NARRATIVE REPORT

UPPER MISSISSIPPI RIVER NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

WINONA, MINNESOTA

JULY 1, 1973-JUNE 31, 1974

United States Department of the Interior

Fish and Wildlife Service

Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife

REFUGE PERSONNEL

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Donald G. Young
(trnsf. 4/15/74)
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(e.o.d. 6/9/74)
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DISTRICT MANAGERS

Jerry F. Leinecke	Refuge	Manager		Winona Distr	ciat
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Kenneth O, Butts (e.o.d. 7/7/74)		Manager M mager		"	**
Peter T. Smith		Manager	(Asst.)	11	13
Douglas M. Mullen		Manager		Lansing	**
Robert E. Wilson	Refuge	Manager		Guttenberg	88
William H. Hutchsinson	Refuge	Manager		Cassville	01
Jay R. Bellinger (trnsf. 5/12/74)	Refuge	Manager		Savanna	19
Thomas D. Atkins (e.o.d. 6/9/74)	Refuge	Manager		Savanna	10
Steven W. Breeser	Refuge	Manager	(Asst.)	58	81



Front row, 1 to r: Atkins, Willett, Breeser, Volk, Pospichal, and Cornelius; Back row: Gueswel, Wilson, Butts, Mullen, Joswick, Smith Bill Green and Dunc Green.

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A. Weather Conditions

Temperatures during the year remained near normal, except that the first frost in the Lansing district was a month later than usual—this came in early November. Although no major flooding occurred, water levels were above normal for much of the year. This created problems of nest destruction for waterfowl and stress on those furbearers associated with an aquatic environment. Heavy precipitation in May and June brought the highest river crests of the year in some areas, especially the Savanna district. Rainfall was 5" above normal in the La Crosse district in August.

B. Habitat Conditions

- 1. Water Several violent storms created havoc with wildlife as well as habitat. On October 3, 1973 a storm struck Pool 9 of the Lansing district, with high winds and hail. Hundreds of trees were uprooted, and marsh vegetation was flattened. Hunters reported finding injured or dead waterfowl for some time thereafter. It is estimated that 1,000 ducks were casualties of that storm. Violent storms on June 10 and June 21 left heavy damage in the Winona district, including considerable nest mortality in heron-egret rookeries. A June 20 storm in the Guttenberg district carried winds of 60-85 miles per hour. Local marinas were especially hard-hit-one suffered \$100,000 in damages (est.).
- 2. Food and Cover Good to excellent aquatic growth provided adequate food for resident and migratory waterfowl using the refuge. A heavy wild rice crop in the Bagley Bottoms of the Cassville district provided both food and cover. Chufa, smartweed and millet on the mud flats also produced good wildlife food. Grain sorghum and corn in the Cassville area augmented wild food supplies, but high water at Savanna flooded cultivated crops already in and prevented planting others.

II. WILDLIFE

A. Migratory Birds

1. Waterfowl

Ducks - Wood ducks continued as the predominant summer resident species on the refuge. In the Winona district this totaled half the birds present. Mallards were second in abundance. Production was excellent, with substantial increases in wood duck broods in most districts. Lansing showed a slight decline. Bluewinged teal and hooded mergansers also produced young in most areas.

By early October, all common duck species were present on the upper portion of the refuge. The bulk of birds present were dabblers, with mallards most common. Major movements of divers occurred in mid-month, with considerable increases in canvasback numbers. Main canvasback concentration areas were in the Whitman area of Pool 5, with 10,000 birds, and the Lake Onalaska and Wisconsin Island areas of Pools 7 and 8, with over 100,000 birds. This was a 635% increase over the past seven years. Trapping and marking projects were continued in the La Crosse district by the Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Station. The principal diver species on the refuge by number was lesser scaup. The peak was reached in early November. The lower portion of the refuge showed scaup to make up 25-57% of the fall duck use. By the first week of December, most waterfowl had departed.

Spring migration peaks occurred from the third week of March in the lower portion of the refuge to mid-April in the Winona district. All showed higher peaks than the previous year, except Cassville--about the same--and Lansing, which showed a 33% decline.

