

# AMERICA THE BEAUTIFUL

## National Wildlife Refuges: Where Wildlife Comes First

(NAPSA)—Nowhere is America's love affair with wildlife more apparent than on the nearly 540 units of the National Wildlife Refuge System. In the 99 years since the first refuge was established the system has evolved into a 95-million acre network of lands and waters protecting many of America's—and the world's—unique natural areas as habitat for an amazing variety of wildlife.

As the refuge system prepares to celebrate its centennial anniversary on March 14, 2003, refuges from Maine to Hawaii and Alaska to the Caribbean are gearing up—hosting special events, partnering with conservation organizations and private corporations, bolstering volunteerism and reinforcing public support for their wildlife conservation mission.

“America's national wildlife refuges are great places to reconnect with nature, escape from our everyday surroundings and enjoy outdoor activities such as hunting, fishing and wildlife watching,” says Steve Williams, Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which administers the refuge system.

The National Wildlife Refuge System story began in 1903 when President Theodore Roosevelt learned that brown pelicans and white egrets living on tiny Pelican Island on Florida's east coast were being slaughtered for their feathers. Taking action to protect the birds and their habitat, Roosevelt issued an executive order establishing Pelican Island as the first national wildlife refuge; Roosevelt went on to create 51 more refuges during his presidency.

National wildlife refuges form a series of stepping stones for



**America's wildlife refuge system has helped many species to survive and thrive.**

ducks, geese, caribou and thousands of other birds, mammals, fish, reptiles and plant species. Many national wildlife refuges were established along the four migratory bird flyways to provide crucial stopovers for birds to rest, feed, breed and recharge during their long migrations.

More than 400 national wildlife refuges are open to the public, offering a variety of outdoor activities—including fishing, hunting, environmental education, wildlife observation and photography—and making them special places for Americans to discover the wonders of nature. Many refuges offer additional opportunities for nature hikes, bird tours, wildlife drives and other activities. There are refuges within an hour's drive of most major cities.

For more information and a map of the refuge system, call 1-800-344-WILD.