

Mattamuskeet National Wildlife Refuge

Mattamuskeet National Wildlife Refuge, located on the Albemarle-Pamlico Peninsula in Hyde County, North Carolina, was established in 1934. The Refuge consists of 50,180 acres of open water, marsh, timber, and croplands. The Refuge's main feature is the shallow 40,000 acre Lake Mattamuskeet, the largest natural lake in North Carolina.

Mattamuskeet Refuge provides habitat for migratory birds and other wildlife, as well as wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities for visitors. The refuge is known among wildlife enthusiasts for the thousands of wintering waterfowl that it attracts each year.

History

The formation of Lake Mattamuskeet remains a mystery. Some say fires burning deep into the peat soil formed the lake. Another account describes Lake Mattamuskeet and other nearby smaller lakes as being scoured out by a shower of meteors that struck the Carolina coastal plain. A final theory is that the lake remained after the historical Carolina Bays gradually receded from the area.

For many years the idea of draining the shallow Lake Mattamuskeet intrigued farmers and developers. Patterned after similar projects in Holland, large scale drainage operations to convert the lake bottom to farmland began in 1914. The world's largest pumping plant at the time was built, and the lake was actually drained for periods of time. Eventually, the scheme was abandoned as impractical and too expensive.

In 1934 the land was acquired by the United States Government, and the refuge was established. The Civilian Conservation Corps converted the former pumping plant into a hunting lodge which was operated until 1974. The Mattamuskeet Lodge was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1980. In 2007 the Lodge and 6.25 acres of adjacent land were transferred to the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission for use "... as a public facility dedicated to the conservation of the natural and cultural resources of North Carolina."

Habitat Types

Lake Mattamuskeet, dotted with bald cypress trees, is 14 miles long and 5 miles wide and varies in depth from 0.5 to 4 feet with an average depth of 1.5 feet. Dense beds of submerged aquatic vegetation desired by swan, diving ducks, and some puddle ducks are produced naturally. The lake level fluctuates with rainfall, wind tides, and evapo-transpiration.

A system of 15 man-made wetland impoundments totaling nearly 2,505 acres surround the south and east sides of the lake, providing feeding and resting

areas for many species of migratory birds as well as resident wildlife. A farming area contributes another 125 acres of cropland and 275 acres of grassland to the diversity of habitat types on the refuge.

Refuge forests consist of approximately 1,000 acres of loblolly pine, including the 153-acre Salyer's Ridge Natural Area, and 2,000 acres of mixed hardwoods and bald cypress. These woodlands occur in narrow strips along the refuge boundary between the marsh and higher private lands.

Wildlife

Over 100,000 tundra swan, Canada geese, snow geese, and 18 species of ducks overwinter on the refuge annually. Mattamuskeet Refuge's position along the Atlantic Flyway makes it a prime location for wintering waterfowl.

Although noted primarily for its waterfowl, Mattamuskeet also provides habitat for many other species including wading birds, shorebirds, and birds of prey like the osprey and bald eagle. Mammals such as deer, bobcat, otter, black bear, and the endangered red wolf also find refuge here. A variety of amphibians including frogs, toads, and salamanders are common throughout the refuge.

The rich diversity of habitats on Mattamuskeet provides a haven for reptiles including snapping turtles, yellowbelly turtles, eastern fence lizards, and 31 species of snakes. The only poisonous snakes are the copperhead, cottonmouth, canebrake rattlesnake, and the Carolina pigmy rattlesnake.

The lake, marsh, and woodlands provide habitat for over 240 bird species. Ospreys nest in low cypress trees near the edge of the lake. Hundreds of migratory shorebirds find resting and feeding spots along the edge of the lake and throughout the marsh impoundments. Migrating warblers are popular subjects for bird watchers in the spring and fall.

Management

The 2,505 acres of wetland impoundments are intensively managed by using moist-soil techniques to produce stands of natural waterfowl foods such as wild millet, panic grasses, and spikerushes. Water levels are controlled by pumps and water control structures. Impoundments are manipulated every few years by burning, disking, or mowing to maintain these early successional wetland plants.

Corn and soybeans are farmed by a cooperative farmer with a portion of the crop left in the field for Canada geese, snow geese, ducks, and swan to use. Forest management techniques such as prescribed burning are used to enhance wildlife habitat.

Recreational Opportunities

Mattamuskeet Refuge is a popular place for visitors to enjoy a variety of wildlife-dependent recreation. During fall and winter, concentrations of swan, geese, and ducks are a delight to both wildlife observers and photographers. Viewing waterfowl and other wildlife species is particularly good along the Hwy 94 Causeway which travels across Lake Mattamuskeet and along the refuge Entrance Road and Wildlife Drive which run from Highway 94 to the refuge headquarters and along the south side of the Entrance Road Impoundment. An observation viewing deck is available along the Highway 94 Causeway. Visitors are welcome to walk or bicycle throughout the refuge, however, visitors are cautioned to review the corresponding map and observe refuge regulatory signs as some areas are closed to the public during the winter. Each December the refuge hosts an annual Open House where visitors may enjoy tours of a part of the refuge which is normally closed to public access in the winter. Swan, snow geese, northern pintail and other waterfowl as well as bald eagles are often observed.

Boating and sport fishing for largemouth bass, striped bass, catfish, crappie, and other species is permitted on Lake Mattamuskeet and the adjacent canals. Taking blue crabs at the water control structures is a very popular sport enjoyed by all age groups. All fishing activities must be conducted in accordance with state regulations. Additional refuge regulations are available at the refuge headquarters.

Mattamuskeet Refuge provides for quality public hunting of white-tailed deer and waterfowl. For current information on hunting dates and procedures contact the refuge headquarters.

Prohibited Activities

■ Prohibited activities include: camping, littering, air boating, jet skiing, all terrain vehicles, swimming, sailing, sailboarding, molesting wildlife, and collecting plants, flowers, nuts, or berries. In addition, all boating is prohibited from November 2 through February 28.

■ The speed limit on refuge roads is 25 miles per hour unless posted otherwise. Motorized vehicles are not allowed behind closed gates. Boats may not be left on the refuge overnight.

How to Reach the Refuge

The refuge is located approximately 70 miles east of Washington, North Carolina. The headquarters entrance road is located off Highway 94, one and one-half miles north of U.S. 264 between Swan Quarter and Engelhard.



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