

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

# Benton Lake

*National Wildlife  
Refuge and Wetland  
Management District*



## Benton Lake National Wildlife Refuge

*A Paradise for Water Birds*



*This blue goose, designed by J.N. "Ding" Darling, has become the symbol of the National Wildlife Refuge System.*



USFWS

*Native shortgrass prairie dominates the landscape around Benton Lake.*

The gently rolling terrain of Benton Lake National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) is dominated by native shortgrass prairie and surrounded by mountain ranges on three sides: the Highwood Mountains to the east, the Big Belt Mountains to the south, and the Rocky Mountains to the west. These ranges form a dramatic backdrop to a scene reminiscent of the days when the entire prairie-wetland ecosystem of the Great Plains was alive with thousands of ducks, geese, swans, and shorebirds each spring and fall. Benton Lake NWR is one of more than 520 national wildlife refuges administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service that were

established to protect, enhance, and restore the Nation's wildlife heritage. Covering 12,383 acres (19 square miles), the Refuge is located on the western edge of the northern Great Plains, 50 miles east of the Rocky Mountains and 12 miles north of Great Falls, Montana. Despite its name, Benton Lake is actually a 5,000-acre shallow wetland created by the last continental glacier thousands of years ago.

*Wildlife Heritage Preserved*

During Montana's early development, Benton Lake was first viewed as a resource to be exploited. In 1885, the government excluded the Benton Lake basin from homesteading so it could be used as a reservoir for irrigating lands to the east. That plan proved to be impractical. Early in the 20th century, several Montana businessmen planned to "reclaim" the wetlands for use as croplands. A ditch 26 feet deep and 1½ miles long was dug, but the drainage was ineffective and the project was abandoned. This early drainage ditch is still visible from the blacktop road leading to the Refuge.

As the surrounding land was settled, local sportsmen pushed for the establishment of a refuge to keep the area in public ownership. By Executive Order of President Herbert Hoover in 1929, Benton Lake was set aside as a "refuge and breeding ground for birds." However, the Refuge remained dry more often than not until 1957, when members of the Cascade County Wildlife Association secured Congressional funding to transform the marsh into a more consistently wet environment. Over the next 4 years, a pump house and pipeline were built to bring water to the Refuge from Muddy Creek. In addition, dikes were built to divide the wetland into manageable units, and Refuge roads and facilities were constructed.

*Modern Day Management*

Water still flows from the original pump station on Muddy Creek, but the Refuge wetlands have been further divided for more efficient water management. An interior pump system allows movement of water from one Refuge unit to another as needed, and is especially useful in the event of a waterfowl disease outbreak. Water is kept fairly shallow to produce an optimum mix of aquatic plants and insects for wildlife.



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*Black-crowned night heron*

*A Diversity of Wildlife*

Several thousand acres of native prairie on the Refuge are protected from disturbance, while former farm fields have been seeded to a mixture of grasses and forbs preferred by ground nesting birds and other wildlife. The farm fields are rejuvenated every 10 years or so by haying, burning, grazing, or even farming and reseeded to keep plant growth tall and dense.

Benton Lake NWR is truly an oasis for water birds. During spring and fall migrations, up to 150,000 ducks, 2,500 Canada geese, 40,000 snow geese, 5,000 tundra swans, and perhaps as many as 50,000 shorebirds use the marsh. Bald eagles are commonly seen in spring and fall, while an occasional golden eagle, prairie falcon, or peregrine falcon adds a bit of drama to the scene.



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*Ruddy duck hen with brood*

During the summer breeding season, the marsh teems with life. On average, 20,000 ducks are produced yearly, while colonies of Franklin's gulls may contain more than 10,000 nests. Avocets, phalaropes, willets, grebes, and other water birds seem to be everywhere. Of the approximately 240 species of birds recorded on the Refuge, nearly 90 are known to nest here.

