

Where Wildlife Reigns Supreme

Enjoy the natural splendor of Montana's 21 national wildlife refuges. **BY LEE LAMB**

It was a clear and cold March morning when I stood in the Lee Metcalf National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) parking lot shivering beside the other students in my University of Montana ornithology class. We were waiting to head out on our first birding field trip. This was in 1994, and at the time I had no idea of the ornithological spectacle about to unfold.

Skirting the east banks of the Bitterroot River 25 miles south of Missoula, Lee Metcalf NWR encompasses 2,800 acres of woodlands, ponds, wetlands, and upland meadows. Established in 1963 and named

to honor the U.S. senator, Stevensville native, and lifelong conservationist, the refuge is now one of the few remaining large tracts of undeveloped land in Montana's rapidly growing Ravalli County. Tucked between the Bitterroot and Sapphire Mountains, the refuge is home to eagles, herons, mergansers, warblers, pheasants, deer, coyotes, muskrats, and more. It offers visitors spectacular scenery, an excellent environmental education program, and opportunities for fishing, hunting, birding, and hiking (on 2.5 miles of trails).

Lee Metcalf is one of 553 national wildlife refuges nationwide encompassing more

than 150 million acres and managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). The National Wildlife Refuge System was established by Congress in 1903, when President Theodore Roosevelt made tiny Pelican Island in Florida the first permanent sanctuary for birds. The refuge system now encompasses a network of lands and waters managed to conserve fish, wildlife, and their habitats. Congress appropriates funds for staff, operations, and maintenance, and the USFWS uses hunters' license dollars to buy and expand the refuges. Ninety-eight percent of funds from the Federal Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp—the

Dawn at Lee Metcalf NWR, one of the few remaining large undeveloped tracts in the rapidly growing Bitterroot Valley. Right: American kestrel.

federal duck stamp waterfowl hunters must buy each fall—goes to leasing or purchasing wetland habitat included in the NWR System. It's a sound investment. Each year refuges nationwide draw nearly 40 million visitors who pump more than \$1.5 billion into regional and local economies.

"Many refuges in the Lower 48 were established primarily for waterfowl, and waterfowl production remains a high priority for us," says Dean Rundle, regional supervisor for refuges in Montana, Wyoming, and Utah. "But others are for big game and also for things like bats and small fish and endangered butterflies. I think it's wonderful that so much

of America's wildlife heritage is protected and conserved within the refuge system."

After two hours of peering through binoculars and adding 25 new birds to my life list that chilly spring day, I was convinced I'd hit the avian jackpot. But I've since learned that all of the 21 national wildlife refuges in Montana are great spots to see birds—and hike, hunt, fish, take photographs, and learn about nature and conservation. Some highlights:

Wildlife Without the Crowds

For a taste of Yellowstone National Park—without the three million tourists who visit each year—drive another 35 miles west to



STEVEN AKRE



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Bulrushes ring a large wetland at Red Rock Lakes NWR in the Centennial Valley. “The big difference [between us and Yellowstone National Park] is that people who come out here have lots of country pretty much all to themselves,” says the refuge manager.



Ducks and other water birds rest at Red Rock Lakes, located about 35 miles west of Yellowstone National Park. Like many wildlife refuges, Red Rock Lakes is rich in wetlands. Unlike most others, it also contains prairie and mountain wildlife, including sage-grouse and cougars.

Red Rock Lakes NWR. The little-known refuge spans the Centennial Valley at 6,600 feet and climbs to 10,000-plus feet up the Centennial Mountains on its southern border. The nearly 50,000-acre refuge contains an impressive mix of vegetative and aquatic communities, including lakes, rivers, marshes, meadows, sagebrush steppes, woodlands, and even alpine areas. Perhaps nowhere else on earth can a visitor spot a pronghorn, a sage-grouse, a trumpeter swan, and possibly even a wolverine track in the same day.



“With all the different habitats here, you just never know what you might run into,” says Bill West, refuge manager. “One site here, Willow Fen, is as good a place as anywhere in Montana to see a moose, and Lower

Writer Lee Lamb splits her time between Polson, Montana, and Coeur d’Alene, Idaho.

Red Rock Lake is a great location to spot waterfowl, shorebirds, and antelope. We have arctic grayling and nesting bald eagles, and you might even see a wolf.”

The refuge contains the largest wetland complex in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. It serves as a crucial wintering area and year-round home to trumpeter swans that need wetland habitat undisturbed by human activity. Because much of the refuge is designated as a National Wilderness Area, it contains no developed wildlife viewing areas or designated hiking paths. Visitors explore the area by following game trails or striking out cross-country.

Some amenities exist. Gravel roads take visitors to both Upper Red Rock and Lower Red Rock Lakes, each with a developed campground (not found on most NWRs) and water access for boats (motors not allowed). Fishing, waterfowling, and big game hunting are allowed in designated areas.

