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*Great egret, J.N. "Ding" Darling NWR, Florida*

# Introduction

# What is the National Wildlife Refuge System?

President Theodore Roosevelt created the first refuge on Florida's Pelican Island in 1903. He used the power of the Presidency to put a stop to the destruction of breeding colonies of brown pelicans whose feathers were used in the millinery industry. Roosevelt, a lifelong conservationist and big game hunter saw an end to the country's seemingly boundless resources, something many of his contemporaries could not imagine. Roosevelt did something about it. He went on to set up 52 more refuges, some for the protection of big game species such as bears, deer and elk.

Roosevelt said:

*"Defenders of the short-sighted men who in their greed and selfishness will, if permitted, rob our country of half its charm by their reckless extermination of all useful and beautiful wild things sometimes seek to champion them by saying that 'the game belongs to the people.' So it does; and not merely to the people now alive, but to the unborn people. The 'greatest good of the greatest number' applies to the number within the womb of time, compared to which those now alive form but an insignificant fraction."*

Now, a century later, with more than 540 refuges, the National Wildlife Refuge System manages a unique and valuable array of more than 94 million acres set aside to preserve and protect the diversity of this country's natural environment and its

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**1903** Executive order signed by Theodore Roosevelt establishes Pelican Island, Florida, as a "preserve and breeding ground for native birds." During two terms in office, Roosevelt establishes more than 50 National Wildlife Refuges and withdraws enough land from the control of commercial interests to provide space for future refuges, along with lands for national park and forest systems. In 30 years, the system expands to 1.6 million acres.

**1934** Congress passes the Migratory Bird Hunting Stamp Act to provide funds for the purchase of migratory bird habitat.

## The Story of the First Refuge

## Pelican Island, FL

*Pelican Island, the first refuge, had its start in citizen action carried out by the country's very first refuge manager, Paul Kroegel. The following is an excerpt from an interview with J.T. Thompson, Kroegel's, daughter, written by Phil Million which appeared in the Fish and Wildlife News, Jan. 1979. She tells how her father became the manager of the Pelican Island*

*Refuge. The story vividly illustrates the power of one or two people when they put their passion behind a cause: "...Attracted by the Homestead Act and the lure of balmy weather, more and more people were coming to Florida's east coast at this time. The gradual increase in boat traffic spelled trouble for the highly visible - and highly vulnerable - colony*

*of pelicans inhabiting Pelican Island. "One must remember these were freewheeling times. Game laws were practically non-existent. Plume hunters were devastating waterfowl in the Everglades to supply the fashion industry's demand for feathers. One observer pretty well summed up human behavior toward wildlife on Florida's*

wild creatures. Waterfowl Production Areas (WPA's) add nearly 2 million more acres in the north central region of the country. These small "prairie pothole" wetlands are managed to preserve breeding, migrating and wintering habitat for waterfowl. On average over 200,000 acres of new lands are added to the refuge system every year.

The refuge system is managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service of the Department of the Interior, in the Executive branch of government. Today it preserves diverse ecosystems with over 220 species of mammals, more than 700 species of birds, 250 reptiles and amphibians and over 200 species of fish, including 168 threatened and endangered species. The system stretches from Alaska to the Florida Keys, and from Maine to the Trust Islands in the Pacific. There are refuges in Guam, Puerto Rico, and American Samoa. Your refuge is but one link in a large chain that makes up the National Wildlife Refuge System.

A success story? It certainly is. **Yet, the future of the refuge system is threatened and refuges need help from local citizens.**

The Refuge System is burdened by public ignorance and neglect and survives mainly due to the dedication of employees who manage it and the volunteers who help them. The varied challenges of managing individual refuges are met every day by dedicated refuge managers and their staffs whose problems vary from refuge to refuge. Inadequate funding is the basic issue which plagues nearly every one.

While the national park system receives about \$16 per acre in annual federal funding, the refuge system, with 14 million acres more land, will receive

**1934** President Franklin D. Roosevelt appoints J.N. "Ding" Darling, chief of the Bureau of Biological Survey, then part of the Department of Agriculture, the agency in charge of what will become the National Wildlife Refuge System. Darling hired J. Clark Salyer II, a young biologist who traveled around the country to identify likely sites for refuges. Refuge system expands to 5.6 million acres.

