



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service



National Wildlife Refuges:  
America's best-kept secret



Top to bottom: Paul Kroegel by George Nelson; white pelicans by Ryan Haggerty, USFWS; Pelican Island aerial by George Gentry, USFWS

# Pelican Island and the Start of the Wildlife Conservation Movement

*On March 14, 2003, the National Wildlife Refuge System will celebrate 100 years since President Theodore Roosevelt established the first national wildlife refuge at Pelican Island, Florida. Today, the National Wildlife Refuge System is the only network of federal lands dedicated specifically to wildlife conservation. But what prompted President Roosevelt to establish a system of federal lands for fish and wildlife?*

## Wildlife in Crisis

In the late 1800s America's wildlife resources were in trouble. Years of unchecked shooting saw the decline of many species we consider common today, such as deer and turkey. The bison was almost wiped out. The Carolina parakeet and the passenger pigeon were nearing eventual extinction. This 'wild frontier' mentality was also prevalent in Florida, where populations of pelicans, egrets, spoonbills and other water birds were suffering at the hands of market hunters. Plume feathers, which were used to adorn women's hats, were worth more than gold. Conservationists were alarmed by this unchecked slaughter of birds, and faced off against market hunters in what became known as the "Feather Wars."

## An Immigrant and a President: an American wildlife story

Paul Kroegel, a German immigrant, arrived in Sebastian, Florida in 1881. He made his home on the west bank of the Indian River overlooking Pelican Island, a five-acre mangrove island where thousands of brown pelicans and other water birds would roost and nest. He took an interest in protecting the island's birds. Without state or federal laws to protect the birds, Kroegel would sail out to Pelican Island with his gun and stand guard.

In 1901, the American Ornithologist's Union and the Florida Audubon Society led a successful campaign to pass legislation in Florida calling for the protection of non-game birds. Kroegel was one of four wardens hired by the Florida Audubon Society to protect water birds from market hunters. Two of those wardens were murdered in the line of duty.

During this time, Kroegel became acquainted with Frank Chapman, a member of the American Ornithologists' Union and the eventual Curator of Birds at the American Museum of Natural History. Chapman understood the plight of the pelicans, for by 1902 Pelican Island was the last brown pelican rookery on Florida's east coast. Chapman and fellow bird protection advocate William Dutcher visited President Roosevelt at his home and persuaded him to take action.

On March 14, 1903, without fanfare, President Roosevelt signed an executive order establishing Pelican Island as a federal bird reservation - the forerunner to the national wildlife refuge system. This was the first time that the federal government set aside land for the sake of wildlife. Paul Kroegel was hired as the first national wildlife refuge manager. He was paid \$1 a month by the Florida Audubon Society, as Congress had not set aside funds for this executive created refuge. With a badge, a gun and a boat, Kroegel stood watch over Pelican Island until 1926.

## The Birth of the National Wildlife Refuge System

Pelican Island is the birthplace of a great American ideal - that wildlife and wild places should be protected in perpetuity. After setting aside Pelican Island, President Roosevelt would go on to establish an additional 54 national wildlife refuges during his two terms as President. Today, the refuge system consists of more than 530 refuges on nearly 95 million acres of our nation's most important wildlife habitats.

## Refuges: Protecting Our Wild Heritage for 100 Years

The story of Pelican Island, and the refuge system that followed, is the story of conservation success. After 100 years, brown pelicans continue to nest and roost at Pelican Island and are again plentiful throughout Florida's east coast. Thanks to the determination of early conservationists like Paul Kroegel and the leadership of President Roosevelt, today we not only know the familiar sight of pelicans gliding above the shore, but also egrets preening their delicate plumes, waterfowl blanketing our wetlands, and bison herds thundering across the plains. Thanks to our early conservation leaders and all who followed in their footsteps, the refuge system stands today as protector of America's wild heritage.

For more information,  
contact Paul Tritaik  
Pelican Island NWR  
772/562 3909