Other Refuge wildlife includes 28 different species of mammals such as mountain cottontail, common muskrat, American badger, striped skunk, common raccoon, long-tailed weasel, Richardson's ground squirrel,



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*Mountain cottontail*

*Visitors are Welcome*



© Alan G. Nelson

*Sharp-tailed grouse*

coyote, and a limited number of white-tailed deer, mule deer, and pronghorn. Few reptile and amphibian species are found on the Refuge, and there are no sizeable fish due to the shallowness of the marsh.

Refuges are for people too. Visitors are welcome year-round, although access may be limited by winter snows or by special area closures during the nesting season. Recreation is geared toward wildlife-oriented activities such as wildlife observation, photography, and limited hunting for waterfowl and upland game birds. Visitors are encouraged to follow the Prairie Marsh Wildlife Drive to see and learn about the Refuge. Before you go on the drive, be sure to pick up an interpretive leaflet at the information kiosk or the Refuge headquarters. This leaflet will provide more information about what you will see. Facilities available for visitor use include a marsh boardwalk, a sharp-tailed grouse viewing blind, and an accessible hunting blind.



Steve Martin, USFWS

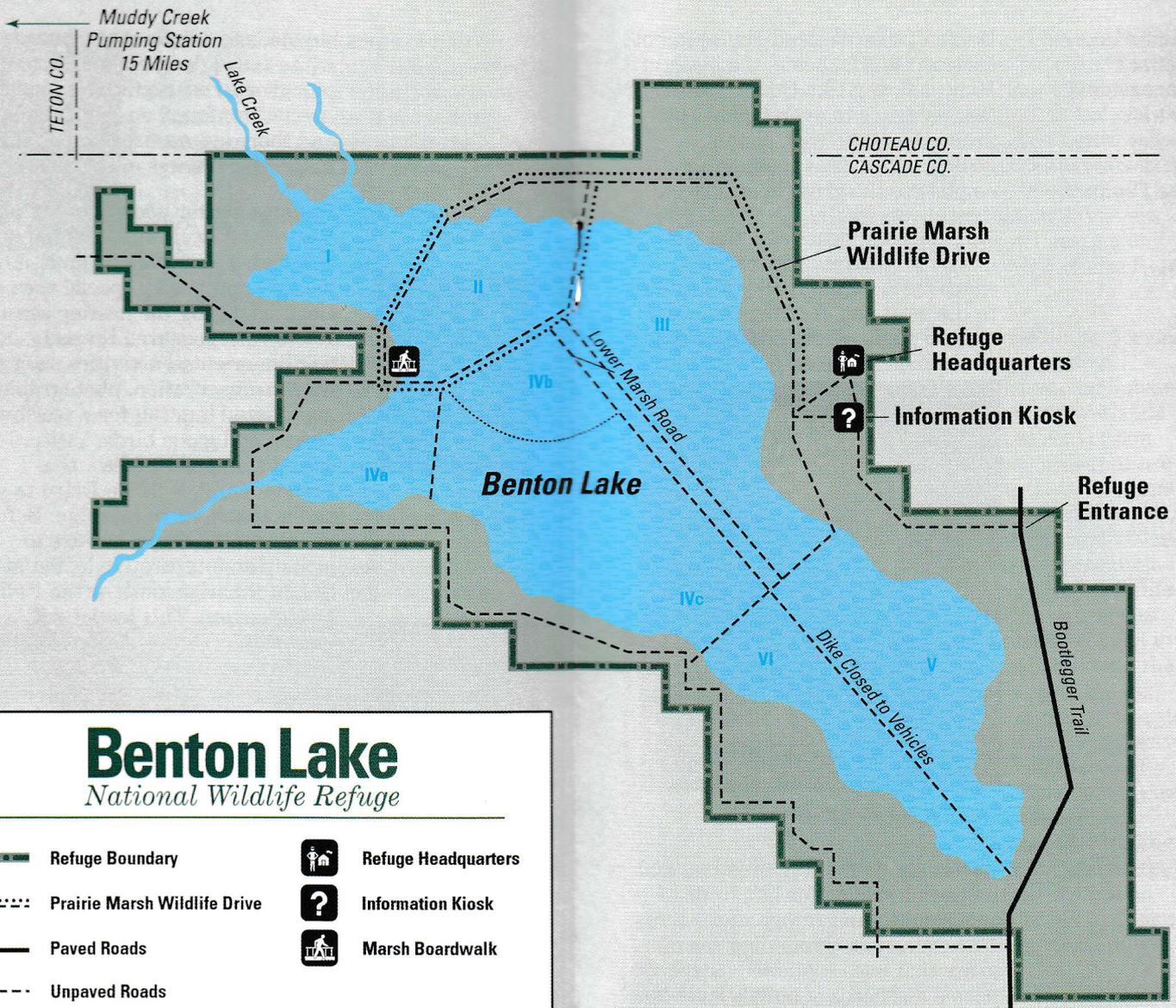
*Marsh boardwalk*

Special leaflets, which may be found at the information kiosk along the entrance road or at the Refuge headquarters, offer more detail on refuge wildlife, refuge management, and specific recreational and educational opportunities.

The Refuge headquarters is open Monday through Friday from 7:30 am to 4:00 pm. Visitors are welcome to stop in for additional information. Refuge employees can offer valuable information for making your visit more enjoyable.

*How To Get There*

To get to the Refuge, follow Highway 87 (Havre Highway) north out of Great Falls for about a mile and turn left onto Bootlegger Trail, which leads to the well-marked Refuge entrance.

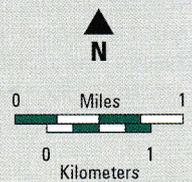
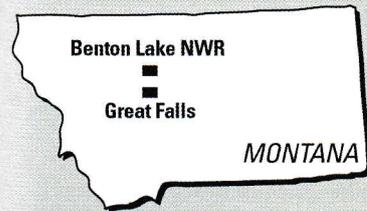


# Benton Lake

National Wildlife Refuge

- |  |  |
|--|--|
|  Refuge Boundary              |  Refuge Headquarters |
|  Prairie Marsh Wildlife Drive |  Information Kiosk  |
