

## WELCOME TO CREX!

This guide was written to help you better understand and appreciate the wildlife and wildlife management activities at Crex Meadows Wildlife Area. The auto tour highlights many watchable wildlife opportunities.

The tour route is 24-miles long. Drive slowly, about 15-20 mph. Look and listen for wildlife. Most animals are secretive and will go unnoticed if you don't watch carefully. Look for the numbered Auto Tour signs. Stop and read the corresponding description in this guide. You can also follow the arrows marked on the map on pages 10-11. Have a pleasant drive.

## INTRODUCTION TO CREX MEADOWS

Crex Meadows is a 30,000-acre state wildlife management area. The primary management objective is to restore the area to its original condition of a brush prairie-wetland complex. This area was drastically altered by settlers in the late 1800s. Wetlands were drained and much of the brush prairie was allowed to grow into a jack pine-oak forest. As a result, many of the original native plants and animals were significantly reduced or completely disappeared.

Habitat restoration efforts began shortly after the State of Wisconsin purchased the area in 1946. Wildlife response to prairie and wetlands restoration has been dramatic. The abundance and diversity of wildlife has made Crex a wildlife show place. It is part of a national network of Wildlife Viewing Areas and Important Bird Areas. Over 120,000 people visit Crex each year. About 75% of them come just to observe wildlife, but thousands of hunters and trappers also use the property.

Hunters and trappers provide nearly all the funds for acquisition and management of Crex lands. Funding for the wildlife management program at Crex is received from the sale of hunting and trapping licenses, duck stamps, and from an 11% Federal tax on guns and ammunition.

### 1. Wildlife Education and Visitor Center

The Wildlife Education and Visitor Center was built in 2002 with funding provided by the Friends of Crex. The 8,600 square foot facility contains classrooms, an auditorium, exhibits, video room, and gift shop. Stop here for the latest information on wildlife sightings and activity. Take time to view the exhibits, watch an introductory video, and peruse the Bog Shoe Gift Shop for unique, wildlife-related items.

The prairie garden, in front of the building, and the Norm Stone Prairie Trail, south of the parking lot, are great places for short strolls to learn about prairies and prairie plants. For a longer stroll, try The Boardwalk Trail that begins at the back door of the building. The first portion of the trail is a handicapped accessible boardwalk that crosses a sedge marsh and wildlife pond. The trail meanders through a forested area to a small observation platform overlooking Hay Creek Flowage, then loops back to the boardwalk.

(Turn left onto County Road "D" and go 1.5 miles to Phantom Lake Road. Turn left and go 1 mile to the top of the dike. Turn right and drive 1 mile to Observation Area.)

### 2. Wetland Restoration

Look out over Phantom Lake where 2,000 acres have been flooded to create the largest body of water on Crex. In the early 1900's the shallow marsh which originally occupied this area was drained for farming. In 1954 a 2.6-mile long dike was constructed to create productive wetland

habitat for waterfowl and other aquatic wildlife.

The area now occupied by Crex Meadows historically contained numerous wetlands. However, many of these wetlands were drained prior to 1946, the year the State of Wisconsin began purchasing the area. Since 1946 over 23 miles of dikes were constructed to create 30 flowages which flood 8,000 acres.

(Go back to Phantom Lake Road. Turn right.)

### 3. Phantom Lake

You are driving on the dike which was constructed to create Phantom Lake. This flowage offers great wildlife viewing. Red-necked grebes often nest to the southeast and yellow-headed black birds, marsh wrens, and the occasional least bittern use the nearby stands of cattails and bulrush. Beginning in May, and continuing through the summer, this is a great place to see trumpeter swan, goose, and duck broods.

The entire north half of this flowage contains a vast stand of wild rice, perhaps the largest in Wisconsin. The new plants, which emerge in June, are a major food source for swans, geese, and ducks. By late summer, the rice completely dominates the flowage. The rice seeds mature in late summer and, for the remainder of the year, provide a feast for blackbirds, rails, and large flocks of coots and ducks.

### 4. Prairie Restoration

Prior to settlement, the original prairies of this area were maintained by frequent wildfires. During settlement these wildfires were all but eliminated and, in the absence of fire, native prairie plants were gradually replaced by a jack pine-oak forest. Since the State purchased Crex, efforts have been underway to restore the prairie.

Approximately 7,000 acres of prairie have been restored through the use of fire. This area is a good example of a restored prairie. Controlled burns were used to kill the brush and trees thus allowing the prairie plants, which require full sunlight, to grow. The "openness" of this prairie habitat is what makes it so productive for water fowl and prairie grouse.

The restored prairies must be burned every few years to keep the brush and trees from shading out the prairie vegetation. An average of 3,500 acres are burned annually to maintain the restored prairies. Spring is the primary burning season but prescribed burns are conducted whenever conditions permit.

