

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

# Reelfoot

*National Wildlife Refuge*



*Unmatched anywhere in the world, the National Wildlife Refuge System is an extensive network of lands and waters protected and managed especially for wildlife and its habitat. Refuges stretch across the U.S. from above the Arctic Circle in Alaska to the subtropical waters of the Florida Keys and beyond to the Caribbean and South Pacific. The National Wildlife Refuge System is managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which protects and manages over 500 refuges for wildlife and for people to enjoy.*



*This blue goose, designed by "Ding Darling," has become a symbol of the Refuge System.*

## Introduction

The lure and beauty of Reelfoot Lake is fascinating not only because of the eagles, ducks, and Canada geese that come to winter, or its superb hunting and fishing, but because of its unique origin.

During the winter of 1811, time in the central Mississippi River valley momentarily stopped as the valley suddenly began to shake and violently move about. The once peaceful woodlands rolled like ocean waves and landslides covered many rivers and streams. A great depression was formed in northwest Tennessee and waters filled the sunken area.



photo: D. Haggard

Thus, Reelfoot Lake as presently known, was formed as a result of the most violent earthquake recorded in North America.

Numerous shocks were recorded from December, 1811 to February, 1812 and after shocks were



photo: D. Haggard

recorded for several decades. Minor shocks are recorded occasionally at the present and geologists state the probability of a major earthquake occurring in the next fifty years is increasing.

The lake was named for a Chickasaw warrior born with a deformed foot causing him to "reel" as he walked. According to legend, the chief incurred the wrath of the Indian gods when he kidnapped a Choctaw princess, and took her as his bride. Reelfoot, his princess, and tribe were eternally entombed at the bottom of Reelfoot Lake when the gods created

a depression into which the waters of the Mississippi River flowed.

The formation of Reelfoot Lake created a valuable wetland area which became a haven for many wildlife species attracting hunters and outdoorsmen such as Davy Crockett and Jim Bowie. The rich natural resources (wildlife, fisheries, and fertile soil) associated with Reelfoot Lake has repeatedly been a source of controversy among local special interests attempting to utilize these resources.



photo: USFWS

### **Refuge History and Management**

**Reelfoot National Wildlife Refuge** is located on the northern portion of Reelfoot Lake in the northwest corner of Tennessee and southwest corner of Kentucky. The refuge was established in 1941 under the terms of a lease and cooperative agreement with

the State of Tennessee. Additional land purchases extended the refuge into Kentucky to its present 10,428 acres. Due to the proximity to the Mississippi River and being located in its former floodplain, the refuge is a major stopover point and wintering area for waterfowl of the Mississippi Flyway.

Refuge management includes forest management, protection and enhancement of wetland habitats, production of waterfowl foods through managed croplands, and manipulation of native vegetation in

shallow wetlands, along with managing Reelfoot Lake water levels. The refuge also provides interpretive, educational and wildlife recreation opportunities for the visiting public.

photo: Phil E. Choate ©



### **Bald Eagles**

Reelfoot Lake has long been known for its large wintering population of bald eagles. Normally 100-200 bald eagles spend their winter at Reelfoot Lake. The majestic birds are primarily fish eaters, but also prey on waterfowl and other wildlife. Eagles nested regularly in the area until 1963. The environmental effects of DDT contamination in the 1950's and 60's caused a

decline in eagle populations nationwide. A nesting population of eagles became reestablished in 1988 as a result of an eagle hacking release program and natural nesting.

photo: RK Burnard



### **Waterfowl**

The refuge and surrounding lake are one of the major wintering, migrating and production areas for waterfowl in the southeast. Ducks, primarily mallards, gadwall, American widgeon and ringneck ducks, begin arriving

in October. In recent years, the mallard population peaked at close to 400,000 in midwinter. Historical peaks were at least double these levels. The Canada goose, an abundant winter visitor, normally reaches population levels of 50,000-100,000 during January. The wood duck, a summer resident, nests in large numbers at Reelfoot Lake during the spring and summer period.

# REELFOOT & LAKE ISOM

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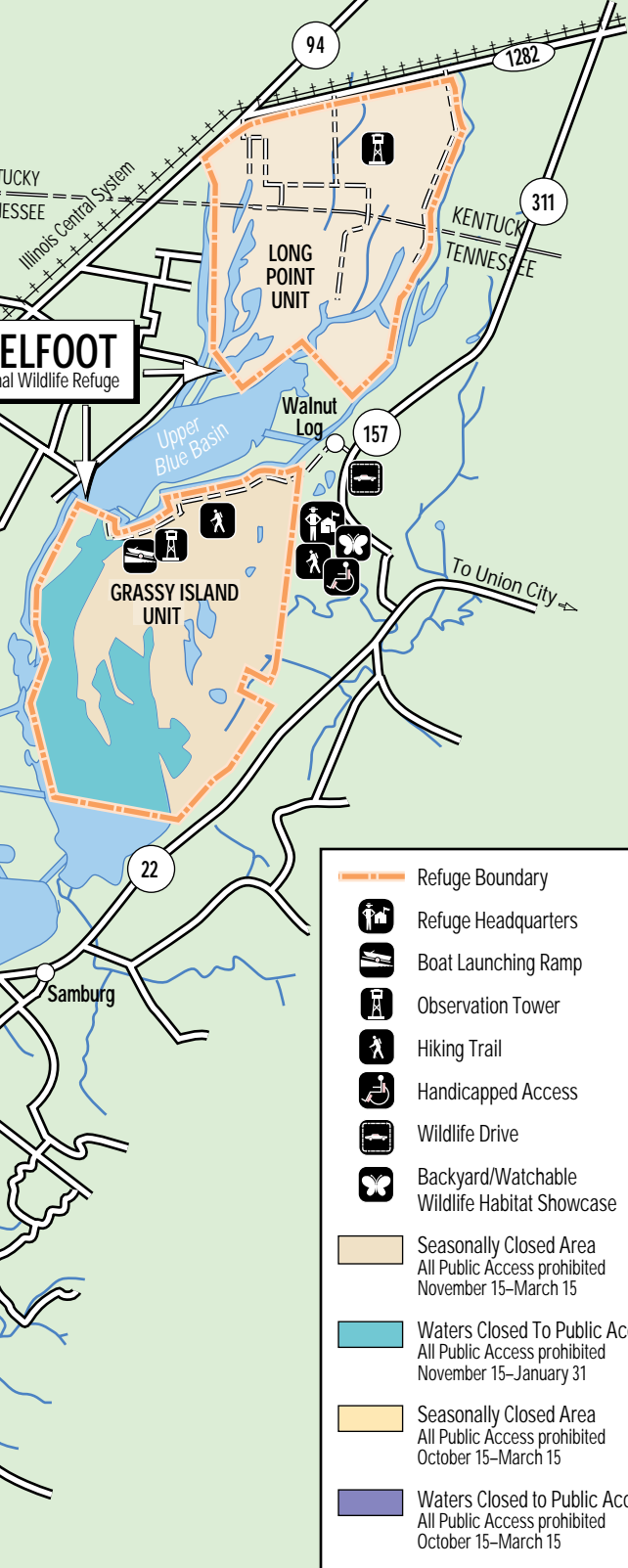
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**LAKE ISOM**  
National Wildlife Refuge







**Lake Isom National Wildlife Refuge**  
Lake Isom Refuge was established by Executive Order in 1938 and lies three miles south of Reelfoot Lake. The refuge's 1,846 acres of open water, forested wetlands and croplands resemble the larger Reelfoot Refuge. Its wildlife resources and management are also similar.



### **Public Use**

The refuge is open to the public from March 15-November 15 for fishing and wildlife observation. Hunting is also permitted within specific seasons. A public boat launch is available for lake access and refuge roads provide access to upland portions of the refuge.

### *Visitor Center/ Office*



The Reelfoot Visitor Center contains a number of displays describing refuge wildlife and historic events in the Reelfoot area. The Center provides an excellent opportunity for the visitor to become acquainted with the refuge before venturing out and is highly recommended, especially for the first-time visitor.

The Center is open daily from 8:00 am-4:00 pm January-March and Monday through Friday during the remainder of the year. For more information, call 901/538 2481 before visiting.

### *Grassy Island Auto Tour*



A self-guided wildlife drive is available on the Grassy Island Unit. The drive is open year-round during daylight hours. A boardwalk and observation platform await visitors at the end of the drive. Additional refuge roads are seasonally open for wildlife recreational pursuits.

### *Boat Access*

Boating on refuge waters is probably the best way to experience the refuge. Several public and commercial boat ramps are available





### *Wildlife Observation*

on or adjacent to the refuge. Boat motors above 10 horse power are not recommended due to the shallow waters and density of stumps.

Brochures describing public use and access and checklists for birds, mammals, amphibians and reptiles are available.

### *Hunting and Fishing*

Hunting and fishing are permitted on a seasonal basis. Consult the refuge public use brochure for further information.

### *Accessibility for the Disabled*



The Visitor Center is fully accessible for the disabled as are the main trail of the Backyard Habitat Showcase and the boardwalk at the end of the Grassy Island Auto Tour. Large print brochures are available on request. Contact the Refuge Manager for more details concerning hunting programs.

### *Observation Towers*

Two observation towers are available to the public year-round: one on the Grassy Island Auto Tour and the other in the main entrance to the Long Point Unit.

### *Hiking Trails*



The Grassy Island hiking trail is located at approximately the halfway point of the Auto Tour. The 1/2 mile semicircle exits on the Auto Tour for a short trip back to the parking area. A network of gravel/grass/wood chip trails is located in the Backyard Habitat Showcase. The farthest point from the parking lot is approximately 1/4 mile.

### *Backyard/ Watchable Wildlife Habitat Showcase*



Explore this living demonstration of habitat types and wildlife attractive species of plants. A separate brochure interprets ten numbered exhibits along the way.

## Calendar of Wildlife Events

*January*



photo: Larry Richardson ©

Waterfowl concentrations of up to 400,000 ducks and 150,000 geese can be observed. Visitor center open daily mid-January through mid-March.

*February*

Bald eagle population is at its peak in the Reelfoot Lake area. Cold weather crappie fishing is going strong. Canada geese are still wintering in large numbers. Grassy Island Unit open for fishing on February first.

*March*



Bald eagles begin northward migration by the fifteenth. Nesting osprey return from South America. The Long Point Unit and Lake Isom open to sport fishing on the fifteenth. Resident wood ducks return and start nesting activity. Large numbers of shovelers and blue-winged teal arrive on northward migration. Wild turkey are very visible on the Grassy Island unit.

photo: RK Burnard

*April*

The spring turkey hunt is conducted on the first weekend in April. Spring wildflowers blooming at Reelfoot. Shorebirds and ducks abundant in refuge moist soil units and temporary wetlands.

*May*



Bluegill fishing is at its peak. This is an excellent time for bird watchers at Reelfoot. Up to 240 species have been documented. Songbirds are abundant, especially warblers. Mississippi kites can be observed. This is the month for frog listening, especially spring peepers and tree frogs, and seeing deer and wild turkey in the early morning and late evening.

photo: Phil E. Choate ©

*June*



Deer fawns become visible this month. Herons and egrets observed fishing in shallow water. Cormorants and occasionally anhingas present.

Emergent and floating aquatic vegetation is blooming. Annual youth fishing rodeo held at maintenance shop pond in conjunction with National Fishing Week.

photo: Jon R. Nickles

*July*

The heat index rises to breath taking heights in Northwest Tennessee. Mosquitoes and deerflies swarm our bottomland forest.

*August*

Refuge squirrel season opens on the fourth Saturday of the month.

*September*

Marsh hawks observed near refuge headquarters. Fall fishing for “stripes,” crappie, and bass begins.



photo: USFWS

Refuge squirrel season ends on September 30.



photo: USFWS

*October*

Good hiking and canoeing weather. Large numbers of gadwall and American widgeon arriving. Eagle population begins to build. Raccoon season kicks off during the last two weeks in October. The archery deer season begins October 1.

*November*

Bald eagles are plentiful by Thanksgiving. The two day quota deer gun hunt is held the first weekend in November. Grassy Island walking trail open with excellent wildlife observation such as deer, turkey, waterfowl, and songbirds. Management Units closed to public entry on the fifteenth.

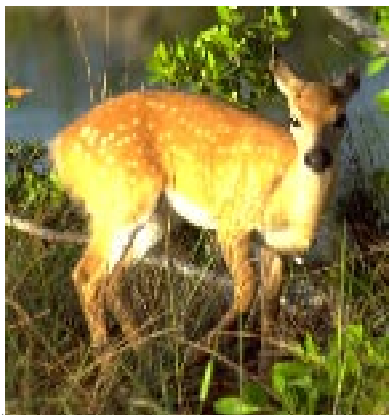


photo: USFWS

*December*

Excellent opportunities to observe ducks, geese, and eagles on the Long Point unit, Kentucky Highway 1282. The local Audubon Society chapters conduct the annual Christmas Bird Count.

Reelfoot and Lake Isom  
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