

Wilderness - Where Wildlife Comes First!

Across the National Wildlife Refuge System, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) administers 71 of the 677 units of the National Wilderness Preservation System in the United States. Many of these refuge wilderness areas include islands or island groups, which pose unique management challenges. Ten of the island wilderness areas managed by the USFWS are closed to public access to protect sensitive wildlife and their habitats. Along the Oregon coast, the USFWS administers Oregon Islands Wilderness and Three Arch Rocks Wilderness. While small in acreage, these two wilderness areas encompass 1,852 rocks, reefs and islands scattered along 320 miles of the coastline. These two wilderness areas support more than 1 million nesting seabirds; 25,000 seals and sea lions; and threatened and endangered species including bald eagles, brown pelicans and Steller sea lions. All of these species are extremely sensitive to human disturbance. Even close approach by people can cause seabirds and marine mammals to flee the sanctuary of the rocks and islands, resulting in the loss of eggs and/or young or complete colony abandonment. Many of the vegetated rocks and islands are riddled with seabird nesting burrows of species such as Leach's storm-petrels and tufted puffins. On islands such as these, humans walking, even gently, can cause burrow collapse, bird mortality, and habitat destruction. In addition, many of the rocks and islands are easily accessible from the beach during low tides.

The rocks, reefs, and islands within Oregon Islands Wilderness and Three Arch Rocks Wilderness provide spectacular scenery along the highly accessible Oregon coast. U.S. Highway 101, designated the Pacific Coast Scenic Byway, spans the length of the Oregon coast and is used by millions of visitors annually. In addition, the scenery is a magnet for pleasure boaters and anglers, and pilots in aircraft from across the West. In order to get better views of these scenic islands with their abundant wildlife, boaters routinely cruise close to their shores and pilots often fly at extremely low altitudes. The USFWS is employing a variety of educational, interpretive and management techniques to preserve and protect the wildlife populations and wilderness character of Oregon Islands and Three Arch Rocks. Some of the measures include working with Friends groups at strategic locations to educate the public and keep them from trespassing into the closed wilderness areas. Other measures include the construction of observation decks and overlooks, including some with permanently mounted, powerful telescopes, and production of high-quality interpretive panels, brochures, and posters. Volunteers are stationed at high visitation areas with large numbers of seabirds and marine mammals on the adjacent wilderness rocks for interpretation and resource protection purposes. We have also worked with local, regional, and national film crews and reporters to educate the public through the TV and print media. Our efforts are not intended to discourage visitors to the area, but to promote conservation by providing high quality opportunities to view the wilderness areas and associated wildlife from a safe distance.