|  Paved Roads                  |  Marsh Boardwalk    |
|  Unpaved Roads                |  |
|  Trail                        |  |

Equal opportunity to participate in and benefit from programs and activities of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is available to all individuals regardless of physical or mental ability. For visitors using TTY, use the Montana Relay Service at 1 800 / 253 4091 TTY or 1 800 / 253 4093 Voice. For more information or to address accessibility needs, please contact the Refuge staff at 406 / 727 7400 or the U.S. Department of the Interior, Office of Equal Opportunity, 1849 C Street, NW, Washington, D.C. 20240.



## Benton Lake Wetland Management District

*Land Where the Sky Begins*

Benton Lake Wetland Management District (WMD) lies in the heart of Montana's Big Sky Country. Here, the sky tends to overshadow the prairie beneath, with distant geological features seeming to emphasize the great open spaces.

Ten thousand years ago, the last glacier worked its will, carving sharp faces on the Rocky Mountains to the west and creating thousands of small wetlands or "prairie potholes" on the land to the east. These prairie



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*Canada geese in flight*

jewels are part of the breeding and migration lifeline for hundreds of thousands of migratory water birds. However, the surrounding sea of grass that once sustained native people and herds of buffalo has been replaced, for the most part, with a sea of wheat.

Benton Lake WMD was established in 1975 in this setting of open space, wetlands, and scattered mountain ranges. The District covers 25,000 square miles, includes 10 counties, and is the largest wetland management district in the country. The mission of this Wetland Management District is to protect wetlands and surrounding grasslands for the benefit of waterfowl and other wildlife.

## *Saving a National Treasure*

Since 1975, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has either purchased or received as donations 22 wetland areas within the Benton Lake WMD. These acquired lands, called Waterfowl Production Areas (WPA), total more than 16,000 acres. These Waterfowl Production Areas are important waterfowl nesting and feeding areas, varying in size from 80 to 3,700 acres.



