



## Wilderness Character Monitoring in the National Wildlife Refuge System

### Background

The National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System) administers approximately 21 million acres, 18% of the National Wilderness Preservation System.

In 2010, the Refuge System chartered the Wilderness Character Monitoring (WCM) Committee to establish standards consistent with its Inventory and Monitoring Strategy and to ensure that monitoring is purposeful, practical and cost effective as well as integrated across disciplines and geographic scales. The methodology used by all of the federal wilderness management agencies to monitor wilderness character was based on *Keeping It Wild: An Interagency Strategy to Monitor Trend in Wilderness Character Across the National Wilderness Preservation System* (Landres et al. 2008).

Between 2011 and 2015, Wilderness Fellows hired through Cooperative Agreements went to refuges, produced Baseline Assessments for all designated, and many proposed refuge wilderness areas. With input from wilderness managers and those Fellows, the guidance was revised in *Keeping It Wild 2: An Updated Interagency Strategy to Monitor Trends in Wilderness Character Across the National Wilderness Preservation System* (Landres et al. 2015). Fellows then worked with staff on refuges to revise measures to be compliant with the updated interagency WCM guidance. These signed revisions for each refuge are termed Update Summaries.

For agency consistency and guidance, we also published the *Survey Protocol Framework for Monitoring Wilderness Character on National Wildlife Refuges* (Dratch et al. 2019). This framework supports development of site-specific protocols to simplify annual WCM data entry on refuges.

### Goal

The Refuge System will complete Update Summaries and site-specific protocols (all information needed to conduct WCM on specific refuges) for all refuges with designated and proposed wilderness.



Sandhill cranes in Okefenokee Wilderness. Photographer: Sallie Gentry

### What is Wilderness Character?

The five primary qualities of wilderness character – Untrammeled, Natural, Undeveloped, Solitude or Primitive and Unconfined Recreation, and Other Features of Value – are based on the 1964 statutory language of the Wilderness Act. These qualities were further defined in the technical report, *Keeping it Wild* (p. ii), and revised in *Keeping It Wild 2* (p. 4). Key monitoring questions were developed from the five qualities; Indicators consistent across agencies were developed from the questions; and measures were developed for each indicator at the refuge level.

### Why Monitor Wilderness Character?

The Wilderness Act of 1964 mandated the preservation of wilderness character. Monitoring provides an assessment of the trends in the qualities of wilderness character so we can evaluate whether wilderness character is improving, degrading, or remaining stable. The Refuge System cannot control everything that affects wilderness character, but we can evaluate impacts of our management actions on wilderness character and make different stewardship decisions. Monitoring over time reveals the effects of both the controllable and uncontrollable impacts to wilderness character, to inform our decisions to help preserve the wild aspects of these areas for present and future generations.



Red fox in Izembek Wilderness. Photographer: Val Urban

#### Progress as of mid-2021

The Refuge System is roughly half way through completing Update Summaries to revise measures to be consistent with ***Keeping It Wild 2***. The first site-specific protocol for wilderness character monitoring was completed and entered in ServCat (the digital catalog of the Fish and Wildlife Service) in July 2021 and several more are in progress.

#### For more information:

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