

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Valentine

*National
Wildlife Refuge*



“It gradually rises on each side, by swell after swell without tree or bush or rock... and everywhere is covered with green grass affording the traveler, from its highest elevations, the most unabounded and sublime views of nothing at all, save the blue and boundless ocean of prairies.”

*George Catlin
American artist*

About the Refuge



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

Valentine National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) lies in the heart of a vast area of undulating sand dunes which stretch across north-central Nebraska. This region, called the Sandhills, is the largest remaining tract of mid- and tall grass prairie in North America. Numerous lakes and marshes in the valleys, and tall grasses on the hills and in the meadows, provide habitat for many kinds of wildlife. This 72,000-acre Refuge is a haven for prairie wildlife, and offers visitors the chance to view wildlife in this vast prairie landscape.

Valentine NWR is one of over 540 refuges in the National Wildlife Refuge System – a network of lands set aside and managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service specifically for wildlife. The Refuge System is a living heritage, conserving wildlife for people today and for generations to come.

The Sandhills – A Unique Prairie

The Sandhills formed during the last 10,000 years when strong and steady winds shaped stream-deposited sands into the dunes and valleys we see today. Periods of low rainfall probably contributed to the forming of the Sandhills by limiting the number of plants which hold the sand in place. Today, a variety of grasses and other plants shield the dunes from the force of the wind and provide a degree of stability to the dunes. These grasses include prairie sand reed, sand love, blowout, Indian, and big and little bluestem.

Rainfall quickly filters through the sand to the Ogallala Aquifer, one of the largest underground water sources in the world. This abundant water source feeds the lakes, marshes, streams, and springs so important to wildlife. In many places, the water is just below the surface, providing natural underground irrigation.

These sub-irrigated meadows produce the heaviest growth of prairie grasses, which are important to nesting birds.

At one time, the Lakota Indians, the great buffalo hunters and warriors of the Plains, lived in and around the Sandhills. In the 1870s, the hills became ranching country with open range, cowboys, and Texas longhorn cattle. Settlers quickly followed, encouraged by the Homestead Act and later, the Kincaid Law. Attempts by the “Kincaiders” to farm the sandy soil were unsuccessful and most sold out to cattle ranchers or let their land go for unpaid taxes.



*Blowout
penstemon*

Mark Lindvall / USFWS

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Refuge Establishment

*Above: Civilian
Conservation
Corpsmen*

During the 1930s, conservationists recognized the need to protect a portion of the Sandhills for wildlife. In 1935, Valentine NWR was established by Executive Order “as a breeding ground for migratory birds and other wildlife.” The Great Depression was in full swing, and a Civilian Conservation Corps camp (CCC) was set up on the Refuge. The CCC workers built fences, dikes, and roads, planted trees, and constructed many buildings which are still in use today. In 1979, the Refuge was recognized as a National Natural Landmark and in 2001, as a Globally Important Bird Area.

Wildlife Abounds

More than 270 species of birds have been sighted on the Refuge. Waterfowl, including blue-winged teal, mallards, canvasback, redheads, ruddy ducks, and trumpeter swans, both nest here and pass through during migration. During May and October, as many as 150,000 ducks can be found on the Refuge. In April, prairie chickens and sharp-tailed grouse gather on dancing grounds for their elaborate courtship displays. In May, marshes and lakes attract herons, terns, shorebirds, and pelicans. The wooded margins of the lakes attract warblers, buntings, grosbeaks, and bluebirds.



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Above: Long-billed curlew with chick; Below top: Blue-winged teal; Below bottom: Coyote

Long-billed curlews and upland sandpipers call from the meadows and fence posts. In early summer, grassland songbirds nest in prairie grasses. Sandhill cranes pass over in spring and fall, filling the sky with trailing V's and musical rattling calls. Winter storms bring rough-legged hawks and bald and golden eagles to hunt the snow-covered prairie.



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Above: White-tailed deer fawn; Below: Blanding's turtle

White-tailed deer prefer the marshes and small woodlots, while mule deer can be found in the open hills. Muskrat and beaver inhabit the lake and marsh edges. Coyotes, mink, raccoons, skunks, and weasels hunt in Refuge marshes, meadows, and hills. To view these animals, come early, bring binoculars, and move quietly along the Refuge trails.

Reptiles and amphibians are here in great numbers, but are often difficult to observe. The beautiful spotted Blanding's turtle lives in wetlands, but travels to the hills to nest. Bull, racer, garter, milk, and hognose snakes hide in thick grasses. Three kinds of lizards inhabit sandy areas. Chorus frogs call loudly in the spring.