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*Northern pintail*

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service also purchases conservation easements from private landowners to permanently protect wetlands and grasslands from conversion to cropland or other uses that are harmful to wildlife. This easement program may also include provisions to prevent residential subdivision and commercial development on lands that have very high wildlife values. Conservation easements ensure that these lands remain in private ownership, protecting the habitat and rural way of life for both wildlife and human occupants of the land. More than 10,000 acres of wetlands and 41,000 acres of grassland in the Wetland Management District are safeguarded by conservation easements. Funding for these preservation efforts comes mainly from the sale of Federal Duck Stamps, purchased by hunters, collectors, and the general public.

## *Waterfowl and More*



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*Black-necked stilt*

Although the Wetland Management District's main mission is conservation of habitat for waterfowl, Waterfowl Production Areas offer surprising wildlife diversity. On the Blackfoot WPA, sandhill cranes nest, bald eagles roost, beavers thrive, and elk winter. Mountain lions, grizzly bears, and perhaps gray wolves wander through Jarina WPA, and numerous raptors nest in the rock outcrops of Kingsbury Lake WPA.

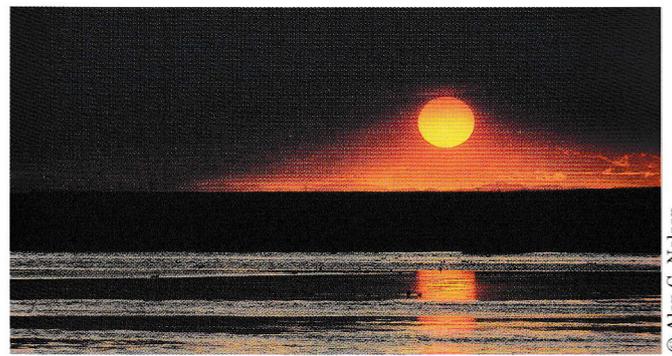
*Habitat  
Management*

More than 7,300 acres of native prairie have been protected on Waterfowl Production Areas in the Wetland Management District. An additional 3,000 acres of former cropland have been converted to native grassland or dense nesting cover, a mix of tall-growing grasses and legumes attractive to ground nesting birds. Wetlands are restored or enhanced by plugging drains or diverting water to replenish or sustain them. Management practices include periodic burning, haying, and occasionally cattle grazing. These practices maintain quality habitat for the benefit of waterfowl and other wildlife.



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*Yellow-headed  
blackbird*



© Alan G. Nelson

*Sunset over  
Benton Lake*

*Wetland Values*

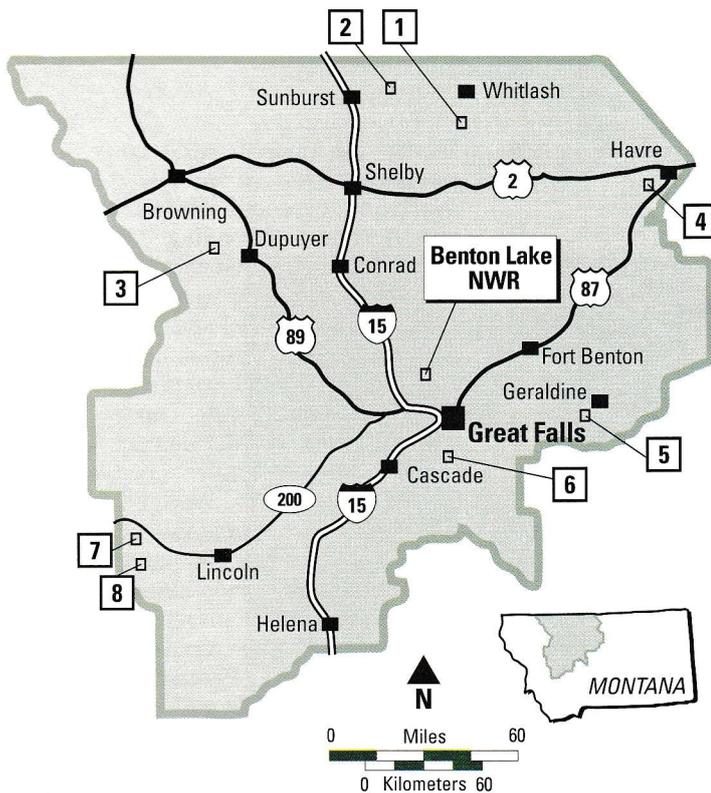
Prairie wetlands provide many benefits to wildlife and people. Wetlands store and slow spring runoff, reducing flooding. They also purify water by absorbing excess nutrients, reducing sediments, and processing chemical and organic wastes. Wetlands replenish ground water supplies and are an important link in the water cycle. During drought years, wetlands may provide the only water source for livestock and crops. Wetlands are a vital part of our vanishing natural heritage. More than 56 percent of the Nation's wetlands have been lost by draining or filling to make way for agriculture, transportation, and development. Protection of our remaining wetlands will ultimately benefit everyone.

*Visitor  
Opportunities*

Waterfowl Production Areas are *your* public lands. You are invited to visit and learn what they have to offer for both your recreation and your spirit. All WPAs are open to wildlife observation and photography, and all but Sands and H<sub>2</sub>-O WPAs are open to hunting, trapping, and fishing in accordance with Montana law. To protect these areas from damage, only foot travel is allowed, and no camping, overnight parking, or fires are permitted. Some Waterfowl Production Areas may be closed during spring and summer to protect nesting birds.

*Locations of Waterfowl Production Areas*

The map below shows the general locations of several Waterfowl Production Areas in the Benton Lake Waterfowl Management District. With a good State highway map and the directions below you should be able to readily locate these wetland areas. Boundaries of each unit are marked with green and white Waterfowl Production Area signs.



**1. Furnell WPA**

Located 1 1/2 miles west and 2 miles south of Whitlash, this Waterfowl Production Area contains 1,995 acres of native prairie and wetlands in the scenic Sweetgrass Hills.

**2. Toole County WPAs**

These seven Waterfowl Production Areas are located in a north-south line about 4 miles east of Sunburst on I-15. They range in size from 80 to 645 acres. The wetlands on these units are often dry.

**3. Jarina WPA**

Travel 1/2 mile north of Dupuyer on Highway 89, turn left toward Swift Dam, and then drive 14 miles west. A spectacular view of the Rocky Mountains awaits. This Waterfowl Production Area covers 640 acres.

**4. Sands WPA**

This 379-acre Waterfowl Production Area is located 1 mile south of the junction of Highways 87 and 2 near Havre. This area is closed to hunting and trapping.

**5. Kingsbury Lake WPA**

To reach this 3,733-acre Waterfowl Production Area, drive 1/2 mile west of Geraldine, then 4 miles south-southwest. Look for scenic rock outcrops at the base of the Highwood Mountains. Raptors like this area.

**6. Schrammeck Lake WPA**

To visit this 420-acre Waterfowl Production Area, go 8 miles east of Cascade on Highway 330, then 1 mile north on a gravel trail. In the spring, sandhill cranes are often present on this beautiful prairie wetland with the Big Belt Mountains in the background.

**7. Blackfoot WPA**

More than 100 acres of spring-fed wetlands have been restored by Ducks Unlimited on this 1,525-acre Waterfowl Production Area located 17 miles west of Lincoln on Highway 200. The wetland, river, and mountain forest habitats attract deer year-round and elk in winter. Sandhill cranes and bald eagles are commonly seen. A scenic overlook with interpretive signs is located here.

**8. H<sub>2</sub>O WPA**

This Waterfowl Production Area, located 3 miles northwest of Helmville, contains 1,803 acres of native prairie and restored wetlands. Deer and elk are common here; sandhill cranes, waterfowl, and shorebirds may also be seen. This area is closed to hunting and trapping.

Locations of other Waterfowl Production Areas can be obtained by contacting the Refuge headquarters staff (see the back page of this brochure for contact information).