



# ORIGINS OF A NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM

More than a century ago, members of the Boone and Crockett Club spearheaded efforts to set aside areas of land and water where conservation of our fish and wildlife is the number one priority. This is how it all began.



B&C Member Jay "Ding" Darling (top) and Paul Kroegel, defender of pelicans, (bottom).

Today, America's National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) System includes more than 567 refuges encompassing more than 150 million acres—larger than the states of Washington, Nebraska and South Dakota combined. Unlike national parks, which are created for the "benefit and enjoyment of the people," wildlife refuges are created for a specific purpose, typically to help restore one or two specific species in peril. This isn't to say

wildlife refuges are off limits to hikers, birders, hunters, and anglers.

More than 75 percent of our national wildlife refuges are open to the public with 50 million Americans visiting annually. Many of these places allow hunting. Where deemed appropriate and sustainable, hunting and fishing on national wildlife refuges are used as a management tool.

This article is hardly a complete history on the creation of our NWR system, which would be a monumental undertaking. Instead, we start at the very beginning where the "refuge idea" begins with a freshly minted Boone and Crockett Club, whose members cultivated the idea and then turned it into reality.

## APPLYING THE TOURNIQUET

The Carolina parakeet, with its bright yellow head and pale beak, was a sight to behold. It was the only indigenous parrot east of the Rocky Mountains. By 1918, it was gone. Extinct. Those pretty, colorful feathers played a large role in its demise. Birds of all colors were killed both for their meat and for their feathers and for their meat at the turn of the twentieth century. Records show that upwards of five million birds were killed every year just to supply the millinery trade.

Members of the Boone and Crockett Club, men like John F. Lacey, worked religiously to pass laws to end the wholesale slaughter of birds and other wildlife. The Lacey Act of 1900 prohibited trade

**In 2022, there are more than 567 refuges. Refuges provide habitat to more than 220 species of mammals, 700 species of birds, and 1,250 species of fish, reptiles and amphibians. Refuges also provide a place of recovery for nearly 400 endangered and threatened species.**

Learn more about Darling's contribution to conservation on page 44.



The Carolina parakeet (left) and other birds like egrets were slaughtered en masse for their feathers to adorn hats, feed restaurant menus and even make old-fashioned feather dusters.

in illegally taken wildlife, but for some species like the Carolina parakeet, it was simply not enough. Remnant populations of big game species like bison, elk, and pronghorn were roaming the West, but they were walking a narrow trail between survival and complete extinction.

In 1902, Theodore Roosevelt signed the first piece of game law legislation protecting the wildlife in the Alaska Territory. Numerous Club members worked on this legislation including Madison Grant, John F. Lacey, and William T. Hornaday. The legislation would become the model for game laws in the Lower 48 states. These new laws put pressure on market hunters and put them on notice. Passing legislation (enforcement was another issue) may have helped to slow the bleeding, but if wildlife populations were going to

recover, those birds, fish, and big game were going to need places set aside. They would need safe places where they could eke out an existence and recover.

### ROOM TO RECOVER

Near the town of Sebastian, on Florida's eastern seaboard, there lived a mustache-wearing, shotgun-wielding lover of pelicans. His name was Paul Kroegel, and the year was 1903. His home on the Indian River overlooked Pelican Island, also home to countless brown pelicans and other birds coveted for their plumage. Kroegel befriended ornithologist and Boone and Crockett Club member Frank Chapman. Chapman had a passion for birds. He parlayed that passion into a job as curator at the American Museum of Natural History,

These two men, along with others from the Florida

Audubon Society, pitched the idea of protecting Pelican Island's birds from poaching and plunder to President Theodore Roosevelt, a Boone and Crockett founding member. As a result, on March 14, 1903, President Roosevelt signed an Executive Order creating the three-acre Pelican Island Reservation. Kroegel became the reservation's warden, complete with badge, \$12 annual salary, shotgun, and boat.

