A Rare Opportunity

Moraine Hills State Park

Proposing a new national wildlife refuge is rare today. What makes Hackmatack even more unique is its location.

Story By Kathy Andrews

A network of public lands set aside to protect wild animals and plants evolved in 1903 through the creation of the National Wildlife Refuge System. Today, 560 refuges span 95 million acres across all 50 states and five U.S. territories. A proposal under consideration by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service could result in the creation of the newest refuge, one spanning the border of Illinois and Wisconsin and located in the shadow of Chicago and Milwaukee.

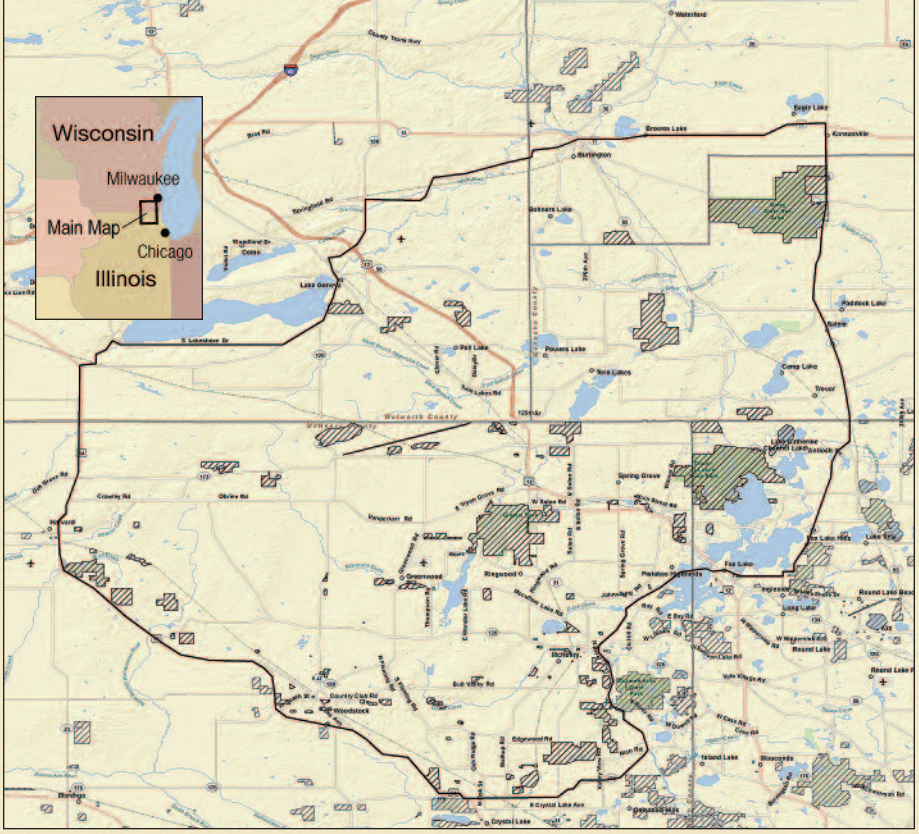
Within Illinois are seven national wildlife refuges, located primarily along the Illinois and Mississippi rivers. With the addition of Cypress Creek NWR in 1990 and Emiquon NWR in 1993, the USFWS manages nearly 320,000 acres to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the benefit of the American people.

A diverse assemblage of plants and animals occur within northeast Illinois.

The study area of the proposed

American bittern, *Botaurus lentiginosus* state endangered

(Photo by David Brewer.)



The proposed study area for Hackmatack National Wildlife Refuge encompasses 50,000 acres of natural lands in Wisconsin and Illinois. Although 350,000 acres is under study, only 10-30,000 acres are under consideration for a refuge.

(Photo by Ray Mathis.)