On your right is the Abel Prairie Trail. Stretch your legs on the short trail through this old farm field that was planted to prairie in the late 1980's. It is an excellent spot to find prairie flowers and grasses. How many can you identify? As you continue the tour, see if you can find evidence of recent burns. Look for dead burnt twigs and fire scars on trees and logs.

(Turn right on Main Dike Road, proceed 2 miles and turn left onto West Refuge Road.)

### 5. Crex Carpet Company-Camp Five

From 1911 to 1932, much of the area now occupied by Crex Meadows, was owned by the Crex Carpet Company. The company harvested sedges used in the production of "grass carpets" and wicker-type furniture.

The name of the company (Crex) was derived from the scientific name of the sedge (Carex). The

local people refer to the sedge marshes as “meadows” and called these sedge marshes “the Crex Meadows” when they were owned by the carpet company. The state kept the name “Crex Meadows” when the wildlife area was started.

To your left is the site of Camp Five, one of three carpet camps located on the wildlife area. Nothing is left of this camp, but the foundations of camp buildings are still evident at Camp Six on the Fish Lake Wildlife Area.

#### 6. Prairie Potholes

As you drive north along the west side of the refuge, you will notice many small ponds along either side of the road. These ponds, or potholes, were dug with bulldozers to provide habitat for nesting ducks. More than 300 potholes have been constructed on the property.

Notice any strange objects in the potholes? The floating logs are called "loafing logs". Ducks use these logs to sleep, preen their feathers and loaf. Turtles, herons, frogs, and kingfishers also use the logs for feeding or just basking in the sun.

#### 7. Refuge: Management Pool

You have been driving along the west side of the refuge. This 2,400 acre refuge is the only area on Crex closed to hunting and trapping. The primary purpose of the refuge is to provide a resting place for migrating waterfowl.

The water level of the management pool, on your right, is regularly manipulated to provide feeding habitat for migrating shorebirds and waterfowl. During the spring and fall migration, shorebirds and waterfowl rely on aquatic insects and other invertebrates available in shallow bodies of water and mud flats. The water level of this pool is generally lowered during the spring and fall migrations to provide these habitat conditions.

#### 8. Refuge - Food Patches

Approximately 120 acres of corn, rye, buckwheat and other crops are planted each year to attract wildlife, primarily waterfowl. The food patches are a means of attracting waterfowl to the refuge portion of the property where they can feed, rest, and regain energy needed to continue their long southward migration. The food patches also present great opportunities for wildlife observation. At the peak of migration (mid October) thousands of ducks and geese are present in the refuge. The refuge is also a "staging area" for sandhill cranes. As many as 10,000 cranes may be present in October and November.

(Turn right on North Refuge Road.)

#### 9. Historical Marker

Take a few minutes to read about the history of Crex Meadows. As you look out over the refuge imagine yourself in the 1800's before settlers disrupted the scene. Following prairie and wetland restoration, it looks very similar to what it looked like back then.

#### 10. Rest Area

The Rest Area is a great place to take a break and have a picnic lunch. Picnic tables, benches, fire grates, and toilets are available for your use. Camping is permitted only during the fall (Sept 1. - Dec. 30), and campers must register at the Visitor Center. The YCC Hiking Trail, beginning near the restrooms, is a nice spot for a walk through the woods.

The flowage and surrounding wetland complex south of the rest area is an excellent spot to view sandhill cranes and waterfowl, especially during the fall.

(Stay on North Refuge Road. If a shorter trip is desired, turn right on East Refuge Road to Stop #18)

#### 11. Wetland Complex

Look around. To the north is Monson Lake; to the south is Zalesky Pond; and close to the road are potholes. This variety of wetland types, adjacent to quality upland nesting habitat, is a magnet for breeding ducks. Breeding pairs of ducks establish territories on potholes or small wetlands. The drake defends the territory while the hen tends to the nest in a nearby grassy area. When the eggs hatch, the ducklings are led to a larger wetland where there is more food and cover.

#### 12. Sedge Marsh

Crex Meadows contains thousands of acres of sedge marsh like you see on our right. Most of Wisconsin's sedge marshes were drained and converted to farm fields. Although many of the sedge marshes in this area were also drained, the conversion to farm fields was unsuccessful. Under state ownership, most of the sedge marshes on Crex are preserved in a condition similar to pre-settlement.

Sedge marshes provide habitat for a variety of wildlife including many rare and endangered species. Among those rare residents are three species; the yellow rail, LeConte's sparrow, and sharp-tailed sparrow, that attract birders from throughout the United States to Crex Meadows every spring. Some of the more common sedge meadow residents, including sedge wrens, Virginia rails, bobolinks, American bitterns, and sandhill cranes may be seen or heard from this spot.

