



Stiff tickseed
(left)
USFWS photo

Neal Smith NWR is one of the *National Wildlife Refuge System's* 520 refuges which manage more than 93 million acres throughout the United States.

Goals of Neal Smith NWR

- to increase biodiversity by restoring and reconstructing tallgrass prairie and savanna habitats;
- to increase public knowledge and understanding of prairie through environmental education;
- to increase scientific knowledge and understanding of the prairie and savanna through ongoing research; and
- to provide diverse wildlife-related recreational opportunities.

Some day...



Great Spangled
Fritillary
Butterfly
Alex Theirman

It is possible that elk, prairie chickens, great spangled fritillary butterflies, northern harriers, upland sandpipers, short-eared owls, glass lizards, sedge wrens, pocket mice, speckled king snakes, and spotted skunks will all once again call Neal Smith NWR home.

For now, we are just beginning. But already Neal Smith NWR may be more than you ever imagined. Then we can all say "Welcome back!"

Refuge Information

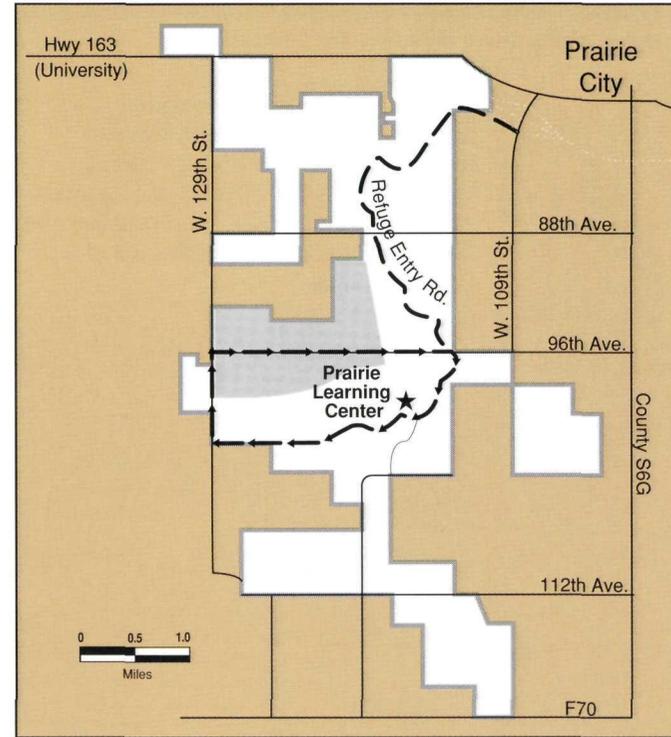
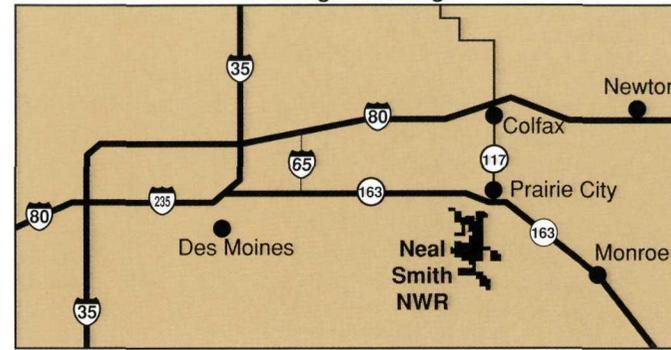
- Bison are wild, unpredictable animals. Remain in your vehicle.
- Designated trails are for foot traffic only.
- For additional or specific regulations contact the Refuge.
- Visitor Center hours are Tuesday-Saturday from 9am-4pm and Sunday from noon to 5pm.
- Refuge trails and auto tour route are open daily from sunrise to sunset.



American bison
USFWS photo

The Refuge and the Prairie Learning Center are located south of Highway 163, just 20 miles east of Des Moines and 8 miles south of I-80.

Finding the Refuge



Bison and Elk Enclosure

- Refuge Entry Road
- Refuge Boundary
- Roads
- Bison and Elk Range
- ← Auto Tour Route

Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge
Prairie Learning Center, Box 399
Prairie City, IA 50228-0399

Phone: 515/994 3400

Web address:
<http://www.fws.gov/r3pao/walnut/>

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



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Neal Smith
National Wildlife
Refuge



American bison
USFWS photo

Welcome back to the Tallgrass Prairie!



Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge

Over the last 150 years, we have converted the prairies to gravel roads and highways, to towns and cities, to farms and industries. We transformed it to the Midwest we have today. The tallgrass prairie that once covered part or all of 13 states is almost gone.

One hundred fifty years ago, tallgrass prairie covered 85% of Iowa's 36 million acres. Today, only one-tenth of one percent of that prairie remains! That's why Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge exists -- to bring back some of the plants and animals that were the tallgrass prairie.

Paths of wind, Patterns of rain

If you travel across the Rockies from the west on Interstate 80, you climb the tree-rich and well-watered western slopes. As prevailing westerly winds rise up over the mountains, they release most of their moisture in the form of rain. By the time these winds blow down the eastern slopes and spill out onto the Great Plains, they are dry. The plants of these plains are low-moisture plants – prairie grasses and other flowering plants. The Great Plains stretch out to the east in a nearly treeless landscape. This short-grass prairie is typical of the western portion of what is called the “prairie wedge.”

As the winds proceed toward the east across the Plains, they collide with the moisture-rich winds sweeping up from the Gulf of Mexico and rainfall grows more plentiful. As more moisture becomes available, the prairie species gradually change – from mixed-grass species in Nebraska to the tallgrass species of Iowa.

The U.S. Congress authorized the acquisition of 8,600 acres – land purchased from landowners willing to sell. Within those acres, there are several miles of surfaced trails to wander and an auto tour to drive; both provide good opportunities to see bison, elk, deer and other prairie wildlife.

Prairie Learning Center



The Prairie Learning Center is at the heart of it all, teeming with fascinating exhibits for all ages – a place to see prairie research in action and the place to begin your visit.

As early Euro-American pioneers gazed across the seemingly endless prairie, they reasoned that “If it can't grow trees, it must be poor ground,” so they passed it by. Later, however, Iowa was found to contain some of the richest soils in the world.



Some day it may all look like this. But for now...



Meadowlark
B. Angus, USFWS

The tallgrass prairies provided a diversity of wild life – hundreds of plant species – over 350 species of birds – nearly 100 species of mammals – scores of amphibians and reptiles and fish – and uncounted thousands of insect species.

Often dry and unpredictable? To be sure. Lifeless and dull? Hardly.

Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge offers a rare peek at this incredible collection of life we call the tallgrass prairie.



Canada Wild Rye
USFWS Photo

Lead plant
USFWS photo



Adaptation – the key to prairie life.



Coyote
USFWS photo

Take a driving tour through this developing remnant of our history. Search for the bison and elk herds in their native tallgrass habitat. Wander through the myriad of prairie blooms with a new show each week during the growing season. Lend a hand by helping plant prairie seeds in the spring. Take a walk among the open-grown oaks of the oak savanna with the ghosts of thousands of elk.

In the shortgrass prairies, trees were few, restricted almost entirely to the river bottoms. In tallgrass prairies, trees grew also in savannas - those scattered oases of tree groves with prairie plants beneath that dotted the tallgrass landscape. The trees were often oaks, burr oaks especially – trees with thick bark that could withstand the prairie fires. Their spreading branches provided welcome shade to the bison and elk that roamed these lands.

The plants and animals growing and living in prairies are adapted to the hot summers, cold winters and endless cycles of floods and droughts. They also adapted to fires that often swept over them. The plants and animals in the prairie are strong survivors.

Saving the Pieces

“The first law of intelligent tinkering is to save all the pieces.”

Aldo Leopold, 1948



Prairie chickens may someday be a part of the landscape of Neal Smith NWR.

While we won't be able to save all the pieces, Neal Smith NWR is saving as many as possible by:

- restoring small prairie remnants that were left, including some savannas;
- reconstructing prairies by planting prairie seeds, many collected by volunteers from tiny remnants in cemeteries, roadsides, and railroad tracks in south-central Iowa;



- reintroducing bison and elk herds to help understand their roles in shaping the tallgrass prairie;



- using fire to encourage prairie and savanna and to control unwanted or non-native plants and;
- restoring oak savanna by removing trees that don't belong.