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The Second Century

Understaffed, underfunded, and underappreciated, national wildlife refuges cannot survive without the help of friends. But making them a success story will require vanquishing their number one foe: species that don't belong.

By Ted Williams

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Pelican Island National Wildlife Refuge, two-thirds of the way down the east coast of Florida, is no more typical than any other refuge, but it faces typical challenges and dangers. And because the refuge system started here in 1903, it seemed a good starting point for an article. I met refuge manager Paul Tritaik in his office on the last day of 2002, 14 hours before the beginning of the refuge system's centennial year. A centennial clock on his wall ticked off the days, hours, minutes, and seconds until March 14, the centennial day. If his refuge isn't typical, Tritaik is. Like every refuge manager I've ever known, he couldn't wait to get me out on the land. He is endlessly enthusiastic, endlessly patient with the public. No time for hunting, fishing, or much of a life outside the refuge. Long hours, lousy pay, lots of frustrations, lots of fulfillment.

Actually, "typical" national wildlife refuges don't exist. They all have different missions—from saving endangered wildlife and plants to producing waterfowl. Some take in entire ecosystems; others, just important scraps. National wildlife refuges include every major biome in our states and territories—from caribou calving grounds in the high Arctic to coral atolls in the tropical Pacific. Five hundred and forty units cover about 95 million acres, comprising the world's largest system of lands set aside primarily for protecting wildlife.

While the refuge system has been hugely successful, it has never realized its potential. From the day in 1903 when warden Paul Kroegel was hired (not by the federal government but by the Audubon Society) at \$7 a month to patrol the Pelican Island refuge in his own boat, the system has been understaffed, underfunded, and underappreciated. Today our refuges are being ruined by exotic plants and animals and by political leaders eager to sacrifice habitat to extractive industry. The public has been easily distracted since September 11, but even when it pays attention, it sees only blurred distinctions between national wildlife refuges, national forests, and national parks. The national park system, 11 million acres smaller than the refuge system, gets about \$16 per acre, per year. The refuge system gets \$3. Two hundred refuges don't even have on-site staff.

Under a cobalt sky flecked with wobbling vultures and white pelicans so high they showed only when their wings flashed white in the fierce Florida sun, Tritaik and I walked along the elevated "centennial boardwalk" to be opened to the public on March 15. On each plank, in reverse chronological order, is inscribed the name of a refuge and the date it was incorporated into the system. We halted at 1980, when President Jimmy Carter's crowning conservation achievement—the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act—tripled the size of the refuge system in one day.

Many of the refuges that now provide some of the last best wildlife habitat had been cutover, grazed-out, eroded moonscapes when they were acquired—Necedah in Wisconsin, for example, or Piedmont in Georgia. When we reached the 1973 plank, I thought of my friend Bill Ashe, who, as regional supervisor for realty in New Mexico, had won his long crusade to get the Sevilleta refuge, 65 miles south of Albuquerque, into the system. It had been one vast, cow-nuked sandlot, so horribly denuded and weed-infested that he was criticized for going after it. Over the years, Ashe kept hearing about Sevilleta's recovery, but when he returned in 1998 he saw a profusion of wildlife and native grasses beyond his wildest dreams. We paused again at plank 1939—the year Bosque del Apache, also in New Mexico, was added. Seventeen sandhill cranes

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wintered on the refuge then; now the figure is about 18,000. Onward to 1936 and 1935, the depths of the dust bowl era, when J. Clark Salyer, the hard-charging, duck-adoring refuge chief, barnstormed the nation, adding 600,000 acres of wetlands and 50 new refuges in 24 months.

As we neared the roofed observation deck, it really seemed as if we were walking back in time. In front of us, a quarter-mile across Indian River Lagoon—still the most biologically diverse estuary in the country—lay Pelican Island. Often there are boats and jetskis buzzing around, but today there were only brown pelicans skimming low over the waves and a pod of dolphins herding baitfish against a mangrove-clad shore. Flights of endangered wood storks glided over and under us. It was a scene to boost the spirits of any wildlife lover who had ever imagined that humankind was a helpless victim of itself, destined to loneliness on a drab and sterile planet.