**1940** Fish & Wildlife Service formally established under the Department of the Interior. The Refuge System grows to 9.6 million acres in the lower 48 states, 8 million more acres in Alaska.

**1960**'s Land and Water Conservation Fund set up to collect revenues from offshore drilling leases used to increase public space for outdoor recreation, and to supplement duck stamp sales.

## The Story of . . .

## Pelican Island, FL

*waterways in the late 1870's when he reported: 'Practically all tourists were armed with rifles, shotguns, revolvers, or all three. These armed men lined the rails of the steamboats and shot ad libitum at alligators, waterfowl, or anything that made an attractive target. There were practically no restrictions on shooting, although the steamers never stopped to gather in the game, but left it where it fell.'"*

*Mrs. Thompson remembers well her father's accounts of those days of trouble for his beloved pelicans: "The channel was such that boats had to go within 100 feet of Pelican Island. When the boats got close, the pelicans would just rise up and hover around them. And that's when people started shooting at the pelicans. Well, daddy saw what was happening and he just had to do something about it."*

*What he did was begin an intensive lobbying campaign on behalf of the birds. According to Mrs. Thompson, one valuable, if unsung, ally in this campaign was a Mrs. Latham who ran a popular fishing lodge a few miles away and numbered among her clientele various "big people from Washington." When such VIP's were in residence, she would send word to Kroegel via the mail*

about \$3 per acre in 2003. Currently a funding backlog of nearly \$2-billion leaves refuge managers unable to manage these lands to a level that will maintain their integrity into the future. It is a shortfall that endangers the mission of the refuge system: to preserve these lands for future generations.

The bottom line: While some progress is being made, the National Wildlife Refuge System is still understaffed and underfunded. The public either doesn't understand or is unaware of the mission of refuges for wildlife first. Members of Congress need to be fully informed about the value of our refuges and encouraged to ensure adequate funding.

**That's where citizens can make a difference on refuges.**

They can help ensure that refuge lands are protected and preserved, that their mission in protecting wildlife is not compromised, and that Congress allocates sufficient funds and supports positive legislation that preserve the system. They provide refuges with critical support by volunteering, raising funds and educating the public. Many citizens have increased their effectiveness by banding together and forming Friends Groups.

Friends groups play a critical role in helping the public understand the importance of protecting and preserving our refuges – in essence, they act as refuge “ambassadors.” Friends groups have proven to be highly effective partners in working to improve the ability of refuges to meet their missions.

**1973** Endangered Species Act authorized the purchase of refuge lands to protect a wide variety of wildlife and plants.

**1980** Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act expands the existing Alaska refuges by 13.7 million acres, and establishes 40 million acres of new refuges. The refuge system more than doubles in size.

**1994** The 500th refuge is added - Canaan Valley Refuge in West Virginia.

**1996** President Clinton signs a landmark executive order which clearly defines and reaffirms the mission, guiding principles and priority public uses of the National Wildlife Refuge System: “...to preserve a national network of lands and waters for the conservation and management of the fish, wildlife, and plants of the United States for the benefit of present and future generations.”

**The Story of . . .**

**Pelican Island, FL**

*boat that ran between Titusville and Stewart.*

*“The mailman would come by and say so-and-so is there and my father would go right up there and use all the influence he possibly could to get the pelicans some help from Washington.”*

*Another important enlistee in Kroegel's cause was the famous ornithologist, Dr. Frank*

*M. Chapman, who was later to describe Pelican Island's bird colony as “the most interesting in my experience.” Chapman, already heavily engaged in the battle to halt the plume trade, helped spread the word about the need to protect the pelicans.*

*“What my father wanted to do was get word through to President Roosevelt.” Mrs. Thomp-*

*son says. “He wanted Pelican Island to be a Federal reservation so he would have the power to keep people off the island.”*

*Roosevelt made him the manager of the refuge in 1903.*

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*“You’re REALLY missing the boat if you don’t have one!”*

—Leland (Lee) E. Herzberger, Refuge Manager, Muscatatuck NWR  
(Refuge Manager Survey, NWRA, 1997)

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## What are Friends and why are they so important?

Friends groups are made up of lots of “regular folks”: students, teachers, carpenters, bankers, nurses, professors, retirees. The one thing these people have in common is that they care about the refuge as a natural resource and work to protect it. Their concern for the resource spurs them into action to organize a Friends group that is dedicated to promoting and perpetuating their local refuge.

Few people know that the refuge in their area is a part of a larger national system, that the refuge system is under-funded, and lacks political support. Friends groups can promote the system by helping their local community understand the mission of the refuge as a place for wildlife first.

Starting with their local refuge, each individual can make a difference to the whole refuge system and help to ensure its future. Friends of refuges not only get their hands dirty donating time, energy and sweat, they also perform the critical mission of public outreach — of communicating the refuge story not just to the general public, but to lawmakers who legislate the future of refuge lands. An effective Friends group can bring a strong and powerful voice to their local refuge. The collective action of volunteer groups communicating the importance of their local refuges then strengthens the refuge system as a whole.

Friends groups may also be non-profit organizations, but some are organized strictly as advocacy groups and may not meet IRS requirements for tax-deductible status. Many Friends groups have formal, written agreements that define their relationship with their local refuge (Memorandum of Agreement or Cooperative Agreement). While these are encouraged and are useful documents, they are not required to become a refuge Friends group.

**1997** President Clinton signs the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act. The Act declares that compatible wildlife-dependent recreational uses are legitimate priority public uses of refuges. The six uses — hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, environmental education and interpretation — are to receive enhanced consideration in planning and management over all other general public uses of the Refuge System. When planning for expanded and new refuges and when making refuge management decisions, the Act requires effective coordination with other federal agencies, state fish and wildlife or conservation agencies and refuge neighbors. This was an invitation to embrace Support Groups and volunteers of all types.

**1998** President Clinton signs the National Wildlife Refuge System Volunteer and Community Partnership Enhancement Act. The Act greatly expands public involvement in the National Wildlife Refuge System and reaffirms the commitment and need to work with volunteers and partners to expand the ability to accomplish the mission of the Refuge System. The Act specifically focuses on enhancement of partnerships, volunteers and educational opportunities.

**2000** Congress overwhelmingly passes the National Wildlife Refuge System Centennial Act. This law broadens public understanding and appreciation for the Refuge System by expanding partnerships for their care and strengthening the infrastructure of the 540 refuges that make up the System; calls for the establishment of a Centennial Commission comprised of prominent American citizens and decision-makers; and tasks the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service with developing a long-term plan to address the highest priority operations, maintenance, and construction needs of the Refuge System.

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*“As most who belong to our group, I have a love for the outdoors and its wildlife. Habitat and wildlife need all of the help all of us can give. Helping others is what makes the project work.”*

–Phil McClure, Muscatatuck Wildlife Society,  
Seymour, Indiana. (Friends Survey, NWRA, 1997)

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## Friends groups are ...

- *Advocates for a local refuge and the National Wildlife Refuge System.*
- *Formal organizations designed to support the mission of a refuge.*
- *Private, independent organizations formed and managed by local citizens.*

## Friends groups are *not* ...

- *“Anti” groups*
- *A “mouthpiece” for refuge management or the Fish and Wildlife Service.*
- *Refuge managers.*

## What can Friends do to turn their concern into action?

- Volunteer for projects to improve refuge resources.
- Educate U.S. Representatives and Senators.
- Vote for legislation that supports the refuge system and its natural resources.
- Raise public awareness and interest in a refuge by: offering educational programs and festivals; writing letters to newspapers; and participating in community meetings.
- Raise funds to support refuge projects and programs.
- Join the NWRA. Stay informed.

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*“(Having a Friends Group)... is an effective way to get work done, get funding for projects and increase refuge identity and outreach.”*

–Paul D. Daly, Refuge Manager, Bombay Hook NWR  
(Refuge Manager Survey, NWRA, 1997)

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