

Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Receives High Marks from Visitors

Written by Claire Cassel

Wednesday, 16 May 2012 08:56

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Iowa, Minnesota, Wisconsin □ An overwhelming percentage of visitors to Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge 2010 and 2011 were favorably impressed with its recreational opportunities, education and services, according to a peer-reviewed government survey released today. Some 90 percent of respondents gave consistent high marks to all facets of their refuge experience.

The survey, commissioned by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and designed, conducted, and analyzed by researchers with the U.S. Geological Survey, evaluated responses from more than 200 adult visitors surveyed at the refuge between July 2010 and November 2011. Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge was one of 53 national wildlife refuges surveyed.

The National Wildlife Refuge System, managed by the Service, is the nation's premier system of public lands and waters set aside to conserve wildlife and wildlife habitat. Refuges protect thousands of species; more than 400 also are open to the public and popular recreation sites, noted for their hunting and fishing, paddling and hiking, environmental education programs and wildlife observation. More than 45 million people visited national wildlife refuges in 2011.

Some surveyed visitors (14%) reported they had only been to the McGregor District stretch of the refuge once in a 12 month period while most (86%) reported they were repeat visitors with multiple visits. These repeat visitors reported they had visited the refuge an average of 23 times during that same 12-month period.

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Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge was established in 1924 as a breeding place for migratory birds, game animals, fur-bearing animals, fish and other aquatic mammals. The 261 miles of marshes, wooded islands and floodplain forest provides homes and resting spots for countless numbers of fish and wildlife

"One of our respondents said that [visiting the refuge] "is a once in a lifetime experience that words cannot do justice." For those of us living along this river refuge we realize what a treasure we have right here in the heartland of America. A place where conservation efforts allow wildlife to thrive and visitors can appreciate their wildlife heritage, "said Refuge Manager Kevin Foerster.

Of survey participants,

- 92 percent reported satisfaction with recreational activities and opportunities;
- 79 percent reported satisfaction with information and education about the refuge;
- 72 percent reported satisfaction with services provided by refuge employees or volunteers; and
- 84 percent reported satisfaction with the refuge's job of conserving fish, wildlife and their habitats.

Some survey participants also volunteered enthusiastic comments, such as this one: "Refuges make me aware that I am a part of the American experience and not just an observer. Nowhere else do I feel such a deep sense of connection with the land, the plants, and the wildlife. Visiting a refuge is truly a spiritual experience."

Among the most popular refuge activities visitors engaged in were wildlife observations, bird watching, photography, hiking and auto-tour-routes. Most visitors also reported viewing refuge exhibits, asking information of staff or volunteers and visiting a refuge gift shop or bookstore.

USGS social scientist Natalie Sexton was the lead researcher on the report. The survey is available at <http://pubs.usgs.gov/ds/643/>

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The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. We are both a leader and trusted partner in fish and wildlife conservation, known for our scientific excellence, stewardship of lands and natural resources, dedicated professionals, and commitment to public service. For more information on our work and the people who make it happen, visit www.fws.gov.

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