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Managing for Wildlife

Above: Using prescribed fire to manage grasslands.

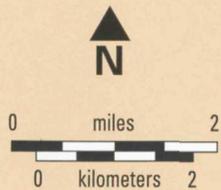
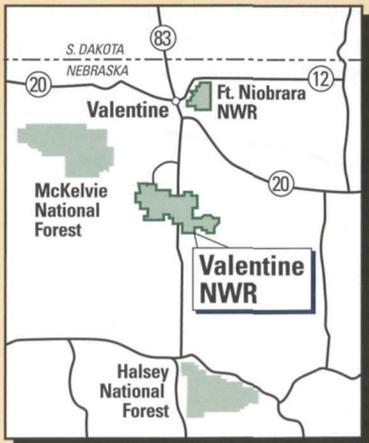
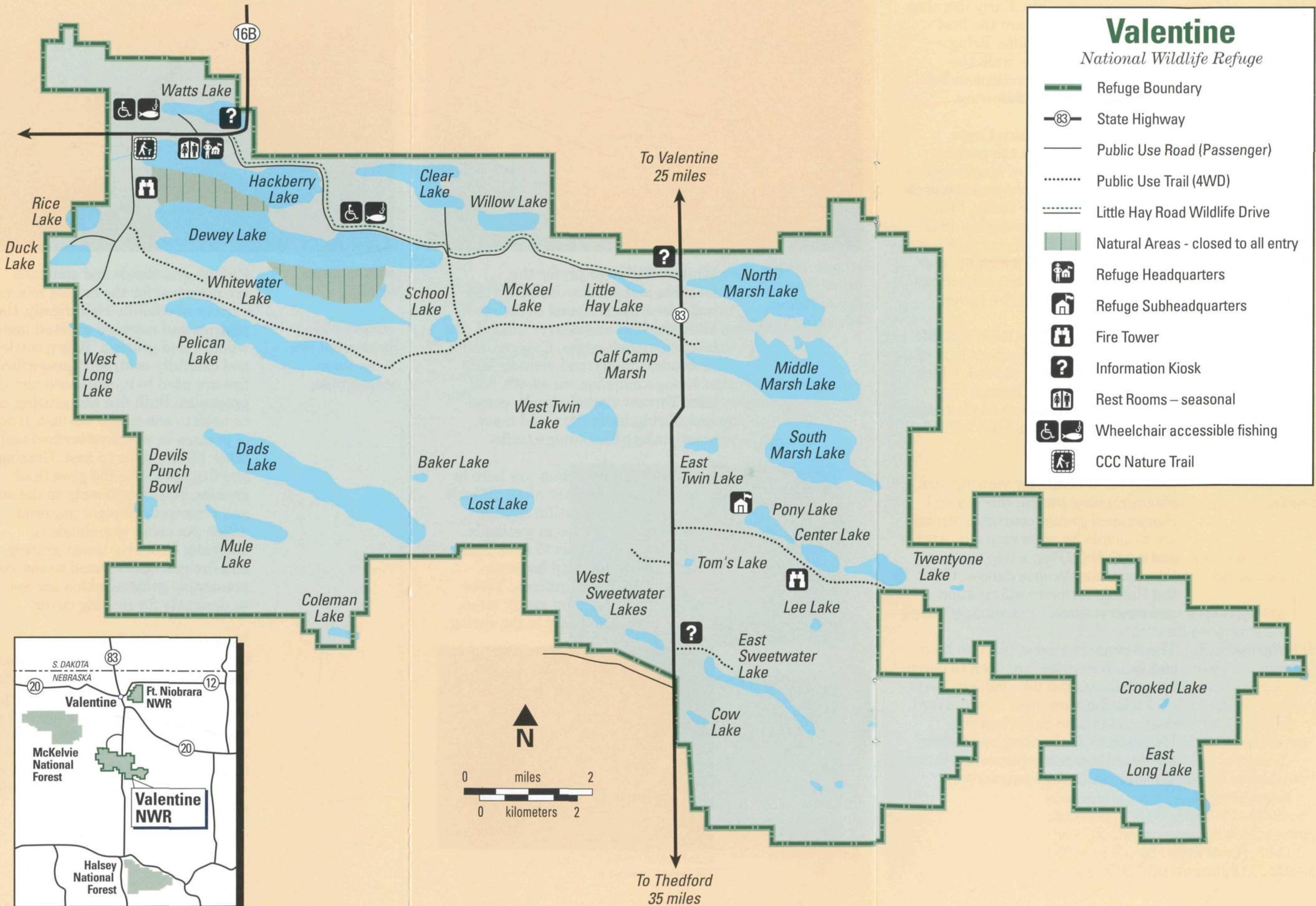
Refuge grasslands and wetlands are managed for the benefit of a wide variety of wildlife. Historically, the prairies and marshes evolved under wildfire and grazing. Today, cattle and carefully controlled prescribed fire are used to mimic those historic processes. Both fire and grazing can be used to encourage the lush growth of grasses in which waterfowl and other birds prefer to nest. Grazing and fire stimulate the growth of grasses, return nutrients to the soil, and remove dead plant material which can cause grasslands to stagnate. Properly timed grazing and fire can also be used to control non-native grasses which are not as desirable for nesting cover.