#### 13. Land Management

Notice the heavily forested area across the road and compare it to the more open area on your left and right. This is due to different owners with different management objectives. The land across the road is part of the Burnett County Forest, and is managed for timber production. The land on this side is part of Crex Meadows and is managed for wildlife production.

The original vegetation of this area was described as a pine savannah or brush-prairie. It consisted of scattered jack and red pine (approximately 8 per acre), brush (mostly oak), and prairie grasses and forbs. It provided excellent habitat for sharp-tailed grouse and other species associated with the prairie.

At the time of settlement, brush-prairie covered 1,500 square miles of Northwest Wisconsin (see map below). Wildfires, which had historically maintained the brush-prairie, were drastically reduced with the advent of white settlers in the late 1800's. In the absence of these naturally occurring wildfires, much of the brush-prairie grew into a pine-oak forest. Now, Crex and a few other small remnants are all that remain of this once vast brush-prairie.

(Turn right on Reed Lake Road.)

#### 14. Sand Blow

Take a walk to the sand blow for a closer look at this unique habitat. Some time after 1850, settlers arrived and attempted to farm this area. Asparagus plants and box elder trees are evidence of a farmhouse on this very spot. Due to the sterile, sandy soil, harsh weather and hard

times, farming was discontinued.

The sand, up to 80 feet deep, is a result of a glacial lake which covered most of the county. In areas of disturbance, such as the top of this old sand dune where a house once stood, the sand is constantly blown by the wind and vegetation doesn't have a chance to take root. Several sedges, grasses and mosses have adapted to sandy soil and are growing along the periphery.

#### 15. Sharp-tailed Grouse

The mowed, brush-free area on your right is a sharp-tailed grouse dancing ground. Every spring the male sharp-tails select a small portion of the ground and defend it against all other males. In his territory the male performs an elaborate mating dance to attract females. The males arrive on the grounds well before sunrise and display for several hours. They are on the grounds every morning from late March to late May.

The dancing ground is mowed and kept free of brush to provide the birds with an open area needed for their display, to be seen by females, and also to watch for predators. The brush-prairie surrounding the dancing ground is excellent sharp-tail habitat. By restoring the brush-prairie on Crex we have dramatically increased the sharp-tail population.

(Turn right on Main Dike Road.)

#### 16. Smith's Stopping Place

The first trail through this area, crossed this very spot. It was established in 1830 as a mail route and military trail between La Pointe on Madeline Island in Lake Superior, and Fort Anthony in what is now St. Paul, MN. The trail later became the first "Tote Road" to be used by settlers. Stopping places were established along the road as places for travelers to stop for the night. Smith's Stopping Place was located in the open area to your right.

#### 17. Diversion Pump

To maintain wetland habitat we have to be able to control water levels. By using a diversion pump we do not have to rely on nature to control the water. This pump is capable of pumping 20,000 gallons of water per minute or flooding 100 acres one foot deep in 24 hours. Once the water is on the north side of the dike it can be released to most of the flowages on Crex. The volume and direction of water flow is regulated by ditches and water control structures. You may have noticed these structures along the road as you were driving.

(Turn left on East Refuge Road.)

#### 18. Transfer Ditch

This channel of water is a transfer ditch. The water flows by gravity from North Fork Flowage to the Refuge Extension and Phantom Lake. Notice the water control structure on the left side of the road. The amount of water flowing through the ditch can be regulated by raising or lowering the gate.

Each of the 30 flowages on Crex has a water control structure. These structures permit us to raise or lower the water levels according to moisture conditions.

(Turn left on North Fork Flowage Road.)

#### 19. North Fork Flowage

The islands in the center of this flowage are managed as waterfowl nesting islands. They are periodically burned to reduce the woody vegetation and increase the grass, thereby creating favorable nesting habitat for ducks and geese. Waterfowl nesting on these islands have much higher nest success because nests are less likely to be destroyed by ground predators such as skunks, raccoons, and foxes.

(Turn around and go back to East Refuge Road. Turn left and follow to County Road "D".)

Thank you for visiting!

In conclusion we'd like to leave you with the following thought. It was written in 1964 by Richard Vogl who was one of the first to do a detailed study of the area.

"Sometimes man does not seem to recognize what is best ecologically for the land. Crex Meadows is an example of the land winning out despite all of man's efforts to change it. Here man has had to learn to live in harmony with his land and to respect the inherent ecological principles of this sand country. The first surveyors called Crex Meadows 'third rate, soil and timber worthless', but now, in terms of birds, plants and wildlife, Crex Meadows is of priceless value as one of the largest and most productive wildlife areas in the state, serving multiple purposes and attracting thousands of visitors every year."

We sincerely hope you've enjoyed  
your trip through Crex.

Please come again!

