



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

# Waterfowl Production Areas:

## *Prairie Jewels of the National Wildlife Refuge System*

*The National Wildlife Refuge System is one of America's greatest conservation success stories. In its first hundred years, it helped save our national symbol, the American bald eagle, from extinction and has protected hundreds of other wild species—including fish, migratory birds, and many other plants and animals and the habitats that support them.*

**T**he refuge system includes several thousand waterfowl production areas that preserve wetlands and grasslands critical to waterfowl and other wildlife. Providing vital breeding and nesting habitat to millions of waterfowl, these small depressions, bordered by wetland grasses and filled with aquatic life, are the jewels left by receding glaciers following the Ice Age. Nearly 7,000 fee waterfowl production areas preserve more than



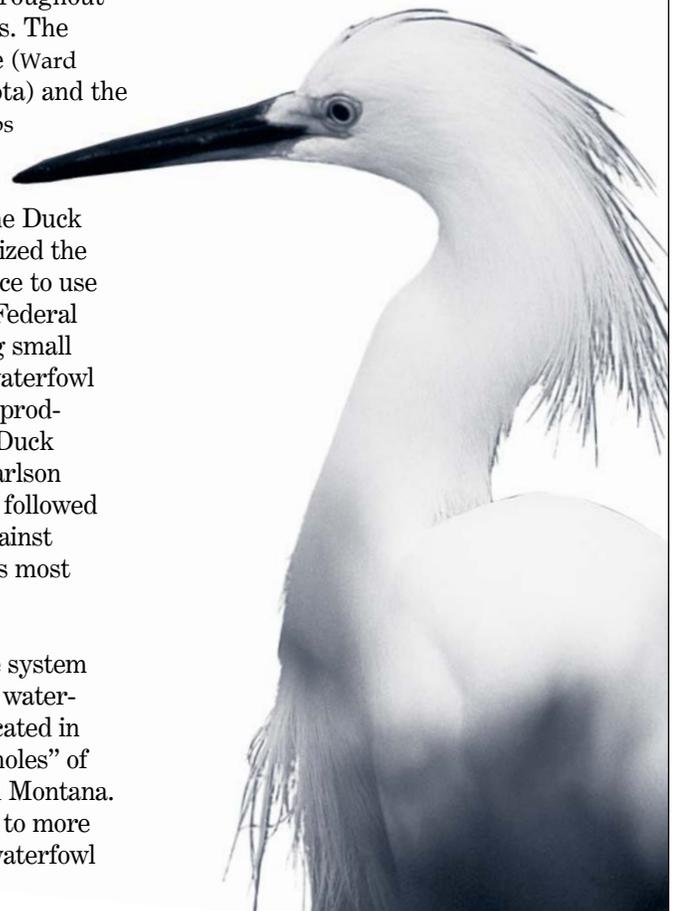
677,000 acres of wetland habitat nationwide, forming a series of breeding and nesting locations throughout traditional waterfowl ranges. The smallest is less than an acre (Ward County WPA in North Dakota) and the largest is 7,468 acres (Phillips County WPA in Montana).

When Congress amended the Duck Stamp Act in 1958, it authorized the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to use money from the sale of the Federal Duck Stamp to begin buying small wetland areas to preserve waterfowl habitat. The first waterfowl production area purchased with Duck Stamp money was the McCarlson area in South Dakota. What followed ultimately became a race against draining some of the nation's most valuable wetland habitat.

Incorporated into the refuge system in 1966, nearly 95 percent of waterfowl production areas are located in the prairie wetlands or "potholes" of the Dakotas, 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 become extinct.

Although 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.



Staff also manage wetland easements, perpetual contracts with willing private landowners who protect their wetlands from draining and filling with soil. To date, the Service has acquired over 29,000 easements covering 2.5 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.

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, fishing, and trapping. Other important wildlife-dependent uses include wildlife observation, photography, and environmental education.

### Interesting Facts about WPAs

- ◆ 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. Approximately 2 to 3 million geese and 7 to 9 million ducks use the area for a few weeks each year as they wing their way to their breeding grounds.
- ◆ Dozens of threatened or endangered species, especially prairie plants 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 for waterfowl production and to protect nesting threatened piping plovers. 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.
- ◆ Plover WPA, in Lac qui Parle County, Minnesota, had granite bedrock outcrops exposed 10,000 years ago by a glacial river. The bedrock is said to be 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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## America's Best Kept Secret



*When President Theodore Roosevelt made Florida's tiny Pelican Island a*

*refuge for birds in 1903, he wrote the first chapter of a great American conservation success story. And the story of safeguarding America's migratory birds, endangered species, and other wildlife keeps getting better and better. Entering its second century, the National Wildlife Refuge System comprises 95 million acres, protected within more than 535 refuges and thousands of small prairie wetlands that serve as waterfowl breeding and nesting areas. There are wildlife refuges in every state, and at least one within an hour's drive of every major American city, providing much-needed refuge for people as well as wildlife.*

*The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is a Federal agency whose mission, working with others, is to conserve fish and wildlife and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. Under the management of fish and wildlife professionals, the National Wildlife Refuge System has become the world's premier network of wildlife habitats.*



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