

The Elements of Success

How WSFR funds helped create Summer Lake Wildlife Area

by AMANDA FORTIN

In the northwestern corner of the Great Basin, about 100 miles from Bend, Oregon, is a haven for wildlife and wildlife enthusiasts alike. Summer Lake Wildlife Area was the first wetland-focused wildlife area established by the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife and, thanks to funds from the Wildlife and Sport Fishing Restoration program, these nearly 19,000 acres play a role in the conservation of hundreds of species and the recreation of thousands of visitors each year.



A sunset on Summer Lake

The Lodge at Summer Lake is a place of R&R for many visitors to the Summer Lake Wildlife Area.

“It is a remarkable wildlife area in a remarkable setting,” says Martin St. Louis, the state wildlife manager at Summer Lake. “Our management revolves around native plants and trying to mimic what was here naturally; this makes it an especially attractive place for birds and game animals which makes it attractive to birders and hunters.”

Today, the Summer Lake Wildlife Area is home to more than 40 mammal species, at least 280 species of birds, 15 reptile and amphibian species, and eight fish species. Large nesting populations of waterfowl including Canada geese, gadwalls and American coots can be seen there, as well as trumpeter swans and snow geese that stop during their spring and fall migrations.

While conserving wetland habitat, Summer Lake Wildlife Area provides public recreation such as fishing, bird watching, wildlife photography, hunting and camping. Open year-round, its facilities include well-maintained access roads and parking area, restrooms, picnic areas, nature trails, a canoe launch, camp sites and interpretive signs. Approximately 7,500 people visit the area each year.

Many of those visitors stop into the Lodge at Summer Lake, a privately owned bed and breakfast near the wildlife area. “People come here from big cities for R&R,” said Jan Froust, owner of the Lodge. “There are also a lot of unique things about the geographical area here. From wetlands and desert to forest and the lake, there is so much to love about this place.”



Great egrets are just one of the 280 species of birds that can be found at the Summer Lake Wildlife Area.

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Along with unique geographical features, Summer Lake also has a special place in history: John C. Fremont, one of Lincoln's major generals early in the Civil War, came across the cliffs above Summer Lake in the winter of 1843 and gave it its name. "It was a cold, clear day and he was standing in deep snow up on that rim," Froust said, recalling the area's history. "He looked down and saw a sunlit valley with a smooth lake and no snow. It looked like summer to him so he called it 'Summer Lake.'"

Creating Summer Lake Wildlife Area

Over the course of several decades, multiple elements came together to create the wildlife area at Summer Lake. The first of those elements was put into place with the passing of the Federal Aid to Wildlife Restoration Act of 1937.

Also known as the Pittman-Robertson Act, this act was crucial to the creation of the Summer Lake Wildlife Area in 1944. "Without money from Pittman-Robertson, the land never would have been acquired," said Dan Edwards, wildlife branch chief for the WSFR program in the Service's Pacific Region. "The state would have had a hard time getting the space."

"Originally, the wildlife area included only about 2,500 acres of wetlands north of Summer Lake," said St. Louis. "Even though it wasn't a huge space, the Summer Lake wetlands were an important stopover for migratory waterfowl and shorebirds traveling along the Pacific Flyway."

With the first acquisition complete, the next element for success was growth. Over the years, the area has expanded as additional land was acquired by purchase, inter-governmental agreement and private easements. The last two large purchases were in 1963, when the refuge purchased the 2,545-acre Williams Ranch expanding the north and east boundaries of the wildlife area, and 1971, when the 1,404-acre River Ranch tract was acquired.

Today, the wildlife area extends over 18,941 acres of Oregon's high desert range land, meadows, wetlands and marshes. The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife owns 12,818 acres of the area's land and 5,124 acres are owned by the Bureau of Land Management and other agencies. The entire wildlife area is managed the state fish and wildlife agency. An additional 999 acres of private land are covered by easement agreements.

Maintaining SLWA for wildlife and wildlife lovers

The Pittman-Robertson Act authorizes the Service to cooperate with the states to fund wildlife restoration projects. "Each state determines which projects are eligible," said Edwards. "These projects may include restoration, conservation, management and enhancement of wildlife and their habitats for the enjoyment of the public."

During the past five years, funding for the operation and maintenance of the Summer Lake Wildlife Area has averaged approximately \$250,000 annually.

This funding is the final element to the success of the Summer Lake Wildlife Area. All developmental, management and maintenance projects accomplished at the wildlife area have been a result of funding through WSFR.

"Everything that has been done at Summer Lake Wildlife Area and probably everything that will be done at Summer Lake Wildlife Area is the result of this funding," said St. Louis. "The Pittman-Robertson fund will continue to support all wetland restoration, management and enhancement and maintenance activities to ensure that this place continues to be a success."

The success of Summer Lake Wildlife Area can be measured in many ways: From the increased number of waterfowl nesting each year to the thousands of acres acquired for recreation, the impact of this area has been far-reaching.

Yet not all successes are quantifiable. "We go there to feel refreshed, have more energy, and to take a break from the hustle and bustle of the lodge," Foust said. "It is so quiet you can actually hear the beating of bird wings above you." □

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