



# Reelfoot NWR's Self-Guided Eagle Tour Packet

## Includes:

- Tips for successfully finding bald eagles
  - Eagle Count Spreadsheet
- Map with detailed descriptions, mileage, and website for eagle info

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## Tips for Successfully Finding Bald Eagles

- 1) When perched in trees, bald eagles look like large footballs sitting upright on branches.
- 2) When searching for eagles, it is best to scan the tree line rather than trying to look at every tree. The dark football shapes will stand out. If you see a dark round shape, it is more than likely a squirrels' nest made of leaves.
- 3) Males and females look identical. Females are slightly larger.
- 4) Juvenile bald eagles are mostly dark brown (brown feathers with mottled white spots, black beak, brown eyes) until they reach maturity at approx. 5 years old. From 5 years on, they will have a white head and tail, yellow beak and yellow eyes.
- 5) When flying, many people confuse vultures as eagles. When vultures soar, their wings will be in a "V" shape, and will rock back and forth. When bald eagles soar, their wings will be straight across and will not rock from side to side.
- 6) The call of an eagle is not what most people hear in movies and on radio stations (they typically display a red-tailed hawk call while showing a bald eagle). The peal **call** is often given in response to humans approaching the bald eagle and is a high-pitched cry that has three to five notes that **sound** like a gull followed by six or seven rapid notes. This peal is described to sound like, kwit-kwit-kwit-kwit-kee-kee-kee-ker.
- 7) Surprisingly, many eagles are found on the ground in open fields. If they are on the ground, they have typically found something to eat! Their favorite foods are fish and waterfowl, but they have been seen eating deer carcasses on the side of the road, as well as many other things.
- 8) Eagles prefer to perch on snags (standing dead trees).
- 9) If you see ducks and geese, you will probably see eagles nearby.
- 10) Don't be so busy looking far away with binoculars that you miss the ones sitting right next to the road. It's surprising with how close they will allow humans and cars to get.
- 11) Bald eagles have a wing span of approx. 6 foot, but from a distance they can be easily confused with red-tailed hawks, which is our largest hawk in TN & KY. The hawks will appear a bit smaller when perched, with a lighter breast. When flying, the red-tailed hawk will be lighter on the underside.
- 12) **Have fun!!!!**

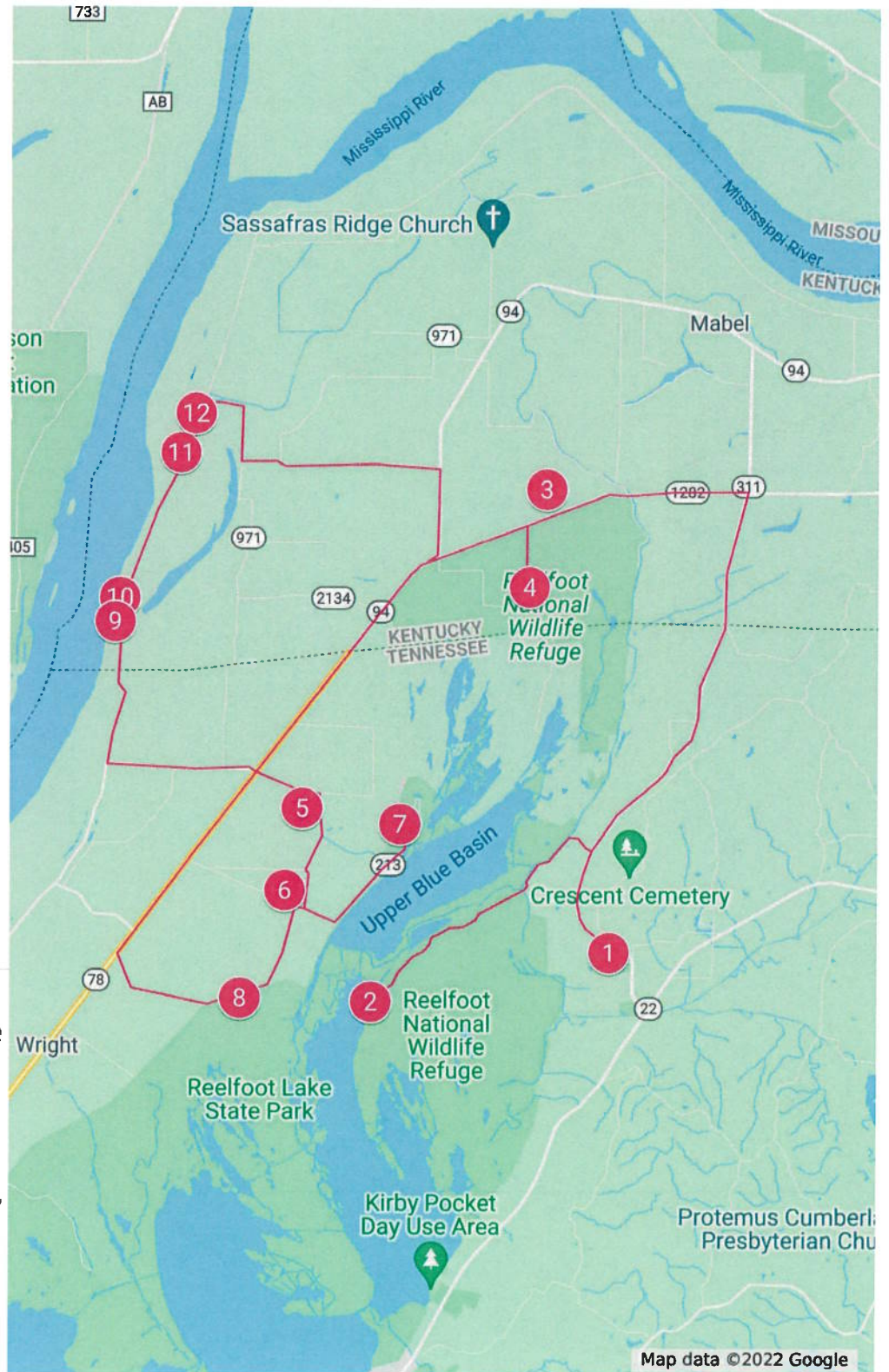


# Reelfoot NWR Self-Guided Eagle Tour

## Eagle Tour

- 1) Reelfoot NWR VC
- Grassy Island Wildlife Drive
- 2) Grassy Island Tower
- Hwy 157/311 & 1282
- 3) Eagle Nest
- 4) Long Point Viewing Tower
- Headed South on Hwy 94
- 5) Old Faithful
- 6) Hotspot
- Waters edge
- 7) Bathroom Break
- Chocktaw McCutchin Rd.
- 8) Hotspot
- Headed north on Hwy 78
- Drove my chevy to the levee
- Mississippi River Levee
- 9) Eagle Nest
- 10) Eagle Nest
- Headed back...
- 11) Eagle Nest
- 12) Eagle Nest

Drive through the Reelfoot National Wildlife Refuge, State Wildlife Management Areas, and on the Mississippi River levee in search of bald eagles, waterfowl, hawks, barred owls, pelicans, etc.





## Self-Guided Eagle Tour at Reelfoot NWR

This packet offers multiple spots where you have a greater chance of finding bald eagles. The staff of Reelfoot NWR cannot guarantee that you will see eagles, but this does make your chances greater!

Drive slowly. We recommend checking off the stops as you go along.

Mileage is in **RED** to help you stay on track (mileage may vary!)

To help save paper, BALD EAGLE FACTS can be found on the following website;

<https://journeynorth.org/tm/eagle/indexCurrent.html>

### #1 Reelfoot NWR Visitor Center

Make sure you grab the Reelfoot and Lake Isom General Brochure for information regarding Reelfoot Lake and the National Wildlife Refuge. **Clear your odometer reading AT THE STOP SIGN before exiting the parking lot.** At **0.0 mi** turn left on Hwy 157 from the Visitor Center parking lot.

### Grassy Island Wildlife Drive

At **1.2 mi**, turn left. This wildlife drive is one of the best roads for spotting songbirds during the springtime. During the Eagle Tour, you may see pileated woodpeckers, northern flickers, red-shouldered hawks, and even barred owls! This drive showcases our bottomland hardwood forests, which are very beneficial to waterfowl, as well as many other birds, mammals, amphibians, reptiles, and macroinvertebrates. To learn more about bottomland hardwood forests, refer to the "Bottomland Hardwood Forest" section in the back of the packet.

### #2 Grassy Island Tower

From this viewing tower (**at 4.6 mi**), you may see Bald Eagles sitting on the tops of the trees and even white pelicans huddled together. You may also see and/or hear eagles from across the road from the viewing tower. There is an eagles nest you cannot see from the road, but it is close by! See "A Few Tips for Searching for Bald Eagles" to know what to listen for. Turn around at the dead-end and drive back to Hwy 157 (**8.2 mi**). Turn left.

### Hwy 157/311 & 1282

Hwy 157 will become Hwy 311 once you cross the state line (**11.3 mi**). Along these roads, watch for northern harriers flying low to the ground in search for food (males are light gray with a white spot on their rump, females are dark brown with a white spot on their rump). Red-tailed hawks are seen often, as well

as American kestrels! At **12.8 mi**, turn left on Hwy 1282. Once you begin driving along the tree line, make sure you are looking to your left, close to the road, in the trees around the **14.7 mi** area. Eagles sometimes hang out in this area.

### **#3 Eagle Nest**

On the right-hand side of the road at **15.2 mi**, you will see a small grouping of trees by themselves at your 4:00. In the top of one of the trees, you will see something that resembles a mustache. This is an eagle nest! If an eagle is not sitting nearby, you can search for them in the tree line just to the left of the nest that runs north/south at your 2:00. Don't worry, you will see nests closer up as we go along, but I didn't want to leave this one out. Turn left at **15.3 mi** where the brown Reelfoot NWR sign is.

### **#4 Long Point Viewing Tower**

At **15.9 mi**, you will see a viewing tower. You may see hundreds, if not thousands, of ducks and geese from this viewing tower. Sometimes you may not see them, but you can hear them, so make sure you get out of your vehicle and climb onto the tower! Wherever you see an abundance of waterfowl, there are usually eagles nearby. Look in the trees straight in front of you. This tower looks over some of our moist soil impoundments and agriculture crops, which are managed for migratory waterfowl. Corn is grown for the waterfowl to supply them with much needed carbohydrates for energy during the winter. Moist soil impoundments are flooded fields that offer seeds, tubers, and other nutritious foods for waterfowl such as duck potato, smartweeds, barnyard grass, sprangletop, millet, and nutsedge. Macroinvertebrates are also found in these moist soil impoundments, which give waterfowl calcium and protein. Refer to "Moist Soil Impoundments" in the back of your packet for more information. When you are finished at the viewing tower, go back to Hwy 1282 and turn left.

### **Headed South on Hwy 94**

Look in the trees and on the ground for eagles that may be eating! Make a left when you come to the railroad tracks. Hwy 94 will turn into Hwy 78 once you cross the state line back into TN (**19.1 mi**). There is a large tree on the right side of the road at **19.4 mi** that eagles like to sit in, drive slowly to search as you drive by. Turn left at **20.8 mi** on Phillip Rd. There are eagles that like to sit in the trees in the yard of the house as soon as you turn.

### **#5 Old Faithful**

Old Faithful is a tree that you can typically find an eagle in, even if you haven't had much luck elsewhere. You will need to use your binoculars to confirm, but any large football shape you see in the tree is typically a bald eagle!

Take a right on Donnell Rd (gravel) at **21.6 mi**. There is no road sign here, but you can recognize the road by seeing the sign labeled "Black Bayou Waterfowl Refuge". You can stop and view "Old Faithful" to your right on this gravel road at **21.8 mi**. When you come to the Y, veer left on Blue Heron Rd.

## #6 Hotspot

There is a tree line in this field to your right that will likely have an eagle perched in one of the trees. Drive slow and look closely. As always, eagles tend to like the taller trees that are dead, which are easy to fly off and on to. Once you reach the end of the gravel road, search the tree line straight ahead across the road, as well as the large solitary tree to your right, for eagles. Turn left onto Grays Camp Rd. **22.9 mi**, and then another left on Phillipy Rd (**23.3 mi**) to ride along the waters' edge.

## Waters edge

Once you begin driving along the waters edge, keep a lookout for eagles sitting in the trees along the side of the road between you and the lake. Sometimes they will surprise you with how close they may be to the road. Look in the large snags to your right at approx. **24.4 mi**.

## #7 Bathroom Break

**24.7 mi.** When you gotta' go, you gotta' go. This will be your only bathroom stop until you get back from the tour. Turn back and go the way you came. At the stop sign, turn right on Grays Camp Rd, make a left on Choctaw McCutchin Road at **26.6 mi** (almost directly across from large solitary tree).

## Choctaw McCutchin Rd

Eagles are spotted regularly on this road. There is an Indian mound on your left soon after turning onto the road. We sometimes spot eagles sitting in the fields on the right side.

## #8 Hotspot

Once you start driving alongside the wood line, keep your eyes peeled...they usually sit on limbs that are very close, and even OVER, the road around **27.7 mi**. Once you drive through the wooded area, you will see more open fields, make sure you stop and search with binoculars in these fields at **28.9 mi** on both sides...they like to hang out in trees surrounding the open fields.

## Headed north on Hwy 78

You will arrive at Hwy 78 at **29.6 mi**, turn right. There will be snow geese decoys to your left, don't let them fool you! As you drive, look around the open fields for eagles sitting in tree lines, or sitting on the ground eating waterfowl. Right before you turn left on Levee Phillipy Rd (by the Hopper Farms sign and farm equipment), there will be a house at **32.0 mi** with a grouping of trees right next to the road, more often than not, bald eagles sit in these big trees! Keep watch! Also, many times we see large groups of snow geese on the right hand side of the roads in the pockets of fields. Don't forget to turn on your flashers if you pull over! To proceed to the levee, turn left at **32.2 mi** on Levee Phillipy Rd, by the Hopper Farms sign.

## **Drove my chevy to the levee**

Before you reach the levee, there are open fields where eagles are commonly spotted. Look in tops of trees along the tree line to your right.

## **Mississippi River Levee (RESET YOUR ODOMETER AT THE STOP SIGN!)**

Once you reach the stop sign at approx. 33.9 mi, **before the levee road, reset your odometer. (0.0)**, turn right onto the road below the levee, drive until you see the gravel road on your left **(0.2 mi)** and drive up to the top of the levee, turn right when you reach the top. Drive slowly along the levee and look to your left. Eagles are commonly seen near the beginning on this entrance perching in the trees closest to the road on the left. This levee was constructed by the Corps of Engineers in the early 1930's.

## **#9 Eagle Nest**

The nest is just passed the two yellow water level markers on your left at **1.8 mi**. There is typically quite a bit of eagle activity here. Eagles are usually spotted either on the nest or nearby! Sometimes you can only see the very top of the eagles' head, especially if she is incubating her eggs towards the end of Feb. Even if you do not see one at first, turn your car off and roll down your windows. You may hear the eagles calling each other, which makes them easier to find. You may find eagles flying overhead, or a pair sitting side by side next to their nest. In March, before the leaves come out, you may see the male bringing the female food while she incubates the eggs!

## **#10 Eagle Nest**

At **2.2 mi** you will find another nest. This nest is found VERY close to the road, so make sure you are looking UP rather than straight out.

## **#11 Eagle Nest**

At 3.5 miles you will find another nest to your left.

## **#12 Eagle Nest**

At ~3.7 miles you will look just a bit ahead and see a nest to your left. This nest is a little trickier to find because it's behind the first row of trees. If you are directly across from it, it will be hard to see. Best views are before you reach the nest or after (while looking behind you).

## **Headed back**

Turn right beside the pump station **(4.3 mi)** to get off the levee, go straight to get on Elbow Slough Rd. Heading back, many visitors have seen thousands of snow geese feeding in the green winter wheat



fields along these roads. Turn left on Midway Rd (**5.4 mi**). Veer right at the Y. When you reach Hwy 94 at **7.6 mi**, look straight ahead at the tree line, eagles like to sit here. Turn right.

**If you are headed back to the Visitor Center**, turn left on Hwy 1282. At **12.3 mi**, turn right onto Hwy 311. The Visitor Center is at **18.2 mi** on the right. Thank you so much for taking this eagle tour with us!!!

# General Reelfoot Information

## REELFOOT LAKE – HISTORY & TRADITION

The northwestern corner of Tennessee where Reelfoot Lake lies, although the youngest section of the state as regards settlement and development, is nevertheless very rich in history and tradition.

If we begin with history, we find that it was not until 1785 that the white man spent any time in West Tennessee. It was then that Henry Rutherford and two companions from North Carolina arrived in the wilds to make some surveys, having traveled in keel boats down the Cumberland, Ohio and Mississippi rivers to the mouth of a small river entering the Mississippi from the east, called by the Chickasaws the Okeena. As they ascended this river the next morning, they were so much impressed with the native deer, whose queerly marked antlers were unlike any they had seen before, that they re-christened it the Forked Deer River. The explorers halted at the first bluffs and began their surveys. Here the initials H. R. cut in a sycamore tree established what is still known today as Key Corner, a point from which West Tennessee surveys have been started through the years. In June 1931 the Lauderdale County Court placed a bronze marker 60 feet east of the original site.

Three years later, in 1788, Henry Rutherford and James Carleton came into the section now known as Lake County. Here James Carleton made a survey called the "I. C. Line" because of the appearance of his initials as written in Old English. This line today marks the main (Church) street of Tiptonville.

Tennessee became a state in 1796; but West Tennessee was not then a part of the state, being still Indian country. It was not until 1818 that Andrew Jackson and Isaac Shelby inveigled the Chickasaws into signing a treaty by which this beautiful country was added to the domain of Tennessee. The price paid was \$15,000 a year for 20 years, making the six million acres involved cost five cents per acre. The area bought was all that west of the Tennessee River from the Mississippi-Alabama line to the Ohio River. This was the "Jackson Purchase."

Reelfoot Lake came into existence between the time of the surveyors' entrance to the section and that of the Jackson Purchase. Henry Carleton and James Rutherford came into northwest Tennessee on the Reelfoot River. That river now is included in the lake where it can clearly be seen because of the fact that no trees nor stumps lie in its channel.

According to the Indian legend, Reelfoot, a chieftain of the Chickasaws, in the course of his wanderings, met and fell violently in love with Starlight, princess of the Choctaws. Forbidden by her father to marry her, he and his braves stole her. After the return home, as they celebrated the success of the venture, the earth opened up and swallowed the whole tribe as an indication of the wrath of the gods.

This legend, as is the way of legends, has its weak points. Students of the Chickasaw language tell us that Reelfoot is not an Indian name. We find also that very few Indians lived in this section at that time, it being reserved as a hunting ground through which they passed from time to time.

History is more reliable. It states that Reelfoot Lake was formed during the earthquakes of 1811-12. Although these earthquakes occurred at a period in the nation's history when the whole Mississippi valley north of Louisiana was virgin forest, and when only a few settlements of white men existed in this region,

including the Spanish and French village of New Madrid now in Missouri, fortunately there were a number of scientists and men of education in and near the region during the period of disturbance who have given vivid pictures of their experiences.

Firmin La Roche, master of a fleet of flat boats operating between St. Louis and New Orleans, recorded that on the evening of November 15, 1811 he tied up his boats eight miles above New Madrid. Awakened in the night by a crash, he found his boats carried more than a mile upstream by a great wave which came up the river. The water rose so rapidly that trees on the thirty foot bank were covered..

Mrs. Eliza Bryan of New Madrid, in a letter to Rev. Lorenzo Dow, an itinerant Methodist preacher who was anxious to learn what had occurred, said that beginning December 16, 1811, there were violent earthquakes in that section throughout the winter months. On some days the atmosphere was so completely saturated with sulfurous vapors as to cause total darkness; trees cracked and fell into the roaring Mississippi, and on some occasions the current was retrograde for a few minutes supposedly due to an eruption in the river bed. The climax came on February 7, 1812 with the hardest shock of all when the waters of the river gathered up like a mountain, rising fifteen to twenty feet perpendicularly and then receding within its banks with such violence that it took with it whole groves of young cottonwoods which edged its borders. Fissures in the earth vomited forth sand and water, some closing again immediately.

Mrs. Bryan's most noteworthy statement was to the effect that she heard it reported that a lake had been formed on the opposite side of the river in the Indian country; that this lake communicated with the river at both ends, making current the conjecture that within a few years the whole of the Mississippi would pass that way.

Vincent Nolte, a merchant on his way from New York to New Orleans, as he rode horseback over the Allegheny mountains to Pittsburgh fell in with another traveler who happened to be the distinguished naturalist, Audubon. They purchased two flat boats on which they started down the Ohio River in January 1812. The weather was so cold that the river froze over, forcing them to leave their boats in the ice, and to ride through the vast forest. They passed through Lexington and Frankfort. When near Louisville, they felt the first earthquake shocks which broke the ice in the river, allowing their boats to come down. Boarding their boats again at Louisville, they reached New Madrid by February 6 on a clear, moonlight night. Awakened by fearful crashes, they saw the Mississippi boiling up like water in a boiling cauldron. The stream flowed rushing back, while the forest trees came cracking and thundering down. As they traveled on to Natchez and New Orleans, they learned that this earthquake had shaken all Louisiana and the whole region around the Gulf of Mexico as far south as Caracas where forty thousand inhabitants were swallowed up.

Today Reelfoot Lake is a magnet which draws tourists from every section of the nation to Lake County, the county which has the highest percentage of tillable land of any county in the state; whose farms lands are assessed higher than any other farm lands in the state; the only county in the state which grows alfalfa in any appreciable quantity; the county which produces more cotton per capita than any other county in the United States, turning out approximately three bales for every man, woman, and child. This is the county which differs from all others in that there cannot be found within its borders a native rock, hill, nor a running rill.

Here lies the beauty spot, Reelfoot Lake which has attracted nation-wide admiration — a land of delight for the naturalists, the photographer, the angler and the hunter.

*Material for this article was taken largely from the historical scrap book of the late R. C. Donaldson, Tiptonville, Tennessee*

# Reelfoot National Wildlife Refuge

Reelfoot National Wildlife Refuge, which is 10,528 acres, is located within four miles of the Mississippi River in rural northwest Tennessee, about 35 miles north of the city of Dyersburg and 15 miles southwest of Union City. It encompasses part of Lake and Obion counties in Tennessee, and extends northward into Fulton County, Kentucky.

The most significant recent geological event, which shaped the present-day landscape of the Reelfoot Lake area, was the New Madrid earthquakes. This series of earthquakes, which shook the area from December 1811 through February 1812, is reported as being the most significant to hit the continental United States in recorded history. These earthquakes reportedly caused the Mississippi River to flow backwards when an area just south of the Reelfoot refuge, known as the Tiptonville Dome, was thrust violently upward into the path of the river. Likewise, an area as much as 30 miles long and 10 miles wide, by some accounts, sank up to 50 feet, creating a sunken forest and forming the present-day Reelfoot Lake.

Reelfoot National Wildlife Refuge was established on August 28, 1941, under the authority of the Migratory Bird Conservation Act. Subsequent lands for the refuge were acquired under the authority of the Refuge Recreation Act and the Endangered Species Act of 1973. The refuge was specifically authorized "... for use as an inviolate sanctuary, or for any other management purpose, for migratory birds" (Migratory Bird Conservation Act), and is "... suitable for (1) incidental fish and wildlife-oriented recreational development, (2) the protection of natural resources, (3) the conservation of endangered species or threatened species ..." (Refuge Recreation Act).

