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Red Rock Lakes

National Wildlife Refuge

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Trumpeter swans
W. Steve Sherman, USFWS



Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge has often been called the most beautiful national wildlife refuge in the United States. The rugged Centennial Mountains, rising more than 9,000 feet above the Centennial Valley wetlands,

Overview of the Refuge
USFWS

provide a dramatic backdrop for this extremely remote Refuge. The inherent solitude and suitable habitat has made this the perfect place for reviving declining populations of the majestic trumpeter swan.

A Quiet Retreat for Wildlife and People



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

Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) was established in 1935 to protect the rare trumpeter swan. Today, this 45,000-acre Refuge continues to be one of the most important habitats in North America for these magnificent migratory birds. The Refuge lies in the eastern end of the Centennial Valley near the headwaters of the Missouri River. The Centennial Mountains border the Refuge on the south and east and catch the heavy snows of winter, providing a constant supply of water that replenishes the Refuge's 14,000 acres of lakes and marshes. The flat, marshy lands of the valley floor merge into the rolling foothills of the Gravelly Range to the north. This ideal habitat provides the solitude and isolation that are so essential to the trumpeter swan.



Arrowleaf balsamroot

The Refuge includes a designated Wilderness Area and is also a registered National Natural Landmark. These special habitats are managed to retain as much of the wilderness character and landscape as possible. Likewise, public use is managed to provide visitors the rare opportunity to experience isolation and solitude.

Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge is one of more than 500 refuges in the National Wildlife Refuge System - a network of public lands set aside specifically for wildlife. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service manages these lands to conserve wildlife and habitat for people today and for generations to come.

Early Valley Visitors

The Saier Ranch was one of several ranches that operated in the valley in the late 1800s.



USFWS

In the early days, market hunting for waterfowl and big game brought some revenue to local residents, but most settlers concentrated on livestock and sporadic lumbering. The long winters, great distances to market, and small land parcels combined to make subsistence difficult. Few survived the depression of the 1930s. Visitors can still see some of the original homesteads on the Refuge today.

Return of the Trumpeters

The trumpeter swan once ranged over much of the interior of the United States, but their numbers decreased as they were shot for their plume feathers and as their habitat diminished. By the early 1900s, only a remnant population was left in the tri-state area of southwestern Montana, southeastern Idaho, and northwestern Wyoming, as well as in parts of Canada and Alaska. Less than 100 swans were in the tri-state area in 1935 when the Refuge was established. The Refuge provided protection and seclusion, and swan populations increased. Their slow, steady growth continued until the nesting population peaked in the early 1960s.



W. Steve Schrammer, USFWS
Once depleted populations of trumpeter swans are now increasing in number and being reestablished in their former homes.

Current trumpeter swan summer populations for the tri-state area average about 400 birds. This population grows to more than 2,000 trumpeter swans during fall as migrating birds arrive from Canada. Most winter in the nearby Madison River Valley, at Ennis Lake, along the Henry's Fork River, and further south into Idaho. About 25 trumpeter swans winter in secluded sites on the Refuge.

During the winter, the birds are limited to the confines of the open water on the Refuge and elsewhere within the tri-state area. In earlier years, wildlife managers believed that naturally available foods were insufficient to maintain the growing population. As a result, grain was provided for the swans at MacDonald and Culver Ponds during the severe winters. Wintering swan numbers increased and became crowded enough on the small Refuge ponds to raise concern for the potential spread of diseases. In 1992, biologists throughout the traditional migration route of the swan agreed that the birds should be encouraged to migrate to areas with larger natural bodies of open water. Consequently, the feeding program was discontinued.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has introduced swans from the Refuge to repopulate their former habitats in other areas. As a result, wild flocks of trumpeters are now reestablished in Oregon, Nevada, South Dakota, Nebraska, and Minnesota. Zoos and parks throughout the United States, Canada, and Europe exhibit trumpeter swans originating from Red Rock Lakes birds.

Refuge Wildlife Throughout the Seasons

The diverse habitats of the Refuge attract a variety of wildlife species throughout the year. Each spring, greater sandhill cranes nest in the Refuge meadows and marshes. These long-legged birds are most easily observed in the open areas near Upper Red Rock Lake from April through September. Their courtship display and dance take place in April and May. Great blue herons, willets, avocets, and long-billed curlews are other conspicuous waders and shorebirds that frequently nest on the Refuge.

The Refuge's lakes, marshes, and creeks provide attractive habitats for a multitude of ducks. Eighteen different kinds of waterfowl, including the Barrow's goldeneye, raise their young here each year. In October and November, thousands of ducks and geese congregate on the Refuge before their southward migration. Tundra swans often make their appearance on the Refuge in November.