While most historical records tout this as the first instance of a federal refuge, James B. Trefethen, in his book, *An American Crusade for Wildlife*, argues this may not have been the first. He notes that at the request of Club member and Secretary of the Interior John Noble, President Harrison set aside Afognak Island in Alaska as a salmon-spawning reservation. Harrison used the powers granted to him by the Forest

The Impact Series is dedicated to showing how sportsmen, members of the Boone and Crockett Club in particular, saved the wildlife and wild places of the United States. Early members of the Boone and Crockett Club comprised the movers, shakers, and initiators of the American conservation movement. They were hunters, anglers, explorers, lawmakers, soldiers, and above all conservationists. These members established laws that allowed our wildlife resources to flourish. They also protected landscape-scale geologic marvels and American icons like Yellowstone, Grand Canyon, Denali, and many, many more. These members may no longer be with us, but their legacy remains. This series aims to honor their accomplishments and remind us of the good work still yet to do.



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Reservation Creative Act of 1891, according to Trefethen.

Pelican Island, though, put the idea of animal refuges into both the public and political consciousness. More islands favored by birds would receive protection. That little barrier island with its shotgun toting protector became the first of 55 official reservations and preserves President Roosevelt would set aside.

Birds were not the only beneficiary of this radical idea. In their quest to restore the nation's fledgling bison populations, Club members worked to establish the Wichita Mountains Forest and Game Preserve in 1905 and the National Bison Range in 1908. Club member and National Audubon Society president T. Gilbert Pearson worked to protect a chunk of high desert in northern Nevada for both pelicans and pronghorn. In January 1931, President Hoover signed an executive order that created

the Charles Sheldon National Antelope Range at 34,325 acres. Today, the Sheldon-Hart National Wildlife Refuge Complex now spans 851,000 acres.

This laundry list of wins isn't to say that everything Club members proposed was met with rubber-stamp approval. In 1919, Club members tried to establish a refuge for mountain sheep (presumably bighorns) in the Black Hills, but it failed. In 1922, influential Club members Charles Sheldon and George Bird Grinnell failed to establish a refuge for desert sheep in Arizona. Even so, Club members were achieving their goals to help wildlife populations recover by setting aside and protecting land.

#### PAYING FOR IT ALL

Wildlife restoration has never been cheap, and groups like the Boone and Crockett Club and Audubon Society were able to foot the bill for

decades. Yet they could only raise so much. As the idea of a refuge system gained steam, it was apparent that acquiring more land was going to need more money.

In 1934, President Franklin Roosevelt appointed the Committee on Wildlife Restoration. Thomas Beck, Jay Norwood "Ding" Darling, and Aldo Leopold worked to outline a program that would be used to acquire lands for the conservation of not just waterfowl and songbirds but for upland game and mammals as well.

