

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

# St. Marks

*National Wildlife Refuge*



photo: Tom Darragh

*The National Wildlife Refuge System is an extensive network of lands and waters protected and managed especially for wildlife and its habitat.*

*Refuges stretch across the United States from above the Arctic Circle in Alaska to the subtropical waters of the Florida Keys, and beyond to the Caribbean and South Pacific. The National Wildlife Refuge System is managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which protects and manages over 500 refuges for wildlife and for people to enjoy.*



*This blue goose, designed by J.N. Ding Darling, has become a symbol of the National Wildlife Refuge System.*

### **Introduction**

The St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge was established in 1931 to provide winter habitat for migratory birds, and is one of the oldest refuges in the National Wildlife Refuge System. It encompasses about 70,000 acres in Wakulla, Jefferson and Taylor counties, and includes about 43 miles of north Florida's Gulf coast. Congress has designated 17,350 acres of the Refuge a National Wilderness Area.

Elevations on the Refuge range from the open water of Apalachee Bay to about 30 feet above sea level. Seven rivers and numerous creeks cross the refuge. Annual rainfall averages 55 inches, and the driest months tend to be April, May, October, and November.

The St. Marks NWR is divided into four distinct units: The St. Marks Unit is primarily slash pine flatwoods, man-made pools, swamps and marshes. The Refuge's Offices and Visitor Center are located here on Lighthouse Road, and most public use occurs on this unit.



*photo: Tom Darragh*

To the west lies the Wakulla Unit, which is mostly hardwood hammocks, swamps and pine flatwoods. Further west lies the Panacea Unit, which is mostly longleaf/wiregrass habitat, flatwoods and sandhills,

dotted with lakes and tidal marshes. East of the St. Marks Unit is the Aucilla Unit, which includes a boat ramp on the scenic Aucilla River and 640 acres of adjacent wetlands and swamp forest.

About 300,000 visitors come to the St. Marks NWR each year to birdwatch, photograph, hike, fish, picnic, hunt, bike, and simply enjoy the Refuge.

### *A Look Back*

Paleo-Indians occupied the Florida Panhandle over 10,000 years ago. Their

descendents, the Apalachee Indians, encountered Spanish explorers including DeSoto during the early 1500s. Fort San Marcos de Apalache, first built there in 1679, suffered numerous attacks by pirates and soldiers, and is now a state historic park. By 1839, St. Marks was an established port at the confluence of the Wakulla and St. Marks Rivers, which is today the City of St. Marks.

The St. Marks Lighthouse, first constructed in 1831, is located at the terminus of Lighthouse Road (Co. Rd. 59) in the St. Marks Unit of the Refuge, a 15-mile drive from the City of St. Marks. The current lighthouse has guided maritime activity since 1842. It has survived gun boat battles, the landing of Federal troops during the Civil War, and many major storms. Today

it is on the National Register of Historic Sites. Transfer of the Lighthouse from the U.S. Coast Guard to the Refuge occurred in October 2013.

The land which is today the St. Marks NWR has long provided rich natural resources for area residents. Limestone mined from the Wakulla Unit of the Refuge was used to rebuild Fort San Marcos and to build the foundation of the St. Marks Lighthouse. Refuge salt



photo: Nick Baldwin

marshes are dotted with the remains of salt work vats, where sea salt was produced during the Civil War. Timber was another source of revenue, and

much Refuge land was logged before sale to the government. Turpentine production in the area's pine forests was also a major industry in the early 1900s. The West Goose Creek Seineyard was a major mullet fishing site for decades, and free-ranging cattle and hogs fed on native grasses prior to 1940.



photo: Nick Baldwin



photo: Joe Reinman

### *Habitat and Wildlife*

St. Marks NWR is well-known as an oasis of diverse habitats along Florida's Gulf Coast, providing homes for an abundance of wildlife.

Natural salt marshes, tidal flats, and man-made pools (impoundments) attract thousands of waterfowl, shore-birds, wading birds and other animals. Open marshes and swamps also provide homes for turtles and hundreds of American alligators.



photo: Teresa Darragh

Hardwood swamps support wood ducks, night herons, black bears and river otters, to name a few. Finally, the extensive pine woodlands offer

food and cover for turkeys, white-tailed deer, bluebirds, fox squirrels, gopher tortoises, and many more species.

Apalachee Bay is home to bottlenose dolphins, brown pelicans, wintering redhead ducks, sea turtles and a rich diversity of marine life. In addition, the salt marshes that connect the Refuge to Apalachee Bay are a valuable nursery area and food source for birds, marine fish, shrimp, and shellfish, and they provide protection during storms to coastal birds and other animals.



Of the more than 300 species of birds recorded on the Refuge, 98 nest here, including bald eagles. Some 19 species of ducks and two species of geese maybe seen from mid-November through January. Migrating hawks, falcons, and shorebirds also use the Refuge. The Refuge's 44 species of mammals include Florida black bears, bobcats, otters, as well as feral hogs. In addition, the Refuge hosts 38 species of amphibians and 69 species of reptiles.

Endangered, threatened or rare animals found on the Refuge include the least tern, red-cockaded woodpecker, Wilson's plover, wood stork, swallow-tailed kite, peregrine falcon, whooping crane, American alligator, and frosted flatwoods salamander. In addition, visitors occasionally glimpse loggerhead sea turtles and West Indian manatees offshore from the lighthouse. Finally, the Refuge's 1,300 plant species, on which animals depend in various ways, include many state-listed threatened or endangered plants.



photo: David Moynahan

### *Wildlife Management*

One management tool for wildlife is the protection and enhancement of natural habitats. Such efforts include adjusting water level in man-made lakes and ponds (termed impoundments) for wildlife access and growth of food; limiting the spread of invasive plants and certain animals (such as feral hogs); and thinning trees to achieve multi-age stands of pine woodlands. Artificial nesting structures have also been used successfully by several bird species.



photo: Jennifer Hinckley

Prescribed burning is used to mimic natural lightning-caused fires, and most areas of the Refuge are burned on a three-year cycle. Fire plays an important role in the ecosystem by reducing fuels on the forest floor, releasing nutrients in the soil, and stimulating certain plants to produce seeds and fruits for wildlife.

In some cases, restoration of historic habitat or wildlife populations is the goal. Planting longleaf pines and wiregrass helps to restore the historic environment in areas impacted by past agricultural practices. The population of red-cockaded woodpeckers has been increased by introducing birds from other areas and creating nest holes in mature pines.



photo: Teresa Darragh

In 2009, the St. Marks NWR joined the Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership whose mission is to reestablish a migratory eastern population of endangered whooping cranes. For the past few years, an ultralight aircraft has led young whooping cranes to the refuge, where they mature in safety before flying on their own back to Wisconsin.



### *Environmental Education and Public Programs*

Visitor Services programs bring people and wildlife together. Refuge staff teach about wildlife and conservation to around 10,000 school children each year. Annual events for the public include: the Monarch Butterfly Festival (October), migratory bird tours (November, December, January, April), Wildlife, Heritage and Outdoors Day (February), and Lighthouse Day (April). Check our website for event details.

The Refuge offers a variety of photography opportunities. Photography classes are offered the first Saturday of most months, and there is an annual photo contest. The St. Marks NWR Photo Club meets the third Saturday of most months, and offers training in outdoor/wildlife photography. (Check their website: [http://www.fws.gov/refuge/St\\_Marks/visit/photoclub.html](http://www.fws.gov/refuge/St_Marks/visit/photoclub.html))



*Make Your Visit Meaningful*  
St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge offers something for everyone who appreciates and enjoys nature. First-timers especially should stop at the Visitor Center to acquire maps and view displays describing

photo: Tomi Darragh



refuge wildlife and habitats, before venturing out. The Visitor Center is open Monday through Friday from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. and on Saturday and Sunday from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. The Visitor Center is closed on some federal holidays. The Refuge is open during daylight hours throughout the year.

The main route to view wildlife is Lighthouse Road. It is roughly 7 miles from the Visitor Center to the historical St. Marks Lighthouse at the end of the road. **(Please drive slowly to protect our wildlife!)** Many visitors enjoy cycling early in the morning to see wildlife.



The Nature Store, run by the refuge Friends' group, sells field guides, postcards, t-shirts, insect repellent, and other gifts. Supporting the bookstore through purchases and memberships helps the St.

photo: Paul Hamilton

photo: Betty Hamilton



Marks Refuge Association, Inc. assist the Refuge with various programs.

Insects and sun can make an enjoyable day quickly turn uncomfortable, so be prepared before starting out. Wear a hat, closed shoes, and carry water. You may want to carry insect repellent and sunscreen. Of course, bring your binoculars, field guides and camera!

Being in the right place at the right time ensures successful wildlife sightings and photo opportunities. Knowing the animals likely to be found in certain habitats and patiently waiting helps, too. A bird and unusual wildlife sighting log is kept in the Visitor Center to assist you. **Remember that wild animals can be unpredictable and it is illegal to feed or harass them.**

photo: Carole Robertson



Two primitive hiking trails on the St. Marks Unit (7 and 12 miles), and two on the Panacea Unit (5 and 9 miles), offer views of different habitats. Shorter nature trails include: the Plum Orchard trail behind the Visitor Center, trails near Headquarters Pond, around Tower Pond, and along the Lighthouse Levee, and the Cedar Point trail near the lighthouse boat ramp.

The *Florida National Scenic Trail* extends 49 miles through the St. Marks NWR, and the Refuge is in Segment 5 of the *Florida Circumnavigational Saltwater Paddling Trail*. Some parts of the Refuge may be closed seasonally to protect sensitive wildlife areas. For more information on trails, check with Visitor Center staff and the website.

St. Marks Refuge is open to bank fishing all year. Boats, kayaks and canoes are only permitted in refuge impoundments along Lighthouse Road from March 15 to October 15, and they must be hand-launched and use

trolling motors or paddles. In Otter Lake, boats, including canoes, may use motors of up to 10 hp. Popular crabbing areas are the tidal creek and the shore near the Light-house. **Don't let alligators eat your bait!**

Boat launching is permitted where marked. Saltwater access is available at a boat ramp near the Lighthouse, the Aucilla River boat ramp, the end of Bottoms Road near Panacea, and the end of Wakulla Beach Road (no ramp). Freshwater access is available at Otter Lake and East River Pool. Launching of commercial or sport net boats and jet skis from the saltwater boat ramp on Lighthouse Road is prohibited.

Hunting is allowed in designated areas for resident game species on specific dates from Fall through Spring. Contact the Refuge for current dates, regulations and how to apply for permits.

### Other Refuge Regulations

- Entrance Fees are required of all Refuge visitors traveling beyond the Visitor Center on Lighthouse Road. Annual passes are available. Educational groups and official visitors must stop at the Visitor Center for a non-fee pass.
- Some trash receptacles are available, but please take trash and litter home if possible.
- Taking government property or any natural feature, artifact, animal or plant is prohibited.
- Pets must be on a leash under the owner's control at all times.
- Fireworks and ground fires are prohibited.
- Horses must remain on service roads, and ATVs/vehicles are not allowed.

### For further information, contact:

St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge  
P.O. Box 68  
St. Marks, Florida 32355

Tel: 850/925 6121

[www.fws.gov/refuge/st\\_marks](http://www.fws.gov/refuge/st_marks)

[saintmarks@fws.gov](mailto:saintmarks@fws.gov)

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December 2014



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