

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

# Deep Fork

*National Wildlife  
Refuge*



*The 8,372-acre Deep Fork 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:  
Forest Jewel**

Lush, hardwood forests surrounding oxbow lakes and a muddy river add up to precious remnants of a vanishing ecosystem in Oklahoma.

Deep Fork National Wildlife Refuge joined the National Wildlife Refuge System in 1993 as a crucial link for waterfowl migrating along the Central Flyway.

**A Flood-loving  
Forest**

Just 35 miles south of Tulsa, the 8,372-acre refuge offers a wealth of wildlife viewing, photography, hunting, and fishing. Wood ducks nest in quiet sloughs off the Deep Fork River. Great blue herons flap in and out of a tree rookery. Flocks of blue-winged teal, gadwall, and mallards land in wetlands, wings flashing in the evening light. Thousands of mallard ducks call the refuge their winter home. Channel catfish and carp swim into river sloughs after floods.



*(Above) Aerial view of the flooded Deep Fork River. Photo by Jon Brock.  
(Right) Mallards. Photo by Steve Berendzen*



Floods each year replenish the bottomland hardwood forests that flourish on Deep Fork NWR. Bur oak, southern red oak, pin oak, shumard oak, pecan, elm, cottonwood, sycamore, red mulberry, hackberry, black walnut, green ash, hawthorne, dogwood, and redbud take root in soils naturally fertilized by flood waters.

Each time the Deep Fork river swells over its banks, the waters deposit rich, alluvial soils throughout the adjacent hardwood forests.

Flood waters scour shallow wetland areas and cut off river meanders, creating oxbow lakes. Thanks to flooding, the refuge forests harbor homes for hundreds of kinds of wildlife.

*(Above) Aerial view of the Deep Fork River with oxbow and lake. Photo by Jon Brock. (Right) Deep Fork River bank, USFWS Photo.*



The Deep Fork flooding schedule runs about like this: major floods every 5 years, moderate floods every year and a half, and minor floods twice a year. Most of the refuge falls within the 100-year floodplain, and over 80 percent of it floods at least once a year, except during very dry periods. On some portions of the refuge, watermarks on the trees are 10 feet high.

### **Going, Going...?**

Unfortunately, bottomland hardwood forests are rapidly disappearing. Historically, this forest ecosystem of eastern Oklahoma extended across an estimated 2.2 million acres. By the early 1980s, roughly 85 percent of the forests had been destroyed, leaving only about 330,000 acres. Many of the remaining bottomland hardwoods exist in small, isolated tracts that are of little value to wildlife.

*(Above) Bottomland hardwoods. Photo by Jon Brock. (Right) Beaver. Photo by John and Karen Hollingsworth*



## Wildlife Watching Tips

Dawn and dusk 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.

## Wildlife: Warblers to White-tails

Here, these valuable forests blanket about 85 percent of the refuge. Shrubby wetlands, emergent wetlands (those that support sedges, cattails, and other aquatic plants), open water, forested uplands, and abandoned agricultural fields make up the remaining 15 percent.

The prothonotary warbler, a bright yellow symbol of southern swamps, commonly nests on the refuge. Its clarion call, “*tswee! tswee! tswee!*,” rings throughout the bottomlands during spring and summer.

