

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Buffalo Lake

*National Wildlife
Refuge*



The 7,664-acre Buffalo Lake National Wildlife Refuge is one of more than 500 refuges throughout the United States managed by the Fish and Wildlife Service. The National Wildlife Refuge System is the only national system of lands dedicated to conserving our wildlife heritage for people today and for generations yet to come.

**Welcome:
Shortgrass Prairie
Landmark**

Once buffalo grazed the shortgrass prairies you see today at Buffalo Lake National Wildlife Refuge in the Texas Panhandle. Once a lake reflected the clouds. The buffalo have vanished. The lake has dried. But the shortgrass prairie remains as one of the best in the high plains grassland ecosystem.



**Umbarger Dam
and the Past**

In fact, this prairie is so important that 175 acres of it carries the designation of National Natural Landmark. Over 4,000 acres of grasslands are the best you'll see anywhere in the area. Most everywhere else, these native grasslands fell to the plow and with them their wildlife. Here, you'll still see black-tailed prairie dogs perched on mounds and burrowing owls blinking in broad daylight.



The shortgrass prairies spill into marshes, woodlands, riparian habitat, croplands, and water-carved canyon walls that together form 7,664 acres of homes for migratory and year-round wildlife.



(Above, top) Double Rainbow over Buffalo Lake; (Above, left) Tiger Swallowtail Butterfly; (Left) Yucca. Photos by Lynn Nymeyer

Wildlife: Looking in All the Right Places

Red-tailed hawks hunt rodents over the grasslands, occasionally joined by golden eagles. Bald eagles arrive during the winter and tend to stay closer to water in search of fish or waterfowl. Trees clustered along the shore act as beacons for migrating songbirds in spring and fall. Finding wildlife at the refuge takes some habitat know how.

Scissor-tail Flycatcher.
Photo by J. Beall



Migratory Songbird Shelter

After years of observation and recording, birdwatchers have tallied some 300 species of birds at the refuge. Buffalo Lake NWR rests in the Central Flyway, a route through the central U.S. followed by migratory birds winging between tropical wintering and U.S. nesting areas. Warblers, flycatchers, tanagers, orioles, and sparrows pass through the refuge each spring and fall, and many remain to nest in the shoreline trees.

Buffalo Lake NWR joins a web of protected places vital to the survival of migratory songbirds. Many species have shown serious declines in recent years.



Fighting Turkeys.
Photo by Lynn Nymeyer

Wintering Waterfowl at Stewart Marsh Moist Soil Management Unit

The whistles and quacks of visiting waterfowl fill the frosty winter air. Look for flocks of mallards, green-winged teal, northern pintail, shoveler, and maybe a heron or two.



Growth in Moist Soil Unit. Photo by Lynn Nymeyer

Prairie Dogs, Burrowing Owls, and Plovers

The rolling grasslands harbor a 100-acre, black-tailed prairie dog town. Where there are prairie dogs, you'll also find burrowing owls that depend on the dog towns for burrows. During spring, the rare mountain plover might be seen in vegetation kept clipped and short by prairie dogs. Grasshopper sparrows, Cassin's sparrows, lark sparrows, and lark buntings find food and shelter here. Ferruginous hawks glide by and even a peregrine falcon might streak overhead in search of an easy meal.



Wildlife to See Anytime

Lending a Hand for Wildlife

(Above) Kestrel;
(Right) Bobwhite Quail. Photos by Lynn Nymeyer

Anywhere in any season on the refuge, you might spot mule and white-tailed deer, pheasants, bobwhite quail, cottontail rabbits, and coyotes. Wild turkeys tend to stay closer to the woodlands.

Whether it's tending to trees, restoring vigor to grasslands, flooding Stewart Marsh Moist Soil Management Units, or planting wildlife food crops, the refuge staff takes an active role in improving the refuge wildlife habitats.



Wildlife Watching Tips

Morning and evening are the best times to see wildlife.

In warmer climates, little is moving on hot summer afternoons or on windy days.

Observe from the sidelines. Leave “abandoned” young animals alone. A parent is probably close by waiting for you to leave. Don’t offer snacks; your lunch could disrupt wild digestive systems.

Cars make good observation blinds. Drive slowly, stopping to scan places wildlife might hide. Use binoculars or a long lens for a closer look.

Try sitting quietly in one good location. Let wildlife get used to your presence. Many animals that have hidden will reappear once they think you are gone. Walk quietly in designated areas, being aware of sounds and smells. Often you will hear more than you will see.

Teach children quiet observation. Other wildlife watchers will appreciate your consideration.

Look for animal signs. Tracks, scat, feathers, and nests left behind often tell interesting stories.

Caring for Trees

Elm and cottonwood beside the dry lakebed offer a lush oasis for songbirds in the arid Texas Panhandle. Originally planted by the U.S. Forest Service, the refuge staff now monitors the trees’ health and occasionally controls encroaching salt cedar.