Overall, the Winona district showed a 33% increase in duck use for the fall period and 190% for the spring. La Crosse indicated a similar fall increase, and a spring peak up by 30,000 birds. Lansing showed decreased use for both fall and spring. The fall peak in the Guttenberg district was down by 83%, but the spring peak was up and total use up over 200,000 days. The fall peak at the adjoining Cassville district was also down, and the spring migration about the same as the previous year. In the Savanna district, all species increased, due to excellent fall habitat conditions, by 38%. Spring use was also up. This district showed an increase in total days use by 107%. Overall, the duck use for the refuge increased over the previous year.

Geese - Use of the Upper Mississippi Refuge by geese was spotty. Canada geese were the most common, with a fall peak during the period at 4,430 and the spring high of 13,465. The heaviest fall use was in the La Crosse district with a peak of 2,250. The Savanna area had about half that number. Spring concentrations

were 6,000 or above in both the Winona and Savanna districts. This was a 30% increase in the upper area, but no change at Spring Lake where the peak was a week earlier than a year ago.

Young Canadas were produced in the La Crosse district, where 100 semi-domesticated adults at the Goose Island project raised 30 young. This was a drop. At Savanna, 50 were produced, compared to 80 the previous year. Heavy hunting mortality is considered to be a limiting factor on flock growth.

White-fronted geese were noted only in the Weaver area, where 25 were observed.

Three barnacled geese were reported at Weaver on April 3.

The fall peak of blue and snow geese was 2,110. Only 150 used the refuge at one time during the spring migration.

Swans - The primary concentration area for whistling swans on the refuge is the Weaver Bottoms. The peak during this period was 2,550 compared to 7,770 the previous fall. First fall migrants were noted October 13. Spring arrivals were first seen the first week of March. The high was 10,000 birds. The year before, the peak was 375. Ice conditions have considerable bearing on available habitat when swans are passing through, thus accounting for much of the fluctuation. The fall peak for the refuge was 3,230, and the spring peak was 10,609.

Coots, Rails and Gallinules - Coots find several areas of the refuge attractive. The fall peak in the Winona district rose from 30,000 to 50,000 birds over the previous fall. The spring peak was up to 24,000 from 10,000 in 1973. La Crosse showed fall and spring highs of 22,800 and 22,400; Lansing 40,000 and 9,000; Guttenberg 27,000 and 13,000; Cassville 1,800 and 8,500 and Savanna 13,700 and 6,215. These were increases in nearly all areas. Production for the refuge was over 1,000 coots.

Common gallinules were summer residents in small numbers on the Winona, La Crosse and Lansing districts.

Lansing showed double last year's migration peaks, with 500 fall and 150 spring users.

Soras were common summer residents. There were 1,000 breeding birds estimated on the Winona district.

La Crosse estimated 3,000 birds on October 16. Savanna had 450 on May 11. Virginia rails nest on the refuge, as evidenced by a female with three young observed July 20 in the La Crosse district.

2. Other Water Birds

Egrets - Great egrets nest in the same rookeries as the great blue herons in all districts except Cassville and Guttenberg. The high for the year was 3,505 and 1,110 young were produced.

Cattle egrets were seen in the Winona, La Crosse and Lansing districts.

Herons and Bitterns - Great blue herons are common throughout the refuge, with rookeries scattered through the districts. Peak populations showed a total of 7,630 adult birds and a total production figure of 4,146. Black-crowned and yellow-crowned night herons inhabited the refuge, with a small colony of yellow-crowns on Shore Acres of the La Crosse district.

American and least bitterns were found throughout the refuge but most commonly noted in the upper units.

Grebes - using the area include the most common, pied-billed grebe, and lesser numbers of horned and eared grebes.

Cormorants - double-crested cormorants were noted through the summer months, but the only known nesting colony was one in Pool 13 containing 13 nests and producing 25 young. This is the last known colony in Illinois and is limited to two dead trees. The fall migration peak in that unit was up slightly to 860 birds.

Gulls and Terns - Herring and ring-billed gulls were common on the refuge. Bonaparte's gulls were spring and fall migrants.

Common terns, black, Forster's and Caspian terns all used the area. The first two were quite common.

Pelicans and others - two white pelicans were noted at Weaver in late September. One was present in the Savanna area during that same period.