New ponds have been created on the Refuge, and water levels are regulated on other ponds to provide wetlands needed by wildlife. Carp, which uproot vegetation and reduce waterfowl food plants, are controlled to restore productivity in some of the other lakes. A combination of these sound wildlife management practices enhances habitats for wildlife.

Valentine

National Wildlife Refuge

-  Refuge Boundary
-  State Highway
-  Public Use Road (Passenger)
-  Public Use Trail (4WD)
-  Little Hay Road Wildlife Drive
-  Natural Areas - closed to all entry
-  Refuge Headquarters
-  Refuge Subheadquarters
-  Fire Tower
-  Information Kiosk
-  Rest Rooms – seasonal
-  Wheelchair accessible fishing
-  CCC Nature Trail



A Place to Enjoy Wildlife

Valentine NWR is a great place to see prairie wildlife. Early morning or just before sunset are the best times to observe wildlife. Bring binoculars and quietly walk the Refuge trails. Some recommended activities include the following.

Civilian Conservation Corps Nature Trail

The Civilian Conservation Corps Nature Trail starts at the parking area on the west end of Hackberry Lake and goes to an observation deck located on the old fire tower. Prairie plants are identified along the trail. Information on CCC history, ecology of the Sandhills, bird watching, and a spectacular view of the prairie can all be found at the old fire tower.

Little Hay Road Wildlife Drive

The 9-mile Little Hay Road Wildlife Drive traverses the western part of the Refuge. This gravel road, which goes by three lakes, through high hills, and along meadows and marshes, offers opportunities to view wildlife from a car.

Observation Blinds

Observation blinds for viewing and photographing prairie chicken and sharp-tailed grouse courtship displays are available by reservation in April and early May. Plan a trip to view these amazing prairie dances. Call the Refuge for more information and reservations.

Hunting and Fishing

The Refuge is a great place to hunt and fish. Nine lakes are open to perch, bluegill, bass, and pike fishing. Parts of the Refuge are open to waterfowl, deer, and upland game hunting. Regulations for hunting and fishing are described in a separate brochure available at Refuge entrances.

Bird Watching

Bird watching in May, September, and October offers the chance to see both resident and migratory birds. The Refuge bird list contains over 270 species that have been sighted on the Refuge. The list, available at Refuge entrances, also recommends areas and times of year to see these birds.

Refuge Regulations

To protect wildlife and habitats and to make your visit more enjoyable, the following regulations are enforced.

- The Refuge is open to the public during daylight hours only.
- Vehicles must stay on designated roads. Off-road driving is prohibited.
- Check the Refuge hunting and fishing leaflet for special regulations for these activities.
- Camping and fires are prohibited. State and private campgrounds are located nearby.
- Alcoholic beverages are not allowed on the Refuge.
- Collecting plants, animals, or historical artifacts is not allowed.

Equal Opportunity

Equal opportunity to participate in and benefit from programs and activities of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is available to all individuals regardless of physical or mental ability. Dial 7-1-1 for a free connection to the State transfer relay service for TTY and voice calls to and from the speech and hearing impaired. For more information or to address accessibility needs, please contact the Refuge staff at 402-376-3789, or the U.S. Department of the Interior, Office of Equal Opportunity, 1849 C Street, NW, Washington, D.C. 20240.

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Valentine National Wildlife Refuge
HC 14 Box 67
Valentine, NE 69201
402 / 376 3789
fortniobrara@fws.gov
<http://valentine.fws.gov>

For State transfer relay service
TTY / Voice: 711

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
<http://www.fws.gov>

For Refuge Information
1 800 / 344 WILD

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Greater prairie chicken
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