Grazing the Grassland

Shortgrass prairie ecosystems once depended on American bison grazing to keep grasses healthy. Today, the refuge seeks to replicate the bison way of grazing as closely as possible. Cattle graze intensely for a short time and each grazed pasture receives a year’s rest before cattle return.

Ducks over Moist Soil Unit. Photo by Lynn Nymeyer



Flooding for Waterfowl

The refuge staff floods moist soil management units every spring. As they slowly dry, aquatic plants favored by waterfowl take hold. Just before ducks touch down in the fall, the staff floods the marsh again. The result? Water birds seeking a rest stop find food and shelter waiting for them. Artificial ponds and water tanks offer additional water sources for wildlife.

Sharing Food Crops

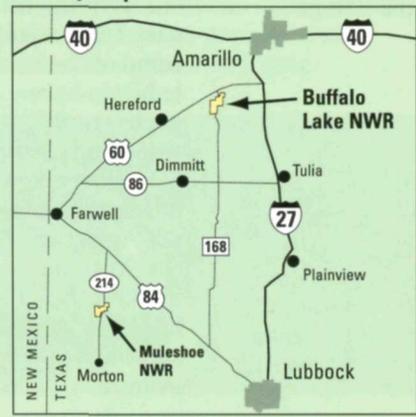
Farmers and wildlife both reap rewards from cooperative farming in the dry lake bottom. Local farmers keep two-thirds of the crop and the remainder stays on the refuge for wildlife food. The lakebed is farmed in a patchwork of croplands and native plants. Together, they offer nesting and winter cover for wildlife.

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National Wildlife Refuge



Vicinity Map



History: Why is the Lake Dry?

Back in 1937, Buffalo Lake pooled behind Umbarger Dam, built as part of the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act of 1937. Water in a dry land instantly attracted waterfowl along the Central Flyway. The Soil Conservation Service first managed the lake for water conservation, recreation, and as a wildlife sanctuary. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service took over on November 6, 1958, recognizing the value for wildlife.



Things to Do at the Refuge

(Above, top) Thundercloud over Headquarters; (Above) Snow in Picnic Area; (Right) Prickly Pear. Photos by Lynn Nymeyer

Tierra Blanca Creek and natural springs fed Buffalo Lake until the 1970s. Irrigation and urban water pumping sapped the water table and, simultaneously, the rains decreased. Tierra Blanca Creek dried up and eventually so did Buffalo Lake. After a torrential rain filled the lake to capacity in 1978, Umbarger Dam was condemned and the lake drained.

In 1992, the Fish and Wildlife Service replaced Umbarger Dam with a modern flood control structure. Major storms occasionally flood Tierra Blanca Creek, but water quality suffers from upstream cattle feedlots. The refuge releases any water in the lake and instead manages the dry lakebed for wildlife habitat.

For an overview of the refuge, start out with the refuge auto tour. Two easy trails take you into the heart of some of the best habitats here—prairie and woodlands. Stop in at the refuge headquarters to pick up a bird checklist and find out the latest on wildlife sightings and events.



Take a 5-mile Wildlife Drive



A leisurely morning or afternoon drive through grasslands, woodlands, a dry playa, and farm fields offers excellent chances for spotting wildlife. Along this out-and-back drive (which turns around at Stewart Marsh), you'll see the most birds during spring and fall migration. Deer wander out into the open during winter to nibble plants and leftover crops. The route passes a "Windmill for Wildlife" exhibit, featuring a working windmill. Take time to visit the observation deck and photo blind.

Hike to a Prairie Dog Town



Visit a prairie dog town and learn about their social life from interpretive signs along the half-mile trail. Prairie dogs are active during daylight hours but will scurry to their burrows when disturbed. If you remain still and quiet the prairie dogs may soon reappear, allowing you to watch them. Keep a sharp lookout for burrowing owls here too. You'll find the trail just 2 miles south of the Highway 1714 intersection.

Stroll the Cottonwood Canyon Birding Trail



This half-mile trail follows tree-shaded canyon walls along the northwest shore, a favorite riparian destination for songbirds. Take along the refuge bird checklist, carry your camera and binoculars, and see how many species you can find. Restrooms, benches, and an interpretive trailhead sign enhance the refuge's most popular trail, located near the entry gate.

(Above) Windmill. Photo by Lynn Nymeyer. (Right) Coyote, USFWS Photo



Photography Best Bets



Whether focusing on a spring wildflower or aiming a long lens toward a flight of ducks, photographers will find plenty of material here. Best bets for photography include the auto tour route, the scenic overlook and observation blind, and designated hiking trails.

Environmental Education

Please contact the refuge to find out about our offerings for schools and groups seeking environmental education



activities. A group camping/picnicking site may be reserved for environmental education. The refuge staff may be able to help with additional activities.

Meeting Your Needs

Camping and Picnicking



You're welcome to camp and picnic in our designated site (see map). Note that the area is primitive, and tables are available on a first come, first served basis. You'll find restrooms and one accessible site. Overnight campers under 18 must have adult supervision. There's a 7-day limit on camping.

Horseback Riding



The refuge permits horseback riding only on 9.5 miles of the outer fire lane around the old Buffalo Lake bed. Here, riders will find varied habitats and excellent wildlife viewing. To protect the refuge, no horseback riding is allowed in any other areas, including cross country riding. Horses are to be in direct, tethered control at all times. Do not tether horses to trees or refuge physical structures such as fences, sign posts, and buildings.

Horses are not allowed in the mowed areas of the camping and picnic area containing the picnic tables. The refuge does not permit overnight horse use.

(Above) Bumble
Bee on flower.
Photo by Lynn
Nymeyer

Horse Trailer Parking

Horse trailer parking for loading and unloading is available at the end of the auto tour road (in the grassed area inside the turn around loop). Horses may not be loaded or unloaded and trailers parked at any other area of the refuge.

Water for Horses

The refuge does not provide watering facilities for horses. However, horses may be watered in the central pond below the camping area. Owners also may bring containers, fill them at refuge public water areas, and transport the water to their animals at the designated trailer unloading/loading areas.

Feeding Horses

The refuge prohibits feeding of horses and the transportation of commercial feeds such as hay, mixed grains, or supplements onto Buffalo Lake NWR.

Closest Food, Gas, Phones, Lodging



You'll find food, gasoline, and public telephones in Umbarger (1.5 miles), Canyon (10 miles), Hereford (20 miles), and Amarillo (30 miles). Motels and restaurants are available in Canyon, Hereford, and Amarillo. Camping off the refuge is available at Palo Duro Canyon State Park (38 miles) and Lake Meredith National Recreation Area (70 miles).

Refuge Hours

The refuge is open from 8 am to 8 pm daily, April 1 through September 30 and 8 am to 6 pm, October 1 through March 31. The refuge office is open from 8 am to 4:30 pm, Monday through Friday.

All refuge areas except the designated camping area are closed to the public after the official closing time including the auto-tour route. The refuge entry gate is timer operated. Campers may leave at any time by driving across the one-way exit. After the official closing time there is no entry or re-entry into the refuge.

Fees

A \$2.00 per vehicle per day fee is charged and an entry permit is required. Visitors may pay the fee and obtain the permit by following the directions at the self-service kiosk near the entry gate. During business hours fees may be paid and permits obtained at the refuge headquarters. Golden Age Passports, Golden Eagle Passports, Golden Access Passports, and a current Federal Duck Stamp are also accepted in place of the daily use fee.

Help Us Protect the Refuge

To safeguard the wildlife of Buffalo Lake NWR, we do not allow the following activities:

Possession and use of firearms, pellet guns, air guns, bow and arrows, or other weapons; fireworks; chemicals; and spotlights.

Hunting

Fires & charcoal/wood burning grill

Littering and dumping

Boating, swimming or fishing

Cutting or defacing trees, rocks, and natural objects

Harassing wildlife

Metal detectors and searching for valued objects, arrowheads, or artifacts of antiquity

Collecting birds, animals, plants, fish, parts of plants, flowers, nuts, berries or fire wood

Destruction, defacement, disturbance, or removal of private or public property (including natural features such as rocks, bones, or deer antlers)

Construction of photography blinds

Construction of tents and/or shelters, except in the camping/picnicking area.

Respect Closures



To give wildlife room to live, the refuge is only open where designated. Please be aware of your location and do not stray into closed areas.

Motorized Vehicles

Motorized vehicles are permitted only on designated roads and parking areas. The refuge does not allow all-terrain vehicles and unlicensed or non street-legal motorcycles.

Pets



Pets must be kept on a leash not to exceed 10 feet in length. Training dogs on the refuge is not permitted.

Fires



Wildfires are a serious threat to wildlife and their homes. Only gas stoves are permitted. Limit use to within the picnic and campground.

Buffalo Lake NWR Facts

Where is it?

Refuge headquarters may be reached from the east and west by U.S. 60 and from the north and south by Interstate 27 to U.S. 60. The entrance road is located 1.5 miles south of Umbarger, Texas, on F.M. 168. Umbarger is 10 miles west of Canyon, Texas, and 20 miles east of Hereford, Texas, on U.S. 60, approximately 30 miles southwest of Amarillo, Texas.

When was it established?

November 6, 1958

How big is it?

7,664-acres.

Why is it here?

To provide protection and habitat for migratory and resident wildlife species.



Cottontail. Photo by Lynn Nymeyer

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