

# Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge



Otters, credit USFWS

## Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge Background

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the premier government agency dedicated to the conservation, protection and enhancement of fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats.

The National Wildlife Refuges of Southeast Louisiana are part of a coastal wetlands system that includes marshes, bottomland hardwood forests, lakes, swamps and bayous. The diversity of wildlife found here can be observed both on the refuge and flying above the fertile scene. Coastal erosion and subsidence, combined with sea-level rise and the fury of Gulf hurricanes have all taken a toll on this delicate patchwork of habitat.

Established in 1994, Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge is the largest undeveloped natural area along the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain. With over 18,000 acres of near shore grass beds, marshes, hardwood hammocks and pine ridges, the refuge is nestled in the middle of an area that is rapidly urbanizing.

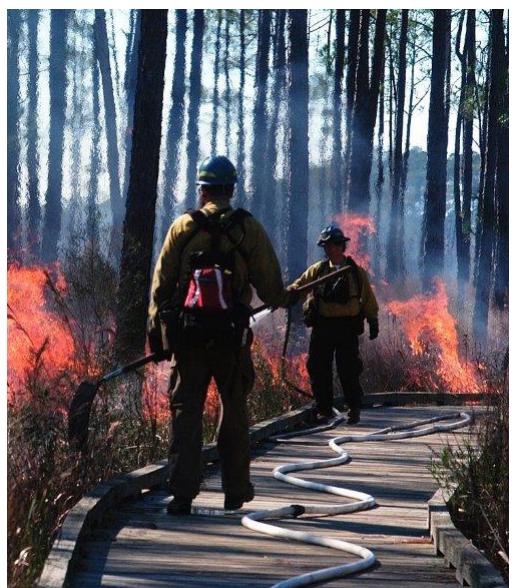
## Wildlife and Habitat

The diverse habitats native to this refuge are vital breeding grounds for an array of wildlife found throughout the Gulf region. Big Branch Marsh is home for approximately 260 species of birds, 40 species of mammals, 90 reptile and amphibian species, and over 100 species of fresh and saltwater fish.

Service staff and volunteers actively manipulate the habitats here to provide for a natural diversity of wildlife. For example, prescribed fires are routinely set on refuge lands to recycle nutrients and maintain healthy native vegetation, and forested areas are periodically thinned out to improve habitat conditions. Additional marsh lands are created by filling large, open ponds with dredge material and planting it with marsh grasses.

Fresh water marshes attract a large number of shorebirds, wading birds, neotropical migratory birds and wintering and resident waterfowl. Each year, millions of migrating birds use refuges as stepping stones as they travel thousands of miles between their summer and winter homes. For many, this refuge is the last stop on an annual journey.

The marshes also provide critical spawning and nursery habitat for a number of fresh and saltwater species. Shrimp, crab, redfish, speckled trout, largemouth bass (green trout), catfish, bream and other species all thrive here.



Prescribed burn, ©Neil Lalonde



Red-cockaded Woodpecker; Bill Lang

A variety of mammal species, including white-tailed deer and swamp rabbits, furbearers such as mink, otter, raccoon, muskrat, and many other non-game species are found here in abundance.

## Endangered Species

More than 380 threatened or endangered plants and animals are protected on wildlife refuges service wide. A population of endangered Red-cockaded woodpeckers (RCW) is found on Big Branch Marsh. It is the only woodpecker to build its nest cavity in live pine trees. Once abundant throughout the southeast United States, open pine ecosystems are the primary habitat of this bird. Commercial harvesting of timber and development have reduced this ecosystem to 3% of its original expanse, making it difficult for the RCW to find adequate nest sites.

Various techniques are used to manage for this species; installing artificial cavities into pine trees simulates real nesting and roosting cavities, while prescribed fire helps maintain a grassy understory which these birds prefer. Banding birds in order to identify individual birds as they mature will help Service professionals make decisions regarding genetic diversity in the population. Biologists may also transfer birds from other populations throughout the state. The best time of day to see these birds is early morning or dusk at the Boy Scout Road entrance.

Endangered species that use refuge waters are the West Indian Manatee and the Gulf Sturgeon. The bald eagle and brown pelican can also be observed on the refuge, but both have been delisted and are considered conservation success stories!

## Enjoying the Resource

Southeast Louisiana Refuges welcome over 400,000 visitors annually, and offer a variety of public use and recreational activities. Hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, environmental education, and interpretation can all be enjoyed at Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge. All visitors will be required to complete a self-clearing permit for all uses on the refuge. Permit stations will be accessible at various locations throughout the refuge.



Boy Scout Road Boardwalk; ©Tom Carlisle

## Hunting and Fishing

Along the very scenic Bayou Lacombe, Lake Road serves as a popular local hot spot for fishing and crabbing. Arriving early to claim a spot is recommended. A public boat launch located on this site is always bustling with activity.

The refuge offers both large and small game hunting seasons. Large game may be hunted with archery equipment only. The marshes also provide unique waterfowl hunting opportunities hard to find near a major urban center.

**Note:** State hunting and fishing licenses are required to hunt or fish on refuge lands. Additional refuge specific hunting and fishing permits are required and subject to regulations contained in the refuge's hunting and fishing brochure. Free permits are available at the headquarters complex, or online.

## Wildlife Observation and Photography

The Boy Scout Road area offers accessible trails through remote areas; a beautiful and easy boardwalk stroll and a four-mile out-and-back hike through habitats leading to the banks of Bayou Lacombe.



Cypress Bayou, ©Tom Carlisle

A reward for those who venture the trail is a raised overlook with a commanding view of an interior marsh unit. On a clear day you can see New Orleans across Lake Pontchartrain over 20 miles away.

Canoeing opportunities are best on Cane Bayou, at the western edge of the refuge. A free public launch is provided and maintained by Saint Tammany Parish just off the road where the bayou intersects at Hwy 190.

A small non-motorized boat and canoe launch is located at the end of Sapsucker Road, off Bayou Paquet Road. This launch takes a paddler along a canal from a small parking area to Lake Pontchartrain. Alligators can usually be seen in this area.

## Environmental Education and Interpretation

Classroom visits and field trips that explore habitat features through hands-on and science-based programs are offered by the environmental education staff. Throughout the year a variety of ranger-led programs serve to both explore refuge resources and connect people with nature.

## U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

### Headquarters and Visitor Center

The headquarters and visitor center for the Southeast Louisiana Refuges Complex is located in Lacombe, Louisiana, at 61389 Hwy 434, just north of Hwy 190 and two miles south of Interstate 12.

Here you will find information and refuge staff to answer your questions. Discover dioramas and displays highlighting the eight refuges of the region. Learn more about how refuge managers maintain productive wildlife habitat. Check out opportunities for wildlife viewing, hiking, fishing, educational programs and tour availability. A charming gift shop with bookstore is operated by the Friends of Louisiana Wildlife Refuges.



Camelia at Bayou Gardens, USFWS

Once commercially operated as "Bayou Gardens," this beautiful 110-acre property boasts a variety of formal garden areas reminiscent of the 1940's. The property was sold in the mid 1950's and later served as the seminary high school called Holy Redeemer. A small network of trails offers a leisurely look at both natural habitats and restored sections of "Bayou Gardens." Peak bloom periods for camellias and azaleas are roughly December thru April.

Administrative hours are 7:30 am – 4:00 pm Monday through Friday. The visitor center is open 9:00 am – 4:00 pm Thursday through Saturday. Both are closed on all federal holidays.