Hackmatack refuge encompasses more than 88 publicly and privately owned parks, preserves and conservation areas in northeastern Illinois and southeastern Wisconsin. Collectively, a total of 50,000 acres of natural ecosystems fall within the study area, with the bulk of the protected acreage owned by the Lake County Forest Preserve District, McHenry County Conservation District and Illinois and Wisconsin Departments of Natural Resources. These lands will continue to be owned by these agencies and managed as they have always been if a refuge is sited in the area.

Those spearheading the refuge proposal seek to preserve some of what once was ecologically typical—and now extremely rare—in the bi-state region. Included within the boundaries are a rich complement of habitats, including wetlands carved by glaciers millions of years ago and globally at-risk oak savannas, as well as the plants and animals associated with those systems.

The bounty of rich wilderness drew early settlers to what has become one of the Midwest's largest metropolitan regions. With more than 12 million people residing within a two-hour drive of the proposed refuge area, developers and a growing population exert continual pressure on the remaining disparate dots of natural lands.

Ed Collins, a natural resource manager with the McHenry County Conservation District, is intimately involved with the grassroots effort exploring new and creative ways to preserve open space habitat in northeastern Illinois.

"Illinois is unique because our conservation community is composed of multiple systems of land preservation," Collins explained. "In northeastern Illinois open lands are owned by constituent organizations, private land trusts and city, county and state governments, but we lack involvement by federal agencies whose primary mission is wildlife conservation. That started us thinking that involving the USFWS would be a way to take land preservation and management efforts to another level."

The national significance of northeastern Illinois' resources is further driving the grassroots effort. The Nature Conservancy has classified some of the natural plant communities in northeast Illinois as critically imperiled or imperiled globally. In addition, the Audubon Society has identified three sites as Important Bird Areas, a global designation for areas vital to birds and other biodiversity.

"When you grow up in an area, running errands to the store and taking your children to school every day, you have a tendency to take things for granted," Collins continued. "There is a slow magic that is part of the Midwest. When you step back and really consider what we have here from an ecological standpoint you realize that while the resources are understated, this region truly is incredible."

From that unique pool of resources comes the refuge's name: Hackmatack.

Hack-ma-tack is a Native American word for the tamarack (*Larix laricina*) tree, an Illinois-threatened species

The source of the word Hackmatack is the tamarack tree, one of the unique plants in the area.

(Photo by Stacy Iwaniki.)

Tamarack, *Larix laricina*
state threatened

Grass pink orchid, *Calopogon tuberosus*
state endangered

(Photos by Carol Freeman.)

Eastern prairie fringed orchid, *Platanthera leucophaea*
state endangered and federally threatened

Bogs, fens and wet prairies in northeastern Illinois host some of the state's rarest and showiest plants.

restricted to the peat soils of bogs and forested fens in Lake and McHenry counties and one of 109 species of concern found within the study area. Natural communities in the area support a diversity of flora and fauna, including 211 bird, 77 fish, 25 mussel, 67 butterfly, 29 reptile and amphibian and at least 785 native plant species. In addition, the glaciated landscape provides nesting habitat for 51 of the 83 bird species identified as conservation priorities in the Midwest region.

Creation of a new national refuge is a lengthy process involving studies, public open house events and comment periods. The USFWS will produce an environmental assessment before making a recommendation on the best course of action—to create a refuge or not. A draft environmental assessment should be available for public review and comment during the summer of 2011, according to Gary Muehlenhardt, a conservation planner with the USFWS who is leading the agency's planning effort.

"A new national wildlife refuge would help expand and link the network of protected lands already assembled by partner organizations, including DNR," DNR Assistant Director John Rogner explained. "With federal, state, county, municipal and private organizations working together, we could create a cohesive whole on a landscape scale for both people and wildlife."

Less than 15 percent of the land within the proposed study area has been set aside for its resource and recre-

Yellow-headed blackbird
Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus
state endangered

(Photo by Steve Patterson, Illini Images.)

A colonial species, the yellow-headed blackbird nests in wetlands rimmed with cattails and bulrushes.

For additional, updated information on the Hackmatack Refuge proposal, visit the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Midwest Region site at www.fws.gov/midwest/planning/hackmatack/index.html or Friends of Hackmatack at http://hackmatacknwr.org.index.

