TISHOMINGO, Chincoteague, Blackbeard Island, Okefenokee—colorful names, these, and colorful places, too. They’re a part of the farflung system of the national wildlife refuges, a chain of nature preserves which includes more than 300 units that totals nearly 29 million acres. The odds are there’s a refuge near you, since all except 5 of the 50 States have at least one.

Many refuges lie astride the congested urban stretches of the eastern seaboard, the Middle West, and the Pacific coast. Mainly they offer sanctuary to millions of migrating waterfowl, but they have other values. People need solitude, too, and 15 million Americans found respite during 1966 in visiting these wildlife havens that can also be human refuges.

Most of them came to observe the birds or merely to wander around and escape momentarily the harassment of city living. Others satisfied a recreational thirst for hunting, fishing, or boating. The national refuge system offers all of these things and more.

Several refuges are unique because they make up the last stronghold for animals bordering on extinction. An example is the Aransas Refuge, located halfway down the Texas coast, 75 miles north of Corpus Christi. Here, on 47,000 acres of bays, estuaries, tidal flats, and sandy islands, visitors may see the whooping cranes, one of our largest birds and probably the rarest in North America. Winters only on Aransas and the adjacent lands. There you may see it—and a lot of other wildlife—from late October to mid-April, when each whooper begins its hazardous 2,600-mile trip to summer nesting grounds in the Far North.

The only nesting area which is now known (and only recently discovered) is in Wood Buffalo National Park of Canada’s Northwest Territories.

Whooping cranes had all but vanished from the wildlife scene before establishment of Aransas. Fifteen lone survivors reported in during the winter of 1941-42, and things continued to be “touch and go” for the species for a number of years. The winter of 1965-66 saw 44 individuals on the refuge—hardly a thriving population but, nevertheless, one that’s edging up instead of down.

The Key deer is another species that had dwindled to near extinction in the 1940’s, but since then has been preserved for people to see. A remnant herd of 50 animals was faced with certain displacement—victims of intensive land development—when area acquisition to preserve their habitat was started. In 1966, the population numbered around 400 animals, most of them occupying the refuge lands on Big Pine Key in Florida.

This diminutive race of whitetails is the smallest deer in all North America.

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These are furtive creatures, but alert visitors to Big Pine Key regularly see the 40- to 60-pound midgets as they scurry through openings and across the roadways in their tropical setting.

Other refuges provide unusual recreational opportunities for people interested in the “offbeat” and the unusual. At the Salt Plains National Wildlife Refuge in Oklahoma, you may dig for selenite crystals. At De Soto National Wildlife Refuge in Iowa and Nebraska, you may pick the delectable morel mushroom, a species so distinctive that not even the rank amateur can go wrong. Sanibel National Wildlife Refuge in Florida is a mecca for those interested in rare and beautiful seashells; and at the Tamarac National Wildlife Refuge in Minnesota, there are settlers’ log cabins and even Chippewa Indian burial grounds.

Would you like to see a real Texas longhorn, that distinctly American breed of cattle which has made famous the old Chisholm Trail and the Goodnight-Loving Trail, and that laid the basis for endless TV shows and “horse operas” a century later? The longhorns once numbered in the millions; today only a few thousand remain. You may see them at Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge in Nebraska and the Wichita Mountains Refuge in Oklahoma, where relict herds are being maintained.

But more than preserving the rare, the unusual, and the endangered, the refuges mainly serve as a haven for the millions of ducks, geese, and other migratory birds. And this is what most persons come to see. If you are serious about bird watching—and sooner or later most people seem to develop this interest—you will do well to come equipped with binoculars and a bird guide. Much of the fun is in knowing and distinguishing the many kinds that are present in confusing variety. The activities and antics of the bird world are engrossing to anyone taking
Canada geese take off from a waterhole in south Texas where many of these geese spend the winter months.

the time to observe up close. A camera, likewise, will find good use in permitting you to record some of the unusual sights which you are sure to encounter.