A century ago this island had been the whole refuge—only five and a half acres but providing the last brown-pelican rookery on Florida's Atlantic coast. Erosion and sea level change have shrunk Pelican Island to about 2 acres; but at this writing the refuge covers 5,376 acres of barrier island, most of it acquired in the mid-1960s, after the Indian River Preservation League (which became Pelican Island Audubon), Florida Audubon, and National Audubon foiled an attempt by the state to sell the land to developers from Miami. In 1903 the millinery trade had wiped out the island's large wading birds, and tourists were shooting brown pelicans for the hell of it. Today 16 bird species nest there: brown pelicans, great egrets, snowy egrets, cattle egrets, great blue herons, little blue herons, tricolored herons, green herons, black-crowned night herons, reddish egrets, wood storks, double-crested cormorants, anhingas, white ibises, American oystercatchers, and common moorhens. If a visitor ever touched off a gun, he'd be beaten senseless with spotting scopes.

An Audubon report has set the cost of invasive species to the American economy at \$130 billion annually. Another cost: 14 million acres of wildlife habitat lost each year—an area equal to a seven-mile-wide swath from coast to coast.

Yet the problems facing Kroegel were minuscule compared with those facing Tritaik. In 1903 Florida was dominated by native vegetation, and developers nibbled at only the fringes. Today developers are closing in from all sides, and invasive exotics are strangling native ecosystems. Tritaik showed me huge Australian pines metastasizing into maritime hammocks; guinea grass choking out tidal marsh, high marsh, and palm hammocks; and endless stands of Brazilian pepper—looking like red hairballs regurgitated by giant cats onto land that used to bloom with a diverse array of native marsh and upland flora.

Removing the exotics seems impossible, but it's being done. A tractor with a cutting attachment brush-hogs the pepper, then refuge personnel paint the stumps with herbicides. Native plants regenerate fast from seeds still in the soil after all these years, but pepper seeds are in the soil, too. So crews have to return and herbicide the seedlings. Australian pines are chainsawed, logs burned, stumps herbicided. Guinea grass has to be sprayed; plow it, and you encourage the seeds; burn it, and you encourage growth. You can have a refuge untouched by short-lived, low-impact herbicides, or you can have thriving native ecosystems full of invertebrates, crustaceans, fish, amphibians, reptiles, mammals, and birds. But you cannot have both.

Not all the locals approve of using herbicides or cutting the Australian pines, which look "magnificent" to the ecologically uninformed. Still, Tritaik gets more support than resistance. Refuge managers aren't so lucky in the Midwest and West, where alien trees are cherished and vast tracts of public land, including refuges, have been ruined for wildlife because registered herbicides have not been applied in timely fashion. The biggest impediment to controlling invasives—after lack of funds—is chemophobic environmentalists. In Idaho, Oregon, and Washington, I have seen millions of acres of big-game habitat ruined by rush skeleton weed, spotted

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knapweed, and yellow star thistle—noxious weeds that could have been contained had not the Northwest Coalition for Alternatives to Pesticides obtained a temporary injunction against certain federal herbicide uses.

In Iowa, the Union Slough National Wildlife Refuge is restoring a tiny piece of the state to tallgrass prairie, a globally endangered ecosystem supporting 300 plant species per acre and critically important to vanishing grassland birds. The only way to do this is to cut down invading trees. But refuge manager George Maze and his staff are getting beaten up by tree lovers who accuse them of "playing God" and initiating "a scorched earth policy." Now schoolkids are sending the refuge e-mails, begging it to stop cutting trees. Americans perceive naturally treeless landscapes as somehow impoverished. They have it straight from the founder of Arbor Day, Julius Sterling Morton, who in 1870 called forth "a grand army of husbandmen ... to battle against the timberless prairies."

Ellicott Slough National Wildlife Refuge, part of the San Francisco Bay refuge complex, is razing America's biggest weed, the bluegum eucalyptus. The eucs are destroying the habitat of native birds, and choking and poisoning (with toxic drippings) oaks, blackberries, and other native vegetation that sustains endangered Santa Cruz long-toed salamanders. For this work, complex manager Marge Kolar reports that she and her people "got creamed." Eucs are trees, and all trees are "lovely." The public has it straight from Joyce Kilmer.

At Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, mute swans from Europe have destroyed vast beds of native bay grass and eliminated the state's only colonies of least terns and one of two colonies of black skimmers (both state-threatened). But all swans are "graceful." The public has it straight from Tchaikovsky. Locals feed mute swans, and four years ago they frightened the state into forbidding managers to kill them. Since then Maryland's mute swan population has doubled. Last December mute swan feeder-fancier Joyce M. Hill won her long legal battle against the Interior Department, thereby protecting this alien species under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, despite the fact that it doesn't migrate like native ducks, geese, and swans. Lethal control—and even a state hunting season that would at least let mutes share a little of the pressure placed on native waterfowl—is still possible legally. Not politically. "It's absurd to call them nonnative," Hill told me. "They've been here for years and years and years."

Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge, near Florida's Kennedy Space Center, is infested with feral hogs. They consume vast quantities of sea-turtle eggs and the eggs and young of ground-nesting birds, plus grubs, tubers, and acorns; in the process, they tear up soil and native vegetation, clearing the way for exotics. For the past decade the refuge has enlisted trappers to catch and market the hogs for meat. About 3,000 are removed each year, indicating that the population isn't being reduced. Still, the animal-rights community wants them sterilized, not killed.

The refuge system's backlog of control work for invasive plants and animals is \$150 million, and yet the agency doesn't spend a tenth of this annually. Moreover, for every year it delays, the cost of control doubles. "Cooling the Hotspots," a comprehensive new report by Audubon, has set the cost of invasive species to the American economy at \$130 billion annually. Another cost: 14 million acres of wildlife habitat lost each year—an area equal to a seven-mile-wide swath from coast to coast. While there are ample vehicles in place to deal with exotics if Congress would cough up the funds, it's considering three important bills: the Noxious Weed Control Act, the Species Protection and Conservation of the Environment Act, and the Nutria Eradication and Control Act. Indicative of the scope of the disaster is that they're being sponsored by an alliance of heroes of the environment, like Representative Mark Udall (D-CO), and heroes of extractive industry, like Senator Larry Craig (R-ID).

Meanwhile, there's a \$900 million backlog for maintenance and a \$1.8 billion backlog for hiring. Buildings are falling apart, and most refuges don't even have a biologist. As horrible as this sounds, it's better than it has been. "Five years ago the maintenance backlog was growing by 20 percent a year," says Dan Ashe (Bill's son),

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who was chief of refuges when I interviewed him. "Last year it was stable. You can't go to a refuge now and not see the effects of the sustained investment. Audubon and the other members of the CORE [Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement] group have had a huge impact on our rising budget fortunes. In 1997 we had \$178 million for operations and maintenance. For 2003 we got \$368 million."

Mike Daulton, Audubon's assistant director of government relations, acknowledges that the Bush administration "has been pretty good about asking for money to run the refuge system." He explains that the system has bipartisan backing and offers the President a chance to fulfill one of his few environmental campaign promises.

Still, Daulton points out, refuges are in deplorable condition. I saw what he meant at Pelican Island, the showcase. There's not even a secure shed in which to store equipment. Recently an ATV was stolen. When jetskis flush birds or motorboats blast through manatee-protection zones, there's no law-enforcement officer to make the bust. The refuge's 2002 base funding of \$300,000 required a \$100,000 transfusion from the regional office just to cover salaries.

It was a scene to boost the spirits of any wildlife lover who had ever imagined that humankind was a helpless victim of itself, destined to loneliness on a drab and sterile planet.

There are friends of the refuge system in the Bush administration, none truer than Interior's Craig Manson, assistant secretary for fish, wildlife, and parks. War veterans, seeking to emphasize history at the expense of wildlife, would have gotten Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge turned over to the Park Service had not Manson intervened. "People don't have enough contact with nature," he said. "We need to get them onto refuges. Otherwise we lose support for conservation values." Manson correctly answered "exotics" when I asked him to name the single most insidious threat to the refuge system. When I inquired if, in the face of ferocious public opposition, it was really necessary to kill such beloved creatures as mute swans, he said, "That's simply what has to be done."