To review the "Hackmatack National Wildlife Refuge Viability Study" produced by the Trust for Public Lands and Openlands, visit http://openlands.org.

To learn more about the Illinois Wildlife Action plan, visit www.dnr.state.il.us/orc/wildliferesources/theplan.

ational value, creating small packets of nature within a heavily urbanized area. Filling in the landscape gaps would entail improving or restoring thousands of acres of drained wetland basins, historic prairies and forest habitats. These acres would become the actual boundaries of the Hackmatack NWR. Conserving habitat between protected parcels also addresses a concern arising as a result of climate change: enhancing plant and animal migration though the creation of contiguous north-south and east-west migration routes.

"The proposed refuge also would seek to provide habitat for migratory birds, a trust resource for the Service," Muehlenhardt explained. "Many birds that depend on grasslands have been declining throughout their range."

"A national refuge will bring together a number of land management partners working toward a shared management plan," Rogner explained. "Ultimately, this means we can quickly advance goals of the Illinois Wildlife Action Plan for the grassland and prairie, wetland and forest campaigns." Development of a state action plan was a federal directive to states to receive continued funding for conservation programs.

The short-eared owl nests on the ground in prairies, marshes, savannas and dunes.

While in a refuge wildlife comes first, meeting the needs for nature-based recreation aren't ever far behind. Hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, trails and nature photography exist within the refuge system wherever such activities have no negative impact on wildlife. Recognizing the need for a stronger presence in metropolitan areas, the USFWS' developed an Urban Refuge Policy, stimulating the establishment of refuges in locations that will foster environmental awareness and outreach programs, and connecting adults—and children—with nature.

Lenore Beyer-Clow, Policy Director at Openlands and also a resident of McHenry County, is part of the grassroots group advocating for a refuge. She said: "If we want to help urban populations understand and value our land, rivers and wildlife, we need to protect areas for them to visit close to home. Hackmatack gives people from the Chicago metropolitan area a unique and beautiful place to bring their families to hike, bird watch and also learn."

(Photo by John Cassady.)

Short-eared owl, *Asio flammeus*
state endangered

"Our part of the world is a unique, beautiful place, and contains some of the most endangered plants, animals and communities within a major metropolitan area," Collins summarized. "This really is a place of national significance, and is worthy of an investment of time and money so the natural resources of northeast Illinois are recognized as a true national treasure to be passed along to future generations."

FAQs

Why designate the area a national refuge? Hackmatack NWR would:

- Counter further habitat fragmentation and degradation resulting from continued urbanization.
- Provide habitat for migratory birds, endangered species and other wildlife.
- Supply diverse outdoor recreation opportunities where documented as in short supply.
- Further the USFWS Urban Refuges Policy by providing additional environmental education opportunities in a heavily populated metro area currently unserved by the National Wildlife Refuge system.

What would this mean to private landowners within the refuge boundary? Both private and public land parcels exist within the proposed refuge study area. According to the USFWS, "The presence of refuge lands does not afford the Service any authority to impose restrictions on any private lands. Control of access, land use practices, water management practices, hunting, fishing and any other general use is limited to those lands in which the Service has acquired an appropriate real estate interest or right." The USFWS acquires land only on a willing seller basis. The focus of the system would be to connect existing conservation areas through limited, strategic acquisitions through fee purchase combined with conservation easements, donations and cooperative agreements.

What would a refuge mean to the local tax base? The Refuge Revenue Sharing program replaces a portion of funds lost to local units of government. In addition, refuge lands place few demands for local tax-paid services when compared to new residential or commercial developments.

Additional FAQs are answered at www.fws.gov/midwest/planning/hackmatack/index.html.

Like many rare species in northeastern Illinois, upland sandpiper numbers declined with the loss of prairie habitat.

(Photo by Brian Tang.)

Upland sandpiper, *Bartramia longicauda*
state endangered