West says visitors to the remote refuge

are rare—especially when compared to the numbers crowding the national park just a few miles to the east. “We’re pretty Yellowstone-ish in a lot of ways,” he says. “We don’t have geysers or bison, but we’ve got lots of other wildlife. The big difference is



Sales of federal duck stamps to hunters, other conservationists, and stamp collectors have raised over \$700 million since 1934. The revenue has gone to acquire millions of acres of habitat for the National Wildlife Refuge System.

RED ROCK LAKES NWR: CHUCK HANEY; DUCK STAMP COURTESY USFWS

that people who come out here have lots of country pretty much all to themselves.”

A Waterfowl Oasis

Thousands of years ago, glaciers carved out a shallow 5,000-acre depression known as Benton Lake. This and another 7,000-plus acres of native grassland and prairie habitat surrounding the wetland complex form Benton Lake NWR, located roughly 12 miles north of Great Falls.

Surrounded by arid farmland for miles in all directions, Benton Lake NWR is an oasis for waterfowl and shorebirds. The wetland complex was once susceptible to severe droughts and floods, which hampered wildlife use. Now an intricate diking system divides the main marsh into eight sections, providing diverse wetland habitats for bird species ranging from the white-fronted goose to the black-crowned night-heron. More than



RED ROCK LAKES NWR: MICHAEL HARING

200,000 ducks, geese, swans, and shorebirds use the refuge during spring and fall migrations. In spring and summer, Franklin’s gulls and white-faced ibises gather in massive breeding colonies. Pronghorn, badgers, burrowing owls, and horned larks live in the nearby native shortgrass prairie. In April and May, the refuge allows visitors to reserve a viewing blind next to an open area called a lek, where male sharp-tailed grouse conduct their staccato-step mating dance at dawn.

Most visitors take the Prairie Marsh Wildlife Drive. Open year-round to vehicles (weather permitting) and bike and foot travel, the 9-mile gravel loop passes through wetland and upland habitats. Early morning and evening are the best times to spot wildlife. An interpretive map available at a kiosk near the drive entrance contains information on wetlands, wildlife, and the area’s history and management. An observation blind sits on the north end of Marsh Unit 1

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Clockwise from top left: The sun retreats over the Rocky Mountain Front, setting aglow Benton Lake NWR; view from the ten-story lookout tower at Medicine Lake NWR; red-winged blackbird on the Prairie Marsh Trail boardwalk at Benton Lake NWR; sharp-tailed grouse at Benton Lake NWR.

at the first parking area. Prairie Marsh Trail is a 1,000-foot boardwalk reaching out into the marsh that allows visitors a closer look at birds and scenery.

A Good Prescription for Birds

Medicine Lake NWR offers visitors a bird's-eye view of its lush surroundings. At the refuge headquarters (25 miles north of Culbertson in northeastern Montana), a ten-story-tall observation tower provides an expansive panorama of the refuge's western half—prairie pothole country of rolling plains dimpled with shallow wetlands.

Medicine Lake is a birding wonderland recognized by the American Bird Conservancy as one of the nation's top 100 globally important areas for avian wildlife. The refuge's 22 lakes and water impoundments, abundant wetlands, and expanses of mixed-grass prairie provide critical breeding habi-

tat for 17 waterfowl species and several rare grassland birds, including Sprague's pipits and chestnut-collared longspurs. The 31,660-acre refuge also provides nesting habitat for migrating sandhill cranes, white-fronted geese, and tundra swans, and year-round range for sharp-tailed grouse and pheasants. Deer, coyotes, muskrats, and even the occasional moose, elk, and pronghorn live here too.

Visitors unwilling to trudge 135 steps up the tower can see the refuge by taking the 14-mile (one-way) graveled wildlife drive. It winds first along the north shore of shallow 8,218-acre Medicine Lake, then past smaller lakes and ponds. Signs explain the refuge's natural and cultural resources and how the lands and waters are managed for wildlife. Pelican Overlook provides a wheelchair-accessible viewing platform with binoculars that give visitors a closer view of American white pelicans on Big Island and Bridgerman Point. The colony of more than 10,000

pelicans is one of North America's largest.

The refuge encompasses the 11,360-acre Medicine Lake Wilderness Area, which includes a sandhills vegetative community composed of rolling dunes dotted with cacti, native grasses, and shrubs such as buffaloberry and chokecherry.

Because the refuge contains no designated hiking paths, visitors explore by following game trails and walking cross-country. Fishing as well as waterfowl, upland game bird, and big game hunting are allowed.