But for every hand in the Bush administration reaching out to help refuges, another reaches out from higher up to slap it and the system down. For example, high-ranking Bush officials saw refuge chief Dan Ashe, a passionate defender of the system, as part of the reason there hasn't been drilling on the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. As one manager put it, "Dan wore a scarlet 'CE,' for Clinton Environmentalist." So in March, Ashe got disappeared to a corner where he is "revitalizing science."

In California, waterfowl habitat in the Lower Klamath and Tule Lake refuges is being leased to farmers in gross violation of the Refuge Improvement Act of 1997, which gave the system its wildlife-first mission and defined compatible uses, such as hunting. Whenever there's a shortage of water, it goes to farmers instead of ducks and eagles, and farmers are killing marshes with fertilizers and pesticides. Under Clinton, Interior pushed to end farming. Under Bush, it claims that farming is "compatible" with wildlife.

The main problem at Interior is its director, Gale Norton, who, as a former colleague and protégé of James Watt, dedicated herself to assisting states and extractive industries to seize control of federal land and federal water rights. In a 2001 ruling in keeping with state notions, the Idaho Supreme Court nullified the 92-year-old water right of Deer Flat National Wildlife Refuge, this despite the fact that the refuge had been established for waterfowl. The refuge includes 101 islands along 113 miles of the Snake River; now that the area is being desiccated, back channels important to waterfowl are filling in with terrestrial plants. Some islands—important to neotropical birds—are now accessible to mainland predators, ATVs, and cattle. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service desperately wanted to appeal the Idaho ruling. Norton said no.

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Even James Watt opposed the two giant jetties the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers dreams of building at Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge and Cape Hatteras National Seashore on the Outer Banks of North Carolina for the convenience of 215 charter and commercial fishing boats. This ancient, \$108 million proposal—harder to kill than Rasputin and which would destroy wetlands, fish, sea turtles, and shorebirds—has drawn spirited condemnation from the Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Marine Fisheries Service, the National Park Service, and the General Accounting Office. When a federal project threatens resources under Interior's jurisdiction and a fix can't be negotiated, the department sends a referral to the President's Council on Environmental Quality. In this case, the 27-page document reported that the department "has concluded that [the project] would result in substantial and unmitigatable environmental harm to lands of national importance." But the referral was never sent; Norton converted it to a one-page memo in which the conclusions became concern that the project "might" impair resources.

It is important for refuges to coordinate with state game and fish departments. In fact, the Refuge Improvement Act requires it. But nothing in the act suggests that states should assume management authority on refuge land. States, funded largely by revenue from hunting and fishing licenses, tend to have diminished ecological perspectives. Former Fish and Wildlife Service director Jamie Clark understood this. "If states take too much control, you ultimately lose the integrity of the system as a whole," she told me. "It's America's refuge system, not Arkansas's or Mississippi's. Otherwise you have decentralization; you don't have a commonality of theme or governance. What if counties wanted to run state wildlife-management areas?"

Current director Steve Williams has a different perspective. Last December 23 he issued an order that allows states to "elevate decisions within the hierarchy of the service." The Refuge Improvement Act requires policies for the refuge system. Some of the policies got finalized under President Clinton. One that didn't was the policy on wilderness, and it doesn't look as if it's going to be finalized anytime soon under President Bush. Federal wilderness inconveniences motorized sportsmen, so some states wish it would go away. Director Williams has engaged (and is paying travel expenses for) five representatives from state game and fish departments to help the agency write policies, including one for wilderness. Negotiations are in chaos. States are even questioning core concepts, clearly delineated in the Wilderness Act, such as the prohibition of permanent buildings. What's more, Williams has publicly stated that—for the benefit of the states, which imagine that the refuge act doesn't go far enough in involving them in refuge doings—he'll consider changing policies finalized under Clinton.

Last year Hugh Durham, then director of the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission, decided he'd like trophy-deer management on eight refuges. Refuge managers were horrified when he tried to force a regulation whereby whitetails couldn't be taken unless their antlers were under two inches or had three points or more. Such a regulation would increase pressure on healthy young bucks that had been passing on the best genes, and skew the natural buck-to-doe ration.