The timber-covered slopes and aspen stands on the south side of the Refuge prove attractive to blue and ruffed grouse and many different songbirds and raptors. Brewer's sparrows are among the more common sagebrush residents.

Moose can be found on the Refuge at any time of year.

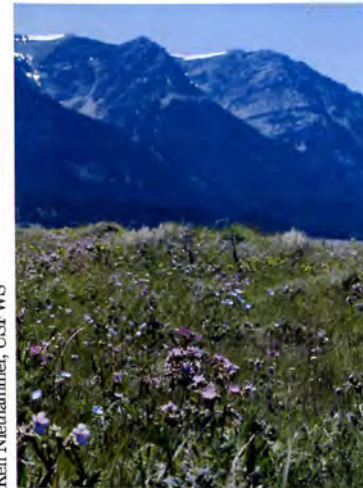


USFWS

Moose are year-round residents, but most of the elk, deer, and pronghorn are forced to migrate out of Centennial Valley due to the severe winters. Refuge visitors will encounter other familiar mammals such as red fox, badger, striped skunk, and Richardson's ground squirrel.

Enjoy Your Visit

Feel free to enjoy recreational activities such as fishing, hunting, wildlife observation, photography, hiking, and camping at Red Rock Lakes NWR. The best time to visit the Refuge for most activities is from May through September.



Ken Niethammer, USFWS

Wildflowers abound on the Refuge from late spring into the summer.

Much of the Refuge can be seen from your car when the weather is good. To preserve the wilderness explorer spirit, there are no artificially-maintained back country hiking trails. Instead, nature provides many routes created by big game animals. You are welcome to cross-country hike throughout open areas of the Refuge, or follow big game routes and see the Refuge from the wildlife point of view.















Animals are best seen in the summer and fall during morning and evening hours. Visitors are encouraged to learn the habitats and behavior of specific animals, such as moose foraging in willow-covered streams, badgers digging holes in grasslands, and falcons swooping on concentrations of shorebirds. This is the key to successful wildlife viewing on the primitive, undeveloped landscape of the Refuge where artificial facilities have been minimized and wildlife is on the move.

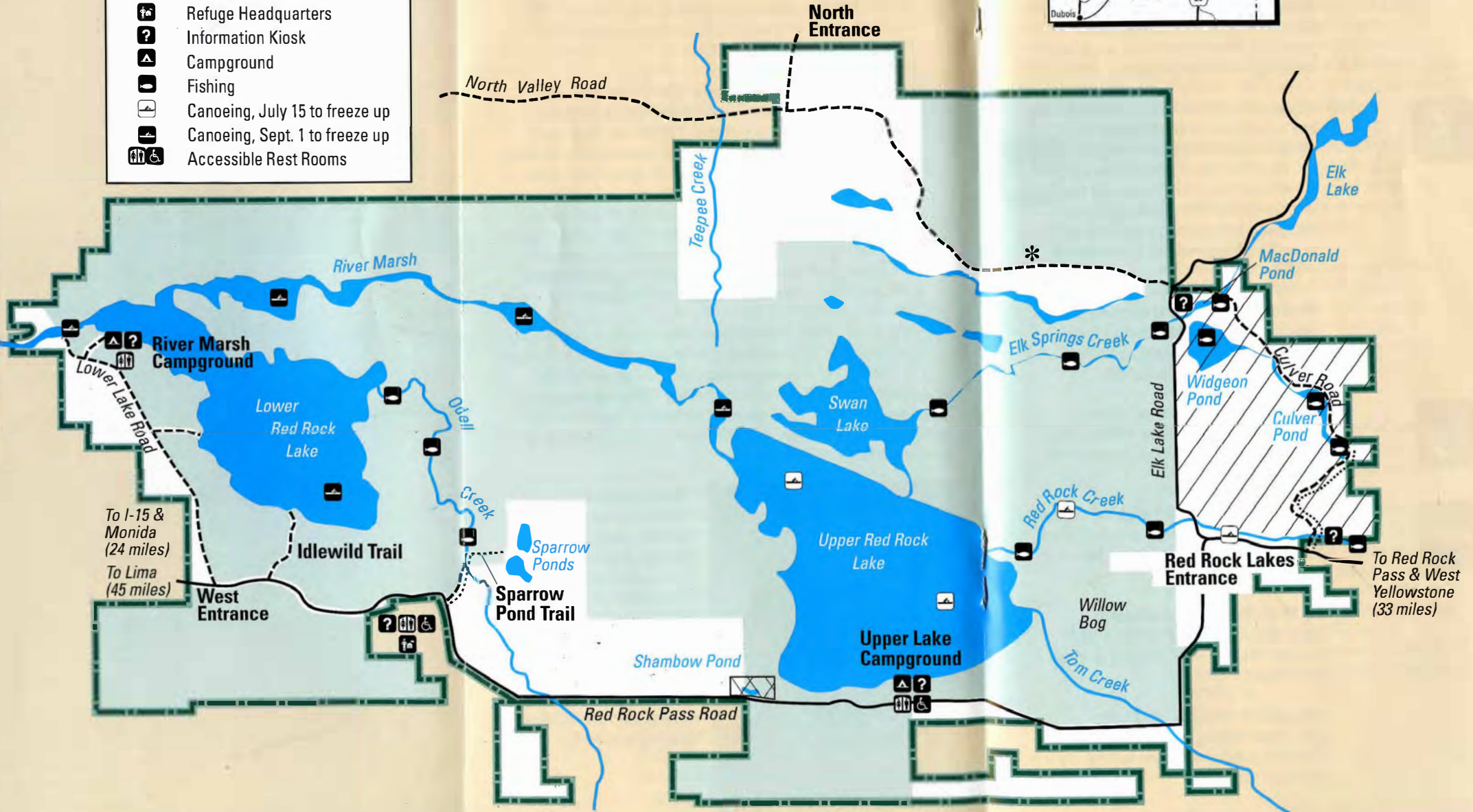
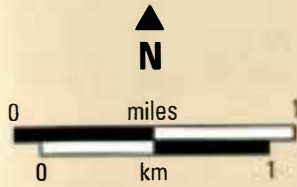
Beginning in May, look for a myriad of wildflowers starting to appear on the Refuge. By July, the Refuge becomes a wildflower paradise. Shooting stars, buttercups, sticky geranium, and Indian paintbrush color the grasslands in hues of reds, pinks, blues, and yellows.

