

News Release



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March 8, 2002

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Where Wildlife Comes First: National Wildlife Refuges Celebrate Nearly a Century of Conservation

Nowhere is America's love affair with wildlife more apparent than on the nearly 540 units of the National Wildlife Refuge System. In the 99 years since the first refuge was established the system has evolved into a 95-million acre network of lands and waters protecting many of America's--and the world's--most unique natural areas as habitat for an amazing variety of wildlife.

As the refuge system prepares to celebrate its centennial anniversary on March 14, 2003, refuges from Maine to Hawaii and Alaska to the Caribbean are gearing up--hosting special events, partnering with conservation organizations and private corporations, bolstering volunteerism and reinforcing public support for their wildlife conservation mission.

Helping to meet those goals of increasing public support and partnerships will be the National Wildlife Refuge System Centennial Commission, a group of distinguished private-sector individuals appointed by the Interior Secretary to oversee special Centennial projects. The Centennial Commission will hold its first meeting March 12 and 13, 2002.

"America's national wildlife refuges are great places to reconnect with nature, escape from our everyday surroundings and enjoy outdoor activities such as hunting, fishing and wildlife watching," says Steve Williams, Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which administers the refuge system. "The Centennial is an opportunity to reinforce growing interest in and support from Congress, conservation partners and the American public to fulfill the promise of the refuge system in its next century."

The National Wildlife Refuge System story began in 1903 when President Theodore Roosevelt learned that brown pelicans and white egrets living on tiny Pelican Island on Florida's east coast were being slaughtered for their feathers. Taking action to protect the birds and their habitat, Roosevelt issued an executive order establishing Pelican Island as the first national wildlife refuge.

Roosevelt went on to create 51 more refuges during his presidency, and today the National Wildlife Refuge System offers the American people unparalleled outdoor experiences in natural settings.

National wildlife refuges form a series of stepping stones for ducks, geese, caribou, and thousands of other birds, mammals, fish, reptiles and plant species. Many national wildlife refuges were established along the four migratory bird flyways to provide crucial stopovers for birds to rest, feed, breed and recharge during their long

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migrations.

More than 400 national wildlife refuges are open to the public, offering a variety of outdoor activities—including fishing, hunting, environmental education, wildlife observation and photography—and making them special places for Americans to discover the wonders of nature. Many refuges offer additional opportunities for nature hikes, bird tours, wildlife drives and other activities. There are refuges within an hour's drive of most major cities.

“The refuge system’s 100th anniversary in 2003 represents an opportunity make the National Wildlife Refuge System stronger than it has ever been,” Williams says. “It also provides an opportunity for the sportsmen and women of America to celebrate their contribution to the nation’s heritage of wildlife conservation.”

Momentum for the Centennial got rolling when the National Wildlife Refuge System Centennial Act of 2000 was signed, paving the way for the Service’s efforts to increase awareness and understanding of the refuge system and bolster stewardship and visitor programs and facilities.

The act also directed the Interior Secretary to appoint the Centennial Commission. Commission members are: **Michael Bean**, Wildlife Program Chairman, Environmental Defense; **Peter Coors**, Vice Chairman and CEO, Coors Brewing Company; **Lynn Greenwalt**, former Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; ; **Jack Hanna**, host of television’s “Jack Hanna’s Animal Adventures”; **William P. Horn** (Commission Chair), Counsel, Sportsmen’s Alliance, and former Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Fish and Wildlife and Parks; NBA All-star and Utah Jazz player **Karl Malone**; **John L. Morris**, CEO, Bass Pro and former Chairman of the Board, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation; **Kym Murphy**, Corporate Vice President of Environmental Policy, Walt Disney Company; and **Daniel Pedrotti**, former President, Boone and Crockett Club. Ex-officio members are: **Sen. James Jeffords** (I-VT), Chairman, Committee on Environment and Public Works; **Sen. Robert C. Smith** (R-NH), Ranking Member, Committee on Environment and Public Works; **Rep. James V. Hansen** (R-UT), Chairman, Committee on Resources; **Rep. Nick J. Rahall II** (D-WV), Ranking Member, Committee on Resources; and Migratory Bird Conservation Commission Members **Sen. Thad Cochran** (R-MS), **Sen. John Breaux** (D-LA), **Rep. John D. Dingell** (D-MI), and **Rep. Curt Weldon** (R-PA). The Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service also serves as a Centennial Commission member.

The Centennial Campaign, an extensive national campaign of special projects, partnerships and events, is the cornerstone of the centennial outreach effort. Activities already underway include a partnership to make significant habitat and visitor facilities improvements at the nation’s first refuge, Pelican Island NWR; a refuge system exhibit at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C.; and a significant partnership with the American Zoo and Aquarium Association, which includes nearly 200 member organizations and reaches 150 million visitors each year.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System which encompasses nearly 540 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 70 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource offices and 78 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.