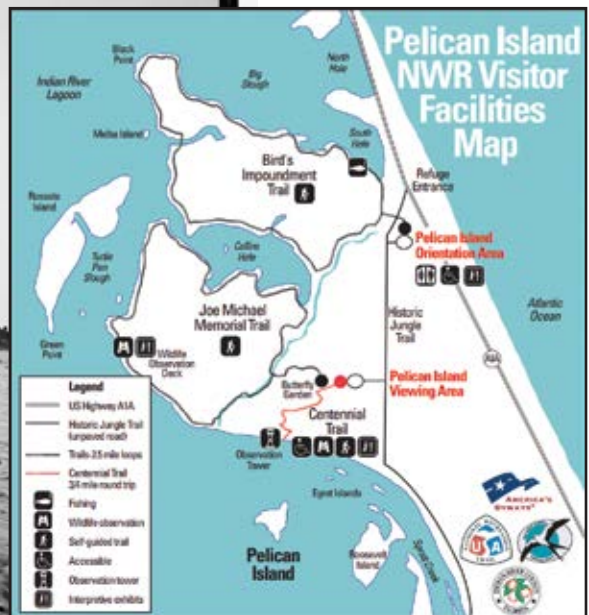
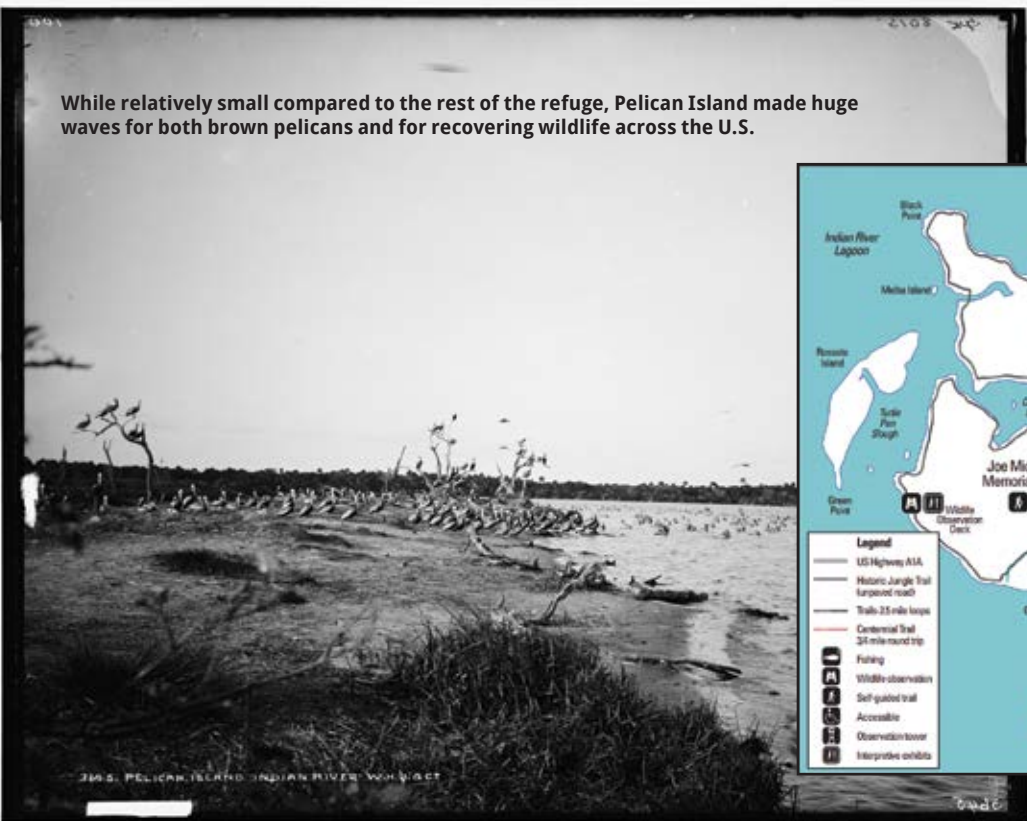
That same year, Congress passed the Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp Act, commonly referred to as the "Duck Stamp Act." All duck hunters would be required to buy this stamp, the first of which was designed by Ding Darling, a writer and Pulitzer-Prize winning cartoonist. In its first year, the \$1 stamp generated \$635,000, roughly \$12.5 million in today's

dollar. The Duck Stamp idea would become a massive conservation success and earn Darling the honor of being "the best friend a duck ever had."

Since its inception, the Duck Stamp has raised more than \$1 billion, the money being used to protect 6 million acres of wetland habitat. For every dollar spent on a Duck Stamp, 98 cents goes directly to purchase vital habitat or acquire conservation easements.

In the 1940s, the newly established Fish and Wildlife Service recognized four "flyways" of migratory waterfowl, which helped managers identify specific areas and habitat used by various species. Yet it wasn't until 1966 that the habitat previously set aside for fish and wildlife received recognition as the official National Wildlife Refuge System.

