



*Celebrating a
Century
of Conservation!*

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

America's National Wildlife Refuge System

Waterfowl Production Areas: Prairie Jewels of the Refuge System

The National Wildlife Refuge System is the world's most unique network of lands and waters set aside specifically for conservation of fish, wildlife and plants. President Theodore Roosevelt established the first refuge, 3-acre Pelican Island Bird Reservation in Florida's Indian River Lagoon, in 1903. Roosevelt went on to create 55 more refuges before he left office in 1909; today the refuge system encompasses more than 500 units spread over nearly 94 million acres.

The refuge system also includes several thousand waterfowl production areas that preserve wetlands and grasslands critical to waterfowl and other wildlife. These public lands became part of the National Wildlife Refuge System in 1966 through the National Wildlife Refuge Administration Act.

Nearly 95 percent of waterfowl production areas are located in the prairie wetlands or "potholes" of North and South Dakota, Minnesota, and Montana. North Dakota alone is home to more than a third of the nation's waterfowl production areas. If wetlands in this vast prairie pothole region were not saved from drainage, hundreds of species of migratory birds would have been seriously threatened or possibly become extinct.

Congress passed the Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Act in 1934, amending the act in 1958 to authorize the Service use proceeds from the sale of Federal Duck Stamps to acquire wetlands and uplands as waterfowl production areas. This began one of the most productive acquisition campaigns in history—one that would ultimately become a race against the draining of some of the nation's most valuable wetland habitat.

Nearly 3,000 waterfowl production areas now cover 668,000 acres nationwide. They average 223 acres in size. The smallest is less than an acre (Medicine Lake WPA in North Dakota) and the largest is 3,733 acres (Kingsbury Lake WPA in Montana).

Waterfowl production areas are managed by the staffs at wetland management districts around the prairie pothole region. Wetland management districts were created in 1962 as the Fish and Wildlife Service's land acquisition program accelerated because of increasing Duck Stamp sales. Each wetland management district has a staff of two to 12 people, including wildlife managers, biologists, technicians, maintenance workers and administrative specialists.

Wetland management staff also manage wetland easements and work with willing private landowners who protect their wetlands. To date, the Service has acquired nearly 25,000 easements covering 1.6 million acres. In recent years, the Service has also purchased grassland easements to provide permanent grassland cover around wetlands to meet the needs of upland nesting waterfowl and other wildlife.

While waterfowl production areas, easements, and national wildlife refuges account for less than 2 percent of the landscape in the prairie pothole region states, they are responsible for producing nearly 23 percent of this area's waterfowl. That is why working with private landowners through



voluntary partnerships to enhance wetlands is so critical to protecting waterfowl.

Nearly 800,000 people visit waterfowl production areas yearly. Waterfowl production areas in the Huron Wetland Management District in South Dakota get more than 100,000 visitors per year—more than any other wetland management district. By law, waterfowl production areas are open to hunting, and fishing. Other important wildlife-dependent uses allowed include wildlife observation, photography and environmental education.

Interesting Facts about Waterfowl Production Areas

- The Blackfoot River, made famous in the book and movie “A River Runs Through It,” winds through the Blackfoot WPA in Montana.
- The Rainwater Basin Wetland Management District in Nebraska is one of the most important stopover areas for waterfowl in North America. Some 2 to 3 million geese and 7 to 9 million ducks use the area for a few weeks between February and April each year as they wing their way to their breeding grounds.
- Dozens of threatened or endangered flora and fauna, such as the western prairie fringed orchid, rely heavily on waterfowl production area habitat for survival. The Service purchased Fuller WPA in northwestern North Dakota to protect nesting threatened piping plovers as well as waterfowl. Other rare or unique species recorded on waterfowl production areas in the West include grizzly bears, mountain lions, bobcats, blue grouse and wolverines.
- Waterfowl production areas also protect a large portion of the remaining tallgrass in the Midwest. Helikson WPA in northwest Minnesota contains 1,373 acres of virgin prairie with grasses over 6 feet tall.

- Waterfowl production areas are usually named after the owner who sold the land to the Fish and Wildlife Service, while a few stick with names given by local residents. Unusual names include Mosquito Ranch, Humpty Dumpty, Robin Hood, Maga TaHohpi (Yankton Sioux for “duck nest”), Gomer Trout and Kicking Horse.

- Plover WPA, in Lac qui Parle County, Minnesota, had granite bedrock outcrops exposed 10,000 years ago by a glacial river. It is believed that this bedrock is some of the oldest in the world.

- Jarina WPA, at the foot of the east face of the Rockies in Montana, is the windiest waterfowl production area. Fierce southerly winds that reach 100 m.p.h., known as Chinooks, roar across the terrain and tear bolted boundary signs from their posts.

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