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 refuges also play a vital role in preserving endangered and threatened species. Among the refuges that are well known for providing



Figure 2: The National Wildlife Refuge System and Waterfowl Flyways



habitat for endangered species are Aransas National Wildlife Refuge in Texas, the winter home of the whooping crane; the Florida Panther Refuge, which protects one of the nation's most endangered mammals; and the Hawaiian Islands Refuge, home of the Laysan duck, Hawaiian monk seal, and many other unique species.

Refuges also provide unique opportunities for people. When it is compatible with wildlife and habitat needs, refuges can be used for *wildlife-dependent activities* such as hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, environmental education and interpretation. Many refuges have visitor centers, wildlife trails, automobile tours, and environmental education programs. Nationwide, more than 30 million people visited national wildlife refuges in 1997.

The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 established many mandates aimed at making the management of national wildlife refuges more cohesive. The preparation of Comprehensive Conservation Plans is one of those mandates. The legislation requires the Secretary of the Interior to ensure that the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System and purposes of the individual refuges are carried out. It also requires the Secretary to maintain the biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health of the National Wildlife Refuge System.



## The Great Lakes Basin Ecosystem

The Great Lakes Basin Ecosystem, which includes the Ottawa Refuge Complex, is the largest body of fresh water in the world. It holds 18 percent of the world's supply of fresh water; covers 95,000 square miles with 9,000 miles of shoreline; includes 5,000 tributaries; and has a drainage area of 288,000 square miles. More than 35 million people live in the Great Lakes Basin and depend upon its natural resources. This bi-national basin, which is shared between the U.S. and Canada, is subject to ever-increasing national and international attention being focused on the introduction and expansion of nonindigenous species, such as the zebra mussel, ruffe, purple loosestrife, and others; the precarious nature of aquatic and nearshore communities and habitats; and contamination, all of which are affecting ecosystem health.

The Great Lakes Basin supports a variety of fish and wildlife species of concern. Fish species of special interest include lake trout, lake sturgeon, lake whitefish, walleye, Pacific salmon, landlocked Atlantic salmon, and associated forage fish species. Native mussels are being seriously impacted by the exotic zebra mussel and are in danger of *extirpation*. The Great Lakes Basin provides critical breeding, feeding, and resting areas, as well as migration corridors, for waterfowl, colonial nesting birds, neotropical migrants, and many other species of migratory birds. Specifically, 31 species of migratory non-game birds of management concern to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service occur in this ecosystem. A recent survey of *biological diversity* in the Great Lakes Basin identified 130 globally rare or endangered plant and animal species and ecological communities. The bald eagle, peregrine falcon, piping plover, Kirtland's warbler, Mitchell's satyr and Karner blue butterflies, Indiana bat, gray wolf, lake sturgeon, deepwater sculpin, and pugnose shiner are a few of the many threatened, endangered, and *species of special concern* that inhabit the Great Lakes Basin ecosystem.

## History of Refuge Establishment

### Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge

The 4,683-acre Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge was created in 1961 to preserve a remnant of the formerly vast Lake Erie coastal wetlands. The land was purchased by funds authorized through the Migratory Bird Conservation and Hunting Stamp Act (commonly called the Duck Stamp Act). A large portion of the new Refuge had been owned and operated as a duck hunting club for decades. Water levels were managed by a series of dikes that formed impoundments and the new Refuge retained these and other facilities. In fact, the current Refuge headquarters was the former club's hunting lodge.



Photo by Sharon Cummings



Today, the Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge is comprised of three separate units. The Ottawa Unit is the original 4,683-acre tract. The 520-acre Darby Unit is located 12 miles to the east near Port Clinton. In 1966, the Service received the Darby Unit in a trade with Toledo Edison for a property known as the Navarre Marsh. The Service retains management rights on the 591-acre Navarre Unit, now the site of the Davis Besse Nuclear Power Station.

### **Cedar Point National Wildlife Refuge**

The 2,445-acre area that is now the Cedar Point National Wildlife Refuge was donated to the North American Wildlife Foundation by the Cedar Point Club, a hunt club that had owned Cedar Point Marsh since 1882. The Foundation turned the marsh over to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1964 with the provision that it not be used as a public park, campground or picnic area. Proposed development was again the catalyst for action by local conservationists to preserve the resource.

### **West Sister Island National Wildlife Refuge**

West Sister Island National Wildlife Refuge is the oldest member of the Ottawa Complex and the most isolated. The 80-acre island became a national wildlife refuge in 1937, and in 1975 it was designated as a Federal wilderness area under the Wilderness Act of 1964. The Service manages 77 acres of the island and the U.S. Coast Guard owns the remaining acreage and an existing lighthouse. The island is home to the largest blue heron and great egret rookery in the U.S. Great Lakes and is also home to black-crowned night herons and snowy egrets. The island is not accessible to the public.

## **Legal Context**

In addition to the Refuge's establishing authority legislation and the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997, several Federal laws, executive orders, and regulations govern administration of the Refuge. Appendix F contains a partial list of the legal mandates that guided the preparation of this plan and that pertain to future Refuge management.