To learn how Boone and Crockett members have worked to continue building upon their successful wildlife restoration efforts, go online to read "Stewards of a National Refuge System" in the B&C Impact Series. ■



## FREDERIC C. WALCOTT THE HUMANITARIAN SPORTSMAN

**In mainstream conservation circles, Walcott is not a name you hear often—certainly not with the frequency of Roosevelt or Grinnell. And yet, Walcott is a name worth knowing. He was born into a very wealthy New York family. His grandfather had established the first cotton mill in the state. At Yale, he was a member of the secretive Skull and Bones society, and he graduated in 1891. He worked as an investment banker and in the cotton business in the early 1900s.**

Walcott was elected to the Boone and Crockett Club in 1905, but it would take a number of years before he would use his connections in the financial and political spheres for nationwide conservation efforts. Until then, he and Starling W. Childs began a partnership in 1909 to dabble in small-scale conservation on 400 acres of barren land around Tobey

Pond in his home state of Connecticut. Over several decades, they dedicated themselves to restoring and managing the land and reintroducing wildlife to the area. Over the next several decades, they secured several thousand additional acres to manage and experiment with native species to see what would thrive in the abused woodlands. Today, that reserve is now 6,000 acres and is known as Great Mountain Forest.

As a bird lover, Walcott traveled to Laguna Colorada in southern Bolivia in 1924. He had heard reports of a brick-red lake in the center of the desert in southern Bolivia. He went there to satisfy his own curiosity and at the behest of the American Museum of Natural History to study the bird life of the region. There he recorded sightings of up to 20,000 flamingos, the eggs of which were used as commerce and food by the locals.

### KEEPING POLITICS OUT OF WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT

Walcott was an active and vocal member of the American Game Protective Association, which was created in 1911 by Harry Leonard and William Clark of the Winchester Arms Company. The goal of the group was to promote wildlife restoration on a national and international scale. And the group's list of accomplishments is even longer than its name. It advocated paying game wardens a salary and creating wildlife refuges open to the public. The group pushed for real consequences for those who violated game laws, and Walcott himself lobbied for teaching conservation in schools.

To truly understand the progressive ideas of Walcott and the association, excerpts from his 1921 article "The Necessity of Free Shooting Grounds" in the group's newsletter are worth

Boone and Crockett Club members have come from a cross-section of famous accomplished people whose lives and careers have written and recorded the history of this country since the late 19th Century. They have been naturalists, scientists, explorers and sportsmen, writers and academicians, artists, statesmen and politicians, generals, bankers, financiers, philanthropists, and industrialists. Their diversity of ideas and activities during their careers have made the Boone and Crockett Club rich in its fellowship and achievements.



READ MORE MEMBER SPOTLIGHTS



Explorer, legislator, public servant, duck lover, and businessman, Frederic C. Walcott was an early member of the Boone and Crockett Club who served as Club president. His conservation achievements still resonate today, especially when it comes to waterfowl and wildlife refuges.

a read. “We believe that a man is a better man if he longs to go afield with rod and gun and dog, and the camera should be included; and that the realization of that longing brings him into close contact with the best, the most uplifting things in life,” wrote Walcott. “The sportsmen of America are our best citizens—clean of mind and body, resourceful, strong and courageous....The love of nature—of clean, vigorous sport in the open—is the antidote to the softening, weakening influences of modern civilization.”

And consider this: “Above all things politics must be kept out of the conservation department or nothing can be accomplished.” This article is a century old! Walcott called for more research and science in regard to wildlife management—before wildlife management was considered a science.

A pragmatic businessman, Walcott understood that if recovery of our nation’s wildlife was going to have a place to recover and to call home, waterfowl in particular, those efforts were going to need money. “A very practical side to this question of free shooting grounds is the

financial one,” he wrote. “There are approximately 7,000,000 sportsmen in the United States, and I sincerely believe that a Federal license is the best way of making possible a national movement in this direction. Did you ever stop to think of the proportion between the money you spend to hunt game and what you devote to game protection?” Not only was Walcott proposing a federal license system for hunters, but he was calling out hunters for spending too much money on gear and not enough on the resource. That’s where the Duck Stamp enters the picture.

### FATHER OF THE DUCK STAMP

Walcott was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1929, and he stayed there until 1935. With this role, “Walcott kept the club advised of conservation work on Capitol Hill and often sought the active aