



## Deep Fork NWR: Preserving Oklahoma Bottomland Habitat

Two hundred years ago, an adventurous settler coming west through Oklahoma in a buckboard had quite a journey ahead of him. This intrepid man or woman may have braved robbery attempts, harsh weather and horrible dirt trails, but by the time he reached the Tulsa area, the hunting, fishing and clean water provided by the over 2,000,000 acres of bottomland hardwood forests in eastern Oklahoma must have been a welcome sight. The Homestead Act of 1862 increased western expansion and by the 1930's rapacious logging and a demand for lumber led to the elimination of all but 200,000 acres of this rich section of Oklahoma nature. Deforestation continued into the 1970s.



Deep Fork NWR; Okmulgee, OK

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) established Deep Fork National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) in 1993 to protect the bottomland hardwood forest ecosystem in eastern Oklahoma. The bottomland hardwood forest system is a symbiotic development of nature that intricately affects such diverse issues as soil and water quality, erosion control, animal and fish habitat, forest harvestation, livestock pasture and recreation. Deep Fork NWR measures 9,600 acres of forest, agriculture, natural wetlands and prairie near the intersection of U.S. Highway 75 and Interstate 40. The refuge offers a variety of outdoor opportunities.

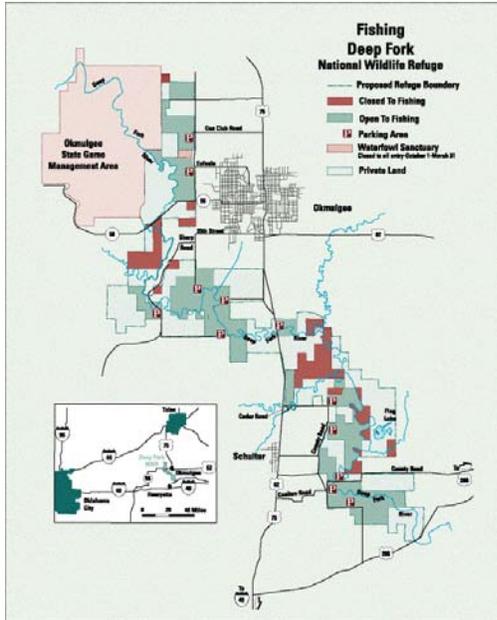
Deep Fork NWR supports a very diverse and abundant wildlife population. A total of 149 species of birds are known to inhabit the refuge and the area is considered a major nesting area for songbirds. The refuge is also a major stopover for migrating waterfowl. Fifty-one species of mammals, 54 species of reptiles and 22 species of amphibians have been documented in the area. The refuge location near two major freeways leads to 30,000 to 50,000 visitors yearly; the primary reason for construction of an onsite administration building. Refuge officials hope to double the size of the refuge within 20 years. More than just a nature refuge, Deep Fork NWR is one of the major hubs of outdoor recreation in eastern Oklahoma providing area residents and outdoors enthusiasts from all over with a variety of outdoor recreational opportunities



Bottomland Hardwood Forest

## Hunting

Hunting is a rich tradition in Oklahoma and Deep Fork NWR provides sportsman with a great area to pursue deer, turkey, waterfowl and small game. The refuge provides a high quality deer and turkey hunting experience by conducting lottery hunts that limit the number of hunters. The Refuge also conducts hunts for youth and for persons with physical limitations.



## Fishing

The Deep Fork River is the heart of the refuge. This river has an abundant population of game fish such as catfish, crappie and white bass. When the Deep Fork River overbank floods in the spring the catfish make a massive migration out of Lake Eufaula up into the refuge. People come from all over to catch catfish as they move up the river.

## Wildlife Observation / Hiking / Nature Photography

The refuge has over 15 miles of maintained trails and one photography blind. The two main trails are the Cussetah bottoms boardwalk and the railroad trail. These trails offer a great place for refuge visitors to observe wildlife, photograph wildlife, get exercise through hiking or just generally enjoy nature. Many miles of county roads run through the refuge. Visitors can slowly drive these roads and try to catch a glimpse of wildlife.

## Birding

Birding at Deep Fork NWR is wonderful for both the novice and experienced birder. The bottomland hardwood forests are alive with activity year round depending upon the season. In the spring, birders may see the brightly colored Prothonotary Warbler, Painted Bunting, or Scarlet Tanager. In the summer, visitors can locate many neo-tropical migrating songbirds raising their chicks at all levels in the forest.

The numerous sloughs and steams support large numbers of Great Blue Heron, Little Blue Herons, and Great and Snowy



Bald Eagles at Rest

Egrets. There are four Great Blue Heron Rookeries located on the refuge. These rookeries are used by Snowy Egrets after the young herons fledge. Raptors, woodpeckers, and songbirds use the area in great numbers. The refuge is a very important migration stop for many species of neotropical birds and provides suitable nesting habitat for many others. Migratory eagles arrive in Oklahoma in November and depart by the end of February. Out-of-state birders are finding Deep Fork NWR to be a great destination to visit and pick up new birds for their life lists.



Archery Tournament 2006; Courtesy Ron Price



## **Environmental Education**

Environmental education is important to the staff at Deep Fork NWR as 70 schools reside within a 50 mile radius. The refuge is starting new environmental education initiatives, and one of the most popular programs is the Okmulgee County Archery in the Schools Day at the refuge. The refuge started this program in cooperation with the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation, the Friends of Deep Fork, and the Oklahoma

Fishstickers. This program takes an indoor physical-education program and brings students from the local school districts that participate in the program to the refuge to showcase how you can take an indoor program outside.

## **Refuge Information and Facilities**

The refuge has informational brochures for hunting, fishing and general information. The refuge has completed 12 parking lots for public access. Most parking lots have a brochure box and an informational sign. The Cussetah bottoms boardwalk area is the site for the new visitor's center / administration building. The site features an outdoor pavilion and ventures off to trails.

2010 marks the 17<sup>th</sup> year of existence for Deep Forks NWR, and the facility only hopes to grow, evolve and better serve the eastern Oklahoma community for many years to come.