Three jaegers were seen September 11 in the La Crosse district. The species was not identified.

3. Shorebirds

Habitat for shorebirds was in short supply in the areas with high water levels. Those species using the refuge included killdeer, common snipe, greater and lesser yellowlegs, spotted, least and semipalmated sandpiper, willet, sanderling and woodcock.

B. Upland Game Birds

Ruffed grouse are the most common upland game birds and are native to the area. Wild turkeys have been stocked by the states of Minnesota and Iowa in recent years and seem to be taking hold. Flocks have been seen in the Winona and Lansing districts. Ten were also seen in the Savanna district during the summer.

Bobwhite quail are limited in numbers by severe winters in the northern districts but were noted at La Crosse.

Ring-necked pheasants were found in limited numbers, mostly pen-reared birds.

Gray partridge were reported on the Savanna district.

C. Big Game

White-tailed deer are the only big game animals found on the refuge and are quite common throughout its length. Population estimates are greatest for the Winona district, which includes the Trempealeau Refuge. There is a regular movement of deer between the river bottoms and adjoining bluffs, depending considerably on food availability and river elevations.

D. Fur Animals, Predators, Rodents and Other Mammals

Spring mortality of river-bottom furbearers was light, since there was no major flood problem.

Muskrats were reported down in some districts, up in one and holding their own in another. Over-all, in spite of heavy trapping pressure, muskrats were in abundant supply. They provided most of the catch for refuge trappers. Fall estimates ran as high as 65,000 in the La Crosse district alone. Beaver also prospered along the river, except for the Cassville district where little sign was apparent.

Mink were present in moderate numbers, with little change from previous recent populations. Otter used the upper units in small numbers. Red fox have been down for several years due to mange outbreaks but appear to be coming back. Grey fox use the lower units of the refuge, being most common in the Savanna district. Raccoon were common in all units. The least weasel was seen on May 22, the first observation since 1941 on the La Crosse unit. The short-tailed weasel, listed as hypothetical, was noted on the refuge near Alma, Wisconsin. Striped skunks were very common and pose a rabies threat in some areas. Opossum were noted in all districts. Cottontail rabbits, badgers, woodchucks and grey and fox squirrels were other species present.

E. Hawks, Eagles, Owls & Crows

The only year-round hawks noted on the refuge were redtail, marsh hawks and American kestrel. Sharp-shinned
hawks were less common. Rough-legs, broad-wings, and
red-shouldered hawks peaked in the northern part of the
refuge in late September. Cooper's hawks were noted at
Savanna where a peregrine was seen on November 15. A
spectacular sight in that district was a flock of 700
broadwings on September 16. A goshawk was seen
November 18, also at Savanna. Turkey vultures were
fairly common along the river throughout the refuge.
They nest along the bluffs. Ospreys were summer residents
in the upper portion of the rfuge and migrant throughout
all units. One was found shot dead in the Guttenberg
district on April 18.

Bald eagles were common for much of the year. Many winter on the refuge. The accumulated peak for all districts was 522. The highest single count in the Savanna district was an aerial check on January 7 showing 205 bald eagles on the unit. The nest in the Reno Bottoms again produced two young, for a total of eight eaglets since the nest was built in 1969. None of the young have nested in the vicinity. In the La Crosse district a wounded bird was found shot on April 7, and a dead one on April 8 (caught in trap, drowned and discarded). Golden eagles also used the refuge. There was an unconfirmed report of nesting golden eagles below Minnesota City.

A snowy owl was seen at La Crosse on December 31 and one in the Winona district in January. Other more common owls noted were barred, great-horned and screech. Saw whet, long-eared and short-eared owls were recorded in the Winona district. Short-eared owls were common at Savanna during the fall. Crows were common in all units.

F. Other Birds

Mourning doves were seen year-round. The Winona district estimated 400 produced; Savanna showed an apparent decrease in migrants in recent years but still showed a peak of 1,500 on September 8. A blizzard on April 8 and 9 killed a large number of robins in the La Crosse district. Monk parakeets were reported in that district also, but this was not confirmed.

G. Fish

Fish-both game and rough-are abundant on the refuge. Fishing is the number one activity. Sport fish include walleye, sauger, large and smallmouth bass, northern pike, crappie, sunfish, catfish, striped bass and perch. Rough fish taken by commercial means included carp, buffalo, catfish and freshwater drum. It is felt that heavy siltation in many areas is damaging the fishery resource. In the Savanna district, the heavy summer flood left much of this material in favored fishing areas.

H. Reptiles and Amphibians

Massasauga rattlesnakes were still found, especially in the Nelson-Trevino area, though in decreased numbers. The state of Wisconsin is considering endangered status for this species. Meanwhile, the bounty was increased from three dollars to five dollars. Several hundred are taken by bounty hunters annually. Timber rattlers occur in the bluffs along the river, especially along the Mississippi Palisades. The western box turtle, painted turtle, Blanding's turtle, snapping turtle and soft-shelled turtle are all found on the refuge. The refuge list includes 35 species, including two salamanders, one toad, nine frogs, nine turtles, one lizzard and 13 snakes. Buffrogs are much sought after by frog hunters.

I. Disease

Mange has taken its toll of red foxes on the refuge for several years. It appears that this situation is improving. Fowl cholera was diagnosed in a whistling swan autopsied by the Wisconsin DNR in November. A goldeneye and two bufflehead ducks were found to have died of lead poisoning in the spring.

Dutch elm disease continued to spread and claimed many more trees this past year. It is not possible to take care of all diseased trees with available help. Oak wilt persists at Trempealeau.

J. Rare and Endangered Species

A single peregrine was noted on the Savanna district November 5.

III. PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT AND MAINTENANCE

A. Physical Development

Much routine maintenance work has been done in all districts. Informational displays and exhibits for visitors were set up.



Of special consequence was the construction of an auto interpretive trail at Trempealeau by the Onalaska National Guard unit.



The aquarium and other facilities at Guttenberg were prepared for transfer to the State of Iowa

B. Plantings

- 1. Aquatics and Marsh Plants A 28-acre planting of millet on mudflats at Spring Lake failed because of poor seed.
- 2. Trees and Shrubs None
- 3. Upland Herbaceous Plants = None
- 4. Cultivated Crops A total of 331 acres of cropland were under special use permit. Much of this was too wet to plant. Crops which produced a shore of wildlife food for the refuge were corn, grain shrghum and soybeans.

C. Collections and Receipts

- 1. Seed and other Propagules Corn for waterfowl banding bait was received from the state of Minnesota. Ear corn from Wisconsin was fed to deer at Trempealeau.
- 2. Specimens Four bald eagles and one osprey were picked up dead or dying in the field. In addition, redtailed hawks, great-horned owl, rose-breasted grosbeak and herring gull specimens found dead were donated to St. Mary's College in Winona.

D. Control of Vegetation

Oak wilt and black locust control work was done at Trempealeau. Some work was done by Forester Al Johnson adjacent to the City of Alma, Wisconsin. Chemical treatment was done on farm units under approved plan only.



E. Planned Burning

Some slash was burned in carrying out the wilt control program at Trempealeau, with the help of Forester Al Johnson. The prescribed burn was not carried out because of unfavorable conditions.

F. Fires

A small burn of four acres was done on the oak wilt project at Trempealeau.

IV. RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

A. Grazing

There were seven permits in effect for a total of 320.26 AUM and a total fee of \$394.66. Most of the fee went to the Army Corps of Engineers.

B. Haying - None

C. Fur Harvest

High fur prices have encouraged more trappers to try for a share of the harvest. There were 1,315 permittees who reported their catch as required. About 150,000 muskrats were taken, with average price about \$2.50. There were over 200 mink taken at about \$15.00 each. The beaver season was closed in the Wisconsin part of the refuge, but 2.459 were taken and sold at about \$13.00 each. Seventy opossum averaged \$1.00. Four red fox brought about \$28.00 each. Grey fox brought \$11. each for three. Raccoons brought \$11. each for about 800 skins. Skunks were trapped for rabies control by a hired trapper for La Crosse County, Wisconsin.

D. Timber Removal

The Winona district had one permit for 153,000 ft. of saw timber and 220 cords of mixed hardwood pulp at a fee of \$3,350. Also in effect were four firewood permits for dead and down oak wilt-killed trees at \$2.50/cord. There was one case of timber removal without proper authority at Winona. A \$1,371.05 permit for 137,105 bd. ft. of elm from the Sny Magill was not completed because of access problems.

E. Commercial Fishing

One permit for a commercial fish-holding pond brought \$100. in the Winona district. Commercial catches in that district

were 2½ million pounds, about 60% carp and most of the balance buffalo and catfish. La Crosse reported catches up to 200,000+ pounds each. Lansing showed single seine hauls netting up to 80,000 pounds of freshwater drum. Winter hauls were especially good for carp and buffalo. In the Savanna district the only permit required was on Spring Lake. That catch of 131,675 pounds consisted primarily of buffalo, carp, freshwater drum, paddlefish, gar and sucker. Paddle fish brought 15¢ and freshwater drum 8¢.

F. Other Uses

A free use permit for a permanent blind to study swans was issued to Rory Vose of St. Mary's College. A wide variety of permits were issued to cover such things as boat club operations, pheasant rearing pens, boat docks, slips, stairways, fishing float concessions, boathouse mooring, county parks, a natural gas metering station, sportsmen's clubs and waterfowl propagating area. This latter project on Goose Island of the La Crosse district represents an investment of thousands of dollars in pens, artesian well and other facilities by the club. The last release was 2,842 mallards five weeks old and 30 Canada geese. Because of the possibility of DVE, the duck release project was halted, and the club was advised to house the birds in winter and shut off the artesian well. Some breeding stock is still being kept at the site.



Some boathouses present problems in appearance.

(La Crosse district)

V. FIELD INVESTIGATION OR APPLIED RESEARCH

A. Whistling Swans

Dr. William Sladen of Johns Hopkins University continued his whistling swan study with the help of St. Mary's College personnel. Six swans were collared, and two were fitted with radios. They were tracked by airplane and ground units.

B. Wood Ducks

Wood duck banding was carried on in all districts, with the refuge quota of 1,000 ducks filled. Both bait and net traps were used. Flight counts and roost counts were used for censusing refuge wood duck populations. Nest box studies in the Savanna district showed the Pleasant Creek area the only appreciable use area. There 68 boxes were used--49% by wood ducks, 13% by hooded mergansers and 7% by unknown fucks.

C. Canvasbacks

The second year of the canvasback study by Dr. Trauger of Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Station continued. Both bait trapping and night-lighting brought limited success. Male canvasbacks were color-marked with rhodamine B (pink) for Pools 7 and 8. Total birds banded were 36 males and five females. Five canvasbacks dyed the previous winter at Chesapeake Bay were observed in the La Crosse district during March and April.



D. Doves

Dove banding was done only in the Savanna district. The quota of 100 was exceeded by 14.

E. Beaver

A summer study of beaver carrying capacity of the Goose Island area was done by a summer work-study, Steven Koester. Willow was the preferred food among 70 colonies studied. It appears that the population is decreasing, probably due to heavy trapping, since suitable habitat is available.

F. Heron Roo eries

Studies of refuge heron-egret rookeries included mapping, tagging nest trees, and inventorying by tree species and numbers of nests before and after nesting. Production was closely checked. Heavy windstorms inflicted considerable casualties on nests and young in June.

G. Dredge Spoil Revegetation

A contract by the Corps of Engineers to the University of Wisconsin, La Crosse included revegetation experiments on a spoil site using grasses and trees on a 35-acre island near Brownsville, Minnesota. Some species tested include white cedar, hybrid poplar, beach grass, garrison creeping foxtail, hard fescue, switchgrass, Wagner flat pea, perennial pea and black alder. The two-acre plot is also testing effects of slope, exposure, fert-lizers, irrigation and soil temperatures.

H. Wilderness Study

Public hearings were held on the refuge wilderness proposal. The present navigation and dredge spoil disposal are considered incompatible with the wilderness concept. Further study of alternate methods of spoil disposal must be made and the project reevaluated. The wilderness study has been "shelved" by the President pending further river study leading to a modification of the 9-foot channel maintenance program.

VI. PUBLIC RELATIONS

A. Recreational Use

Recreational use of the refuge was heavy throughout the year. Fishing was by far the number one attraction, making

up about one-half of the use in some areas. Hunting, boating, camping, picnicking, swimming, wildlife observation and wildlife-wildlands appreciation each draw many thousands of visits each year. Total estimated annual visits approach two million (1,787,378), and it is felt these estimates are conservative. In the Savanna district the estimate of 264,497 was about 10% of that made by the Corps of Engineers.

B. Refuge Visitors

Visits to the refuge included such purposes as inspections, photography for refuge leaflet and environmental education workshop. At the Guttenberg Aquarium, 15,471 visitors came from 30 states and 11 foreign countries.

C. Refuge Participation

Personnel of the refuge were involved with great number of film and slide showings, talks to schools and other groups, ecology tours, nature walks, wildlife week and 50th anniversary plans for Upper Mississippi Refuge. Radio and TV shows were presented. A mini unit was taught at the Alma High School, and a new EE program was initiated at Trempealeau.



Environmental education at Trempealeau. Learning to identify objects by senses other than sight.

Hunter safety and waterfowl identification courses were taught. The annual Sport-O-Rama at La Crosse involved much preparation of slide and movie shows, wildlife displays and other informational material, plus a weekend of attendance to questions. Total attendance was 7,627 people. Many news releases were put out, and there were rookery tours and other field trips for the public. Savanna cooperated with the Eco Center at Thomson on EE programs and with the Illinois DNR on a weekly outdoor show on Radio Station WCCI.

D. Hunting



New type of buoy used to mark open water closed area line

Statistical sampling of duck hunting was done on the Wisconsin side of the upper pools from the Nelson Dike to Dam 9. Waterfowl hunting was fairly successful, but opening day pressure was down in some favored spots due to week-day openings. The Winona district at the upper end of the refuge showed the average bag for the season to be .979 ducks per hunter day. Savanna, at the lower end, showed .79 ducks per hunter visit. The nine-day early teal season resulted in a heavy kill of wood ducks in Illinois.

Rabbit and squirrel hunting was good. Grouse hunting was spotty. Coon hunting increased in popularity due to higher pelt prices.

White-tailed deer hunting, both with gun and bow, was popular. There was considerable movement of deer from the riverbottoms to adjoining bluffs, and the actual kill on the refuge was about 112 deer.

E. Violations

Over 100 cases were made during the year for a variety of violations. Early and late shooting of waterfowl, littering, shooting protected species, carrying loaded gun in motor vehicle and various trapping violations made up the bulk of the cases. Trapping violations were especially hard to police because of the difficulty in locating the violator. Traps are often run at irregular and odd times, often ranging over a period of days.

F. Safety

Regular staff safety meetings were held with all personnel participating. All new or temporary help was indoctrinated with the safety program. There were no lost-time accidents on the refuge, and our safety record as of 12/31/74 stands at 6,245 days. A four-day safety management training course was held in Winona. The Guttenberg manager completed the Red Cross Standard Multimedia First Aid Course.

VII. ITEMS OF INTEREST

Dairyland Power Cooperative expressed an interest in acquisition of refuge lands south of their Alma plant for expansion of facilities.

The U. S. Army Corps of Engineers drafted an EIS on the 9-foot Navigation Channel after studies by consultant agencies.

La Crosse District Manager, Matthias Kerschbaum, transferred to the Benson, Minnesota Wetlands District after three years at LaCrosse. Assistant District Manager Peter Smith assumed charge pending a replacement. He underwent an emergency appendectomy during that period.

Jay Bellinger transferred from the Savanna District to Wichita Mountains on May 8, and Thomas Atkins transferred in from Agassiz on June 10 to fill that position. Steven Breeser was in charge in the interim.

Assistant Manager Donald G. Young was transferred and promoted to the position of Assistant Chief of Operations, Land Management, in the Twin Cities Regional Office in April. Carl E. Pospichal transferred into the Winona office in June.

Michael J. Willett e.o.d. November 19, 1973 as Administrative Assistant in the Winona office.

SIGNATURE PAGE

Prepared by:
Carl E. Pospichal, Assistant Refuge Manager
Date: 4/15/75
Approved, Regional Office:
Date:
(Signature)
Regional Refuge Supervisor

Submitted by:

Refuge Manager Title