Staff is available at the Refuge headquarters during weekdays from 7:30 am to 4:00 pm to help you get oriented, answer questions, or provide more information.

Red Rock Lakes

National Wildlife Refuge

-  Refuge Boundary
-  Wilderness Area
-  Open July 15 - October 1
-  Closed Year-round
-  Seasonal Road
-  Foot Path
-  Point of Interest
-  Refuge Headquarters
-  Information Kiosk
-  Campground
-  Fishing
-  Canoeing, July 15 to freeze up
-  Canoeing, Sept. 1 to freeze up
-  Accessible Rest Rooms



To Protect You and the Refuge

Wildlife observation, hiking, and photography are permitted except in areas designated as closed for the protection of swans and other sensitive wildlife.

Hikers do not need to remain on trails. However, as you explore the Refuge, be prepared for sudden encounters with moose or other thrilling, but potentially dangerous, wildlife. Give wildlife plenty of space. Some little-used roads are seasonally closed to vehicles to provide more hiking opportunities. This prevents disturbing other lands with artificial trail construction.

Cross-country skiing and snowshoeing are permitted on the Refuge. To preserve the wilderness setting, there are no artificially maintained trails for these activities. Visitors should stay at least one-quarter mile away from animals when skiing or snowshoeing to avoid causing stress to wintering wildlife.

Trumpeter swans are extremely sensitive to disturbance and may abandon nests or young. Please do not approach nesting swans.

All pets must be leashed except waterfowl hunting dogs while being used for hunting during appropriate hunting seasons.

Horses are permitted only for access into mountainous areas south of Red Rock Pass Road. Feed must be certified weed-free.

Be prepared for cool summer temperatures, frigid winters, and sudden rain or snow storms during any season.

Hazardous bogs and sinkholes are found throughout the Refuge. Caution is advised when hiking through wet areas.

Mosquitos are abundant from early spring through late summer.

Commercial and private photographers in pursuit of photographs must not disturb wildlife. Photography guidelines can be obtained at the Refuge headquarters or by calling ahead. Failure to follow such guidelines will result in fines.

Cross country or off-road travel by motorized vehicles is not permitted. Automobiles are restricted to maintained Refuge roads, parking areas, and "through" roads (roads that originate outside the Refuge boundary and pass through the Refuge).

Snowmobiles are not permitted on Refuge roads; however, they are allowed on "through" road corridors identified by fences or fenceposts protruding above the snow. Snowmobiles may not travel cross-country, climb hills, or "high mark" (drive straight up a steep slope until the machine will not go any higher) within the Refuge. Snowmobiles must possess a valid registration decal as required by Montana State law.

To operate on public roads in and around the Refuge, Montana State law requires that all-terrain vehicles (ATVs) or quadricycles, like motorcycles, must be "street legal" (equipped with license plate, lights, and horn), and operator's must have a valid drivers license and motorcycle endorsement. Minors under 18 years of age must be properly licensed and must wear a helmet. These requirements are necessary to help insure your safety and that of people around you.

Help Preserve Wildlife Habitats-Follow Road Restrictions





Gasoline is not available locally, but can be purchased in West Yellowstone or Lima, Montana. To avoid being stranded, have enough gasoline for at least a 100-mile round trip. Please consider washing the undercarriage of your vehicle prior to visiting the Refuge. This will help to reduce the spread of noxious weeds.

Bicycles are permitted only on Refuge roads. To minimize disturbance to wildlife and to preserve wilderness values, mountain bikes are not permitted in the timbered areas of the Refuge south of Red Rock Pass Road.

Refuge roads: Lower Lake Road is open May 15 through November 20; Culver Road is open July 15 through September 30; Idlewild Trail is open to vehicles September 1 through the end of November; and for hiking only December 2 through August 31; Sparrow Pond trail is open year-round for hiking only.

Through roads: Red Rock Pass, North Valley, and Elk Lake roads are open all year as weather permits. Elk Lake Road is very muddy in the springtime and may be impassable.

Increase Wildlife Viewing Opportunities by Staying Overnight



Camping is permitted for a maximum of 14 consecutive days at the Upper Lake and River Marsh campgrounds. Grates and toilets are available at both campgrounds; tables and potable spring water are available at the Upper Lake Campground only. Upper Lake Campground facilities are accessible, but the potable water spring is not accessible by wheelchair. Individuals who cannot reach the spring may obtain water at the Refuge headquarters.

Fires are permitted in campground grates only. Firewood is not provided; however, dead or downed timber can be collected. Chain saws are prohibited.

Please pack out your trash.

Take to the Water



Boating is limited to canoes, kayaks, rowboats, rafts, and other non-mechanized vessels in designated areas during designated times of the year as shown on the map. Sailboating and windsurfing are not permitted.

Boaters are urged to use caution on Refuge waters as sudden storms, high winds, high waves, cold temperatures, low water levels, and muddy conditions are common. Be aware that waterfowl hunting is allowed every fall on the Lower Red Rock Lake.

Onboard, approved flotation devices are required for each occupant of the boat.

Try Your Luck at Fishing



Unless otherwise posted, State regulations apply to all Refuge waters where fishing is permitted.

Fishing is permitted from the third Saturday in May through the end of November on Odell Creek, Red Rock Creek, and Elk Springs Creek west of Elk Lake Road. Widgeon Pond, Culver Pond, MacDonald Pond, Picnic Creek, and Elk Springs Creek east of Elk Lake Road are open for fishing from July 15 until October 1. Other Refuge waters are closed to fishing.

Tubes and other floatation devices are prohibited on Refuge waters unless specifically posted (at parking areas) as open to these activities.

Anglers must use artificial lures or flies when fishing Refuge waters open to fishing. In order to minimize injury from hooks and improve the survival of released native fish, fishing with bait is not permitted.

To prevent lead poisoning of waterfowl, lead sinkers are prohibited.

Hunting with a firearm is permitted in designated areas of the Refuge for ducks, geese, and coots, moose, elk, white-tailed deer, mule deer, and pronghorn during the legal hunting seasons for these species. Firearms are not permitted on the Refuge during other times of the year unless they are unloaded and either cased or dismantled for transport.

Bow hunting for antelope, deer, and elk is allowed in areas designated as open to hunting for these animals.

Please refer to the Refuge Hunting leaflet available at information kiosks on the Refuge or at the Refuge headquarters.

How to Find the Refuge

The Refuge headquarters can be reached from the west by turning off Interstate Highway 15 at Monida, Montana, and driving 28 miles east over an improved dirt road. If approaching from the east, follow U.S. 20 southwest from West Yellowstone for about 12 miles to the junction with Montana 87. Continue west on Montana 87 for 5 miles and turn south onto Red Rock Pass Road (locally called "Bootjack" Road). Follow Red Rock Pass Road for 20 miles to reach the Refuge entrance sign.

The Refuge is inaccessible by vehicle in the winter. Deep snow prevents opening the road from Monida on the west side of the valley until about mid-April. This road can still be hazardous for passenger cars until mid-May. Refuge access roads can close again in November. Summer rains can make these routes muddy; inquire about road conditions in Monida or at one of the resorts along Henry's Lake before proceeding on to the Refuge.

Accommodations are available at two cabin-style resorts near the Refuge, and at other resorts along the shores of historic Henry's Lake, about 25 miles east of the Refuge. Hotel and motel accommodations can be found in Lima and West Yellowstone.

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. For visitors using TTY, use the Montana Relay Service at 1 800 / 253 4091 TTY or 1 800 / 253 4093 Voice. For more information or to address accessibility needs, please contact the Refuge staff at 406 / 276 3536 or the U.S. Department of the Interior, Office of Equal Opportunity, 1849 C Street, NW, Washington, D.C. 20240.

Hunting is a Popular Sport on the Refuge

