

Public Use on Rockefeller Wildlife Refuge (RWR)

Public Access

Public vehicle access on RWR is limited to six miles of interior roads. These provide dry land access for recreational fishing, with the most popular area being Price Lake Road, located along the western boundary of RWR. Public usage along the refuge is measured with car counting devices. These counters are located at the entrance of the three highest public use areas (Price Lake Road, Joseph Harbor boat launch, East End Locks boat launch) and the number of vehicles using these points is recorded. Those numbers are then used to calculate the number of man-hours spent on the refuge and consumptive use percentages by the public. It is estimated that the refuge receives on average 100,000 – 150,000 annual visitors.

In order to access the majority of the refuge, there are three boat ramps that are open to public use. Two of these ramps are state owned, maintained by RWR staff, and are free to the public. These ramps, located by Joseph Harbor Canal just off Hwy 82 in Cameron Parish, are very heavily used and received significant damage from Hurricanes Rita and Ike. The launch located by the East End Locks launch was repaired following Ike, while the Joseph Harbor launch improvements have been planned and will soon be initiated. The third ramp, Rollover Bayou Landing, is a private, fee-based launch near Pecan Island, Louisiana (Vermilion Parish), which is located along the eastern most boundary of the refuge.

Approximately 106 miles of canals are available to the public for recreational fishing during the spring, summer, and fall. Around 40% of these canals contain fresh to periodically brackish waters. During the winter months many of these fishing canals are closed, as sections of the refuge are closed to limit disturbance to wintering waterfowl. Around 40 miles of canal remain open year round.

Hunting, Trapping, and Fishing

Recreational opportunities are one of the largest attractions on the refuge. The majority of public use involves some type of consumptive activity. Generally consumptive use peaks in the summer and again in the fall with migrations of shrimp. Recreational use then diminishes during the winter when the interior portions of the refuge are closed.

Fishing is the most popular public recreational activity on the refuge. There are opportunities available for both freshwater and saltwater/brackish fishing. Freshwater fishing areas, mostly located around and connected to the Superior Canal system, are enhanced each year with supplemental stockings of Florida strain largemouth bass. These bass are delivered to the refuge from LDWF's Booker Fowler Fish Hatchery, then grown out in earthen ponds from the larval stage to the Phase I fingerling stage before stocking.

Saltwater/brackish fishing is more popular on the refuge relative to freshwater fishing. Saltwater/brackish fishing can be divided into two categories: finfish and shellfish. Finfish angling is done year round in efforts to catch species such as red drum, spotted sea trout, and southern flounder, while shellfish include crabs and shrimp. The majority of consumptive use is attributable to sport crabbing, shrimping, and fishing. Oystering has been closed for several years across the refuge due to a contamination concern issued by the Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals, but crabbing and shrimping still remain very popular. Annual production of blue crabs and white/brown shrimp seems to drive the annual recreational use on RWR today, with more than 75% of the recreational activities being attributed to the harvest of these organisms. The only specific management techniques done for any of these species are the opening of water control structures during the spring to allow adequate numbers of postlarval shrimp, fish, and crabs to enter the units during times of peak abundance in tidal canals. No commercial take of any species is allowed across the refuge, which includes banning the use of crab traps, nets, or trawls.

One consumptive activity not conducted on the refuge is hunting. Hunting is not allowed due to the game preserve status given to RWR in the original deed of donation, but some regulated trapping is allowed for furbearers and alligators. The furbearer harvest is targeted at nutria and muskrat, which could potentially damage the marsh if their populations are not controlled. Additionally, alligators are harvested annually from the refuge in locations that are considered high public use areas, in order to reduce human conflict with nuisance alligators.

Other Compatible Uses

Rockefeller Refuge also provides other opportunities besides consumptive practices. Some of the non-consumptive uses include bird watching, wildlife viewing, and observing chenier habitat, as well as fresh, brackish, intermediate, and saline marsh habitats. The Price Lake observation tower provides ideal opportunities to view many species of marsh, wading, and shorebirds. Neo-tropical migrant passerines use the shrubs/trees on levees and the chenier ridge habitat as stopover sites on their trans-gulf journeys to and from Central and South America; these areas provide exceptional neo-tropical songbird observation during their yearly spring migrations. The diversity of avian species using the refuge is remarkable and it is recorded that over 250 species of birds have occurred on the refuge (Appendix 2). Levee roads across the refuge provide excellent viewing of wildlife including alligators, mink, muskrat, otter, raccoon, and the occasional deer or bobcat. RWR also permits access to bird watchers to the Evariste Nunez Woods and Bird Sanctuary, which is located approximately 1.1 mile west of RWR Headquarters; this private property is a quality example of intact chenier habitat with vegetation including live oak, hackberry, American elm, palmetto, and deciduous holly.

Non-compatible Uses

Along with hunting and commercial fishing, RWR considers other activities to be not compatible with the goals/mission of the refuge. Non-compatible uses include overnight camping, horseback riding, ATV riding, geocaching, commercial guiding/tours, swimming, and canoeing/kayaking on the refuge. The latter two are primarily for safety reasons due to the abundance of alligators and the potential for negative interactions with large alligators.