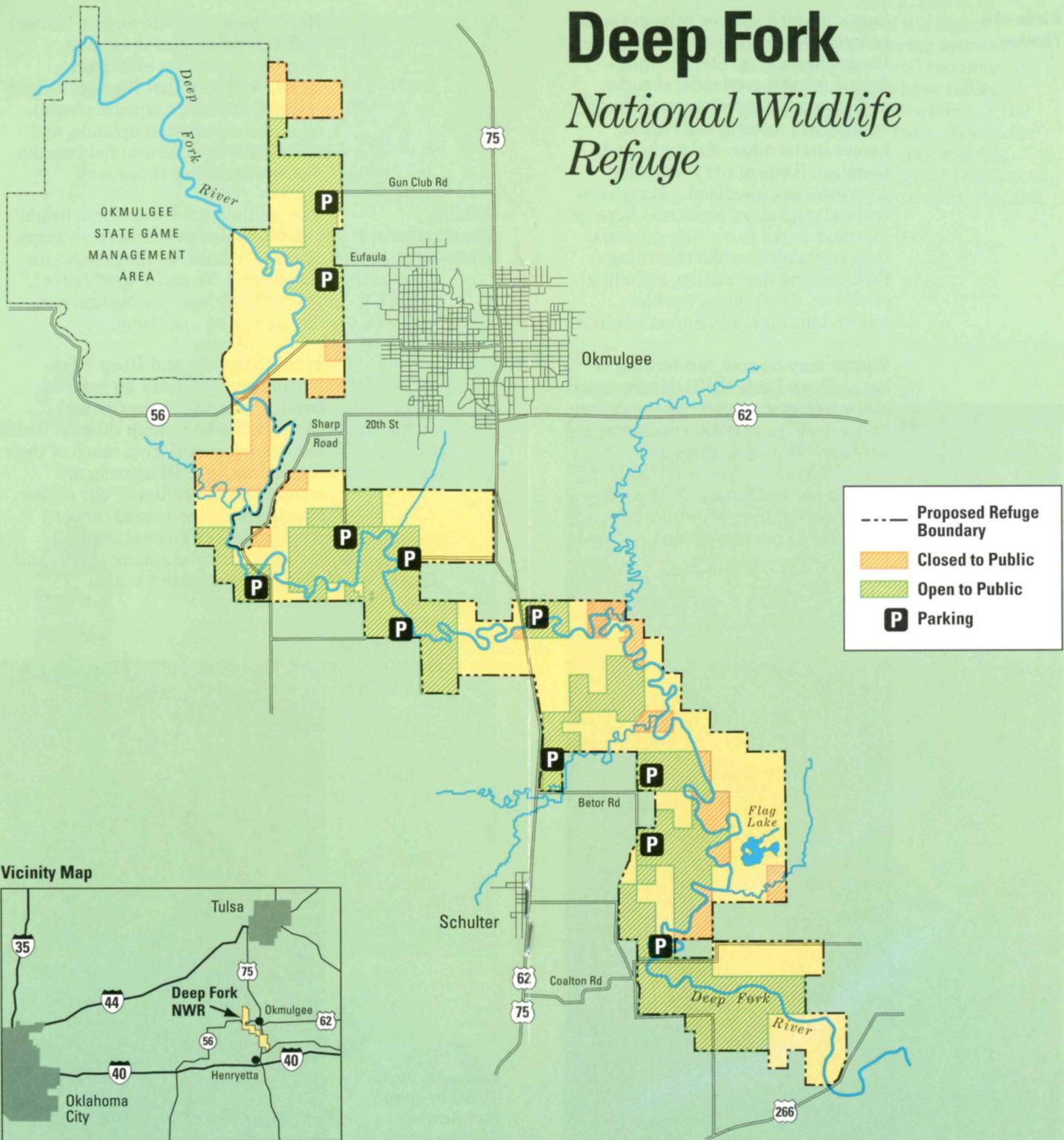
Wildlife variety and Deep Fork bottomland diversity go hand-in-hand. White-tailed deer bound through fields. Swamp rabbits, which have disappeared from much of their former range in Oklahoma, are common at the refuge. Four of the state’s species of special concern dwell here: the river otter, Bell’s vireo, alligator snapping turtle, and the northern scarlet snake.



*Snapping Turtle.  
Photo by John  
and Karen  
Hollingsworth.*

# Deep Fork

*National Wildlife Refuge*



## **Birds of a Feather**

Some 254 bird species rely on the refuge for at least part of the year. Ducks, herons, egrets, and kingfishers inhabit wetlands, sloughs, and streams. Secretive wood ducks find perfect nesting and rearing homes in the maze of sloughs and marshes. Birds of prey hunt the wetlands and woodlands. Many neotropical migratory birds rest here on journeys north to nesting grounds. Other songbirds make this refuge their nesting destination, including swallows, flycatchers, warblers, vireos, buntings, and hummingbirds.

Winter may be cool, but birding is hot at Deep Fork NWR. Estimates of wintering waterfowl on the refuge range from 5,000-20,000 mallards, 1,000-5,000 wood ducks, and 1,000-2,000 other duck species, depending on weather conditions. Bald eagles keep a watchful eye for injured waterfowl from tree roosts.



*Red-shouldered Hawk. Photo by John and Karen Hollingsworth.*

## **Raccoons on the Prowl**

You'll find some of the highest numbers of furbearing mammals in the state here, and raccoons top the list. Biologists have tallied 51 mammal species altogether in the Deep Fork River basin. Watch for white-tailed deer, gray and fox squirrels, beaver, eastern cottontail, swamp rabbit, raccoon, coyote, and opossum.

*White-tailed Deer. Photo by Greg Knadle*



## Snakes Live Here Too

Okmulgee County is home to roughly 54 species of reptiles and 22 species of amphibians. Snakes play an important role in the hardwood forest ecosystem, and would rather stay away from you, but do watch your step when exploring the refuge. Poisonous snakes include the western cottonmouth, copperhead, timber rattlesnake, western pygmy rattlesnake, and western diamondback rattlesnake.



*Pygmy Rattlesnake. Photo by John and Karen Hollingsworth.*

## Things to Do at the Refuge



The refuge is new and facilities are few. However, the staff welcomes visitors to observe and photograph wildlife year-round on all parts of the refuge with public access. Visitors should see peak numbers of birds during spring migration. Dragonflies poise over wetlands, where turtles bask in sunshine on favorite logs. Colorful butterflies pollinate wildflowers.

## Hunting: Check Regulations First



The refuge currently offers rabbit, squirrel, and white-tailed deer hunting during state seasons. A brochure that explains hunting programs and regulations is available at the refuge office on the third floor of the post office building in the city of Okmulgee.



*(Right) Little Blue Heron. Photo by John and Karen Hollingsworth. (Below) Butterfly. Photo by Shawn Steffen.*



*Young boy with first catch. Photo by Roger L. Hamman.*



*Fishing:  
Catfish  
Destination*



Anglers will find excellent sport fishing within the refuge, including plentiful catfish, crappie, white bass and largemouth bass. The refuge limits boat access to small crafts that can be launched from the steep riverbanks. Fish from the bank where existing public roads cross the river. Sloughs separated from the river are open to fishing from March to October. To prevent marsh and water birds from becoming entangled, trot lines and bank lines are not allowed on sloughs and wetlands separated from the river.

**Deep Fork Land Acquisition: Completing the Refuge**



*Argiope Spider.  
Photo by Ginny Brubeck.*

The job of securing this refuge is about half-way complete. Land and Water Conservation Funds and Migratory Bird Treaty Act funds will continue to be sources for adding to the refuge. The proposed Deep Fork NWR boundary encompasses over 16,000 acres. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service acquires refuge land only from willing sellers at fair market value.

Safeguarding one of the last places to experience a wild Oklahoma river and forest takes dedication and a willingness to save Deep Fork and its wild inhabitants.

**Deep Fork NWR Facts**  
*Where is it?*

The refuge is located in Okmulgee County, 35 miles south of Tulsa and 100 miles west of Oklahoma City. To reach the headquarters, take Highway 75 to Okmulgee, then 6th Street west to Grand. On Grand to 4th Street, headquarters are located in the Post Office at 111 West 4th Street, Room 318 (see map).

*When was it established?*

1993

*How big is it?*

8,372 acres.

*Why is it here?*

The Deep Fork NWR protects an important bottomland hardwood forest and emergent wetland habitat along the Deep Fork River for the benefit of migratory birds and other native fish and wildlife.



*Barred Owl. Photo by John and Karen Hollingsworth.*

Deep Fork  
National Wildlife Refuge  
P.O. Box 816  
Okmulgee, Oklahoma 74447  
918/756-0815  
918/756-0275 Fax

<http://southwest.fws.gov>

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service  
1 800/344 WILD

January 2000



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

# Deep Fork

*National Wildlife  
Refuge*

Cover photo by John and  
Karen Hollingsworth