In conjunction with their primary establishing purposes, these refuges will provide inviolate sanctuaries for migratory birds and preserve for the public benefit a representative portion of the bottomland hardwood forests of the Lower Mississippi Alluvial Valley. The refuges would also help support the priorities established by the Service's Lower Mississippi River Valley Ecosystem Team. These ecosystem priorities involve migratory bird populations and their habitats; wetlands; threatened and endangered species and their habitats; fisheries and aquatic resources; and national wildlife refuges and national fish hatcheries (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2000b).

The Reelfoot National Wildlife Refuge is administered under the National Wildlife Refuge System and thus is part of a larger national landscape conservation plan set forth by the Service. The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System is "to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans" (National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997). There are currently over 566 National Wildlife Refuges encompassing more than 100 million acres of lands and 750 million acres of oceans managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The refuges are important components for the conservation and management of fish, wildlife, and plant resources within the National Wildlife Refuge System.

The refuge practices several different types of management techniques to provide optimum habitat for wintering waterfowl.

## \*Bottomland Hardwood Forests (Grassy Island Drive)

The Reelfoot and Lake Isom NWR's protect more than 7,294 acres of bottomland hardwood and bald cypress forest habitat. The refuges' bottomland forests provide invaluable habitat for a wide range of wildlife species and are critical to their preservation and perpetuation. Bottomland hardwood forests are important to migratory and wintering waterfowl, particularly mallards and wood ducks. The forested tracts provide crucial food resources such as hard mast, soft mast, and invertebrates for mallards during flood events in the fall and early spring.

25 million acres of bottomland hardwood forests once dominated the Lower Mississippi Alluvial Valley. Today, over 95% of this important wetland habitat has been cleared for agriculture and other purposes. Due to the previous destruction of bottomland hardwood forests, corn is planted to replace the valuable acorns that were once an essential food in our area for migratory waterfowl.

## **\*Moist Soil Impoundments (Found at Long Point)**

Moist Soil wetlands historically occurred where openings existed in bottomland hardwoods. Forest openings were often caused by high winds, catastrophic floods, beavers, fires, etc. Man-made impoundments are commonly managed as moist-soil wetlands. Moist-soil areas are typified by seed producing annuals such as smartweed, wild millet, and sprangletop. Planting moist-soil areas is not necessary because native plant seeds are abundant in frequently flooded soils. Over 2,500 pounds per acre of seed can be produced in a properly managed moist-soil area. (Wetland Management for Waterfowl-A Handbook 2007)

Moist soil habitats are an integral part of managing public wetlands for waterfowl, as these food resources are provided in large part only on state and federal lands. The Reelfoot and Lake Isom Refuges and the associated river floodplains are capable of supplying moist soil foods such as barnyard grass, sprangletop, smartweed, rice cut-grass, and a host of other beneficial herbaceous plants. The Refuges manage approximately 1,560 acres of a combination of agricultural crops and moist soil foods. This acreage varies from year to year, based on management needs. The Refuges annually provide substantial acreages of these early successional moist soil habitats and play a key role in the migration patterns of mid-continental waterfowl and other migratory birds. (Reelfoot/Lake Isom NWR Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Assessment, 2005)

## **\*Farming (Found at Long Point)**

Agricultural crops play an important role in the scheme of migratory bird management, as they provide a source of high-energy carbohydrates needed during periods of cold weather. Typically, refuges rotate crops and moist soils to ensure a readily available source of food for wildlife, and to meet refuge objectives set forth in the West Tennessee National Wildlife Refuge Conservation Plan. The cropland operation on the Reelfoot and Lake Isom refuges includes approximately 1,560 acres, which are managed in a combination of agricultural crops and moist soil foods. This acreage varies from year to year, based on management needs. These crops are left standing in the fields and provide supplemental forage for resident and migratory wildlife, specifically migratory waterfowl.

Approximately 385 acres of the refuges' crop fields can be flooded for waterfowl use as part of the refuges' impoundment systems. This, coupled with subsequent acquisitions allow the refuges to make substantial contributions to the migratory bird objectives of the Mississippi Flyway. The refuges' farming program will continue to address the lack of habitat issues that affect migratory bird populations.