Most of the Federal areas are staffed by biologists—individuals who sought out such jobs because of a great interest in the outdoors. These all are enthusiastic naturalists who can help you to a richer enjoyment of the world of nature. A stop at the refuge headquarters will yield suggestions on what to see and where, as well as helpful literature.

A few refuges are equipped with visitor centers where you can see displays that tell the story of the refuge, where there are movies or color slide shows of the area and its wildlife. Many have nature trails for walkers, with numbered posts keyed to descriptive leaflets. These explain refuge operations or identify some of the unusual wildlife or plants. Still others, like the Seney National Wildlife Refuge in northern Michigan or the National Bison Range in Montana, have regularly scheduled auto tours.

If your hobby is fishing, you will find possibilities on many national wildlife refuges. Most of these areas have water on them—ponds, lakes, streams, and beaches. Wherever possible, on either a yearlong or seasonal basis, these units are open to fishermen. More than a fourth of all visitors come for this purpose.

Hunting, too. Nearly half a million people enjoy this sport each year on national refuges. Some are open to waterfowl shooting on a limited basis. On others, you may hunt for a variety of resident game such as deer, pheasants, quail, rabbits, and grouse. A few offer the unusual in hunting experiences. On Desert Game Range in Nevada you may pursue the elusive desert bighorn sheep; and on Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge in Virginia exotic sika deer occur in sizable numbers.

If hunting on a refuge strikes you as being inconsistent with the purposes of protecting and saving, let me explain. Big game, if allowed to increase to an excessive degree, can be their own worst enemy. They overbrowse their range; then starvation ruins the herd. But even before nature balances animals to food supply, the destruction of trees and shrubs removes food and cover essential to many smaller animals as well. It's good management for the game—and to the sportsman's benefit—to crop big game judiciously. And most small game can't be stockpiled. If peak numbers in the fall are not reduced by hunting, nature again has a way of paring the flocks through disease, predators, and other means. Regulated hunting can put game in the hunter's bag that would otherwise perish from natural causes alone.

Refuges offer picnicking facilities ranging from the rudimentary base of a few tables and a colony of ants to the elaborate center with fireplaces, running water, comfortable restrooms—and two colonies of ants. Overnight camping is generally not permitted, since such public use is incompatible with wildlife needs of the
area. However, camping facilities are to be found on some of the larger refuges, such as Crab Orchard National Wildlife Refuge in southern Illinois and the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge in southwestern Oklahoma near Lawton.

Boating and water skiing are permitted the year around on several refuge lakes and seasonally on some others. Such facilities as launching ramps, swimming beaches, bathhouses, and concessions where meals or refreshments may be obtained are usually available on the area or else nearby.

By now you have probably concluded that the refuges are as variable as fingerprints. That's true. And that's why there is no fixed pattern of recreational development on the many units. Some refuges are so intensively used by waterfowl that just "looking" is the only recreation compatible with the job and the objective of wildlife management. On others, wildlife is localized or uses the area on a seasonal basis so there is "wiggle room" to share the ground and water with people, even including the "whoop and holler" of the water skiers. Where there's a question, wildlife has priority, of course.

Under the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act of 1965, visitors to most wildlife refuges are charged a nominal fee. Holders of the $7 "Golden Passport," of course, are admitted along with their carload of passengers to all the refuges as well as to the many other Federal installations. But if you do not have a Golden Passport, you may purchase a daily or a monthly entrance permit. All the refuges requiring a permit are plainly posted.

Wherever you live, it is likely you're within a fairly easy driving distance of one or more national wildlife refuges. Most highway maps show their location, but if you desire more detailed information, write the Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife, U.S. Department of the Interior, Washington, D.C. 20240.

And one more thing. When you visit Aransas for a look at the whooping crane, that largest and rarest of our migratory birds, don't refer to them as "whopping" cranes or as "big white buzzards." Phil Morgan, the refuge manager, is a sensitive type and deadly serious about his charges.

For further reading:


A Texas longhorn.