



## U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

# National Wildlife Refuge System

## Overview



Photo: USFWS



Photo: USFWS/Laura Beauregard

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the premier government agency dedicated to the conservation, protection and enhancement of fish, wildlife and plants, and their habitats. The Service also helps ensure a healthy environment for people by protecting such ecosystem services as clean air and water.

Since President Theodore Roosevelt designated Florida's Pelican Island as the first wildlife refuge in 1903, the National Wildlife Refuge System has grown to include more than 560 refuges, 38 wetland management districts and other protected areas encompassing 150 million acres of land and water from the Caribbean to the remote Pacific. There is at least one national wildlife refuge in every state and territory and within an hour's drive of most major metropolitan areas.

National wildlife refuges provide habitat for more than 700 species of birds, 220 species of mammals, 250 reptile and amphibian species and more than 1,000 species of fish. More than 380 threatened or endangered plants or animals are protected on wildlife refuges. Each year, millions of migrating birds use refuges as stepping stones while they fly thousands of miles between their summer and winter homes.

The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 outlined the fundamental conservation mission of the Refuge System, but also identified six areas of wildlife-dependent recreation as appropriate on refuges:

- Hunting and Fishing
- Wildlife Observation and Photography
- Environmental Education and Interpretation

The Service is working to meet such conservation challenges as:

- Urban encroachment
- Landscape-level conservation to combat habitat fragmentation
- Degradation of water quality
- Climate change
- Increasing demands for energy development and extraction

**U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service**  
<http://www.fws.gov/refuges>

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Photo: USFWS/Ron Laubenstein