In its July 2002 newsletter, the normally staid Wildlife Management Institute—a nonprofit staffed by professional wildlife managers—called the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission's power play "reverse carpetbagging" and reported that "Commission officials privately acknowledged a weak biological basis for the action, but defended the need to correct decades of actual and perceived 'wrongs' perpetrated by the feds, as well as to assert the state's right to manage resident wildlife." The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's regional director stood behind his people, rejecting the commission's demand; director Williams reversed his decision. The precedent has emboldened local farmers who lease their land for hunting, lodge owners, and Arkansas duck guides (who have been banned from state-managed hunting areas) to pressure refuges for more access. Duck hunting is huge business in Arkansas, and hunting interests—especially the guides, who earn as much as \$500 per day, per client—fantasize that the refuges are spoiling the shooting by providing so much natural food that the ducks spend all their time eating instead of flying over blinds. The guides are represented by attorney Bill Horn, who, as former assistant to James Watt, headed Watt's crusade to privatize refuges and purge the Fish and Wildlife Service of those opposed to Arctic drilling, and who, in 1996, designed a bill that

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would have turned current refuge uses such as grazing and mining into congressionally mandated purposes. Horn has been chosen by Secretary Norton to chair the Refuge Centennial Commission.

The best refuges have strong citizen support groups, and none is stronger than the Pelican Island Preservation Society. When refuges get ringed by development, wildlife corridors are cut off; for many species this can lead to extirpation. Five years ago—when four citrus growers decided to sell off their property, thereby exposing 300 acres adjacent to Pelican Island to development—the society mounted a successful campaign to acquire the land as a buffer. Without this intervention the land would now be growing condos.

The president of the Pelican Island Preservation Society, Walt Stieglitz, is cofounder of a statewide group called Friends of Florida National Wildlife Refuges. You don't mess with this outfit, as Congress discovered in 2002 when Representative Dan Miller (R-FL) introduced a bill to turn Egmont Key National Wildlife Refuge (along with \$5 million) over to the state on behalf of motorboaters and history buffs who fancied that the refuge's concern about sea turtles, royal terns, Sandwich terns, and laughing gulls might limit access to beaches and archaeological sites. The Fish and Wildlife Service's Washington office quietly went along with the scheme. But Friends members started making phone calls. Within hours, Pelican Island Audubon, Florida Audubon, and the National Wildlife Refuge Association were in the faces of congressmen and senators, and Miller withdrew the bill.

"Such raids are common," remarks Stieglitz, who worked for 34 years with the Fish and Wildlife Service, most recently as regional director in Alaska. He cites the perennial bills by Representative Don Young (R-AK), including one in 2002 to turn management of some of Alaska's national wildlife refuges over to native corporations. If Young succeeds, I wondered if he'd be invited to tear the planks out of the centennial boardwalk.

Before I could ask Paul Tritaik why the last plank—the one for Pelican Island—was missing, he offered the explanation. A luminous dignitary—Gale Norton—would insert it on March 14. It was going to be a huge press event. He hoped it would inspire the American people, get them charged up about their refuges. I hope so, too, but I doubt it. Such doings tend not to stir the imagination. Still, the image of Secretary Norton squatting over a plank bearing evocative words about the birth of the world's largest and most successful system for protecting wildlife, and then pounding nails through it, seemed memorable—and appropriate.

Ted Williams last reported on national wildlife refuges in the May-June 1996 Audubon.

What You Can Do

Contact the national wildlife refuge nearest you and volunteer your time. It may not be a showcase like Pelican Island, but you can make it one. If there's a local Friends or Audubon Refuge Keepers group (see "Labor of Love"), join it. If there isn't, start one.

Refuges don't get funding because they don't have large, loud constituencies. On your refuge, at least, you can change that. This year Audubon scored a major victory by persuading Florida state and local governments to purchase 500 acres of island habitat adjacent to the Pelican Island refuge that was slated for dredging and development. Audubon is working to stop other development proposals threatening this fragile ecosystem. To learn more, go to www.audubonofflorida.org or call 800-753-5499.

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