Prairie Wildlife and One Big Reservoir

Because most people think of elk as mountain creatures, many first-time visitors to the Charles M. Russell NWR are surprised to hear bulls bugling along the Missouri River Breaks at dusk. Before European settlement, elk abounded on Montana's prairies. Today they are returning to grasslands such as those at the "CMR," as it's called locally. The best spot to hear and see elk is the Slip-

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: NEAL & MI WISHLER; CHUCK HANEY; CRAIG & LIZ LARCOM; CRAIG & LIZ LARCOM





Sunrise at the Charles M. Russell NWR. With its native shortgrass prairie, abundant pronghorn and elk, and nearby family ranches, the landscape has changed little since the famous Montana artist portrayed the region's open landscape and cowboy lifestyle.



Male sage-grouse displaying on a lek at the Charles M. Russell CMR. *National Wildlife magazine* recently named the 125-mile-long eastern Montana refuge as one of the nation's top 10 wildlife viewing spots.

pery Ann Elk Viewing Area, along a 19-mile self-guided vehicle tour on the refuge's western end. Hundreds of bulls, cows, and calves gather at this 1,500-acre no-hunting zone along the river bottom every September and October. Despite the region's remote location, more than 200 vehicles line the viewing area some evenings.



The CMR extends from Fort Peck Dam 125 miles west up the Missouri River and includes Fort Peck Reservoir. The refuge is named for the famous western artist who portrayed the region's prairie landscapes and diverse wildlife in his paintings. The refuge's project leader, Barron Crawford, says the area has changed little since Russell's time. The CMR is surrounded by working family ranches, where cowboys on horseback still drive cattle on spring roundups. Conservation groups and private landowners protect and conserve prairie, sagebrush-grasslands,

juniper coulees, badlands, and cottonwood-laced river bottoms. As they have for thousands of years, these habitats provide year-round and seasonal homes for pronghorn, mule deer, coyotes, mountain plovers, and long-billed curlews. Charlie Russell would feel right at home.

The refuge is packed with recreational opportunities. Hundreds of miles of gravel and dirt roads provide driving access. Hunting for big game, upland birds, and

waterfowl is popular, as are walleye and smallmouth bass fishing on the sprawling reservoir. Camping is allowed throughout the refuge within 100 yards of the river and certain roads. Fort Peck Lake—which has more miles of shoreline than the entire California coast—is open for boating and, when the water freezes solid in winter, snowmobiling. At the Fort Peck Dam Interpretive Center and Museum in Fort Peck, visitors will find interpretive displays ex-

Sometimes no hunting

Though supported by hunter license dollars, some national wildlife refuges are closed to public hunting—a conservation measure hunters support. That's because wildlife need these sites to be refuges in the truest sense of the word, where they can rest unbothered by hunting and other activities. Closed to public hunting in Montana are Ninepipe and Pablo NWRs and the National Bison Range, though many nearby satellite refuges and waterfowl production areas are open, as is Ninepipe Wildlife Management Area (owned and managed by the state). Also, many refuges open to hunting have regulations more restrictive than those off the refuge. Call refuges beforehand to learn of special seasons and boundaries.

Download a state-by-state guide to hunting national wildlife refuges at fws.gov/refuges/hunting/pdf/huntingguide.pdf.

plaining the dam's colorful history and the biology of local wildlife.

Crawford says wildlife watchers have their best chance of spotting bighorn sheep by hiking on Mickey and Brandon Buttes. The place visitors are most likely to see sage-grouse dancing on mating leks (in April) or catch a glimpse of reintroduced black-footed ferrets hunting prairie dogs is at UL Bend NWR, 55 miles south of Malta and within the boundaries of the CMR.

World's Biggest

With these four refuges—Lee Metcalf, Red Rock Lakes, Medicine Lake, and the CMR—I've only scratched the surface of what's available in Montana. There is also the National Bison Range Complex near Missoula, which includes 2,062-acre Ninepipe and 2,542-acre Pablo NWRs. Near Malta, 15,551-acre Bowdoin NWR is home to 260 bird species, many visible from a 15-mile driving loop. The newest refuge in

Montana is Lost Trail, near Kalispell.

Montana has seemingly endless federal lands containing species ranging from mountain goats to prairie dogs. What's so special about national wildlife refuges? "Two things stand out," says Rundle, the regional NWR supervisor. "One, this is the only federal lands system where wildlife conservation is the singular highest priority. And two, it's the largest publicly owned land system in the world dedicated to wildlife conservation."

Rundle adds that despite the system's reputation for great birding and other viewing, visitors should know that "national wildlife refuges are not zoos," where animals are on display and always easy to find. "But at the right season at the right times of day," he says, "a person looking for waterfowl, shorebirds, and other wildlife—especially wetland species—can be very well rewarded." 🐾

Learn more about national wildlife refuges in Montana at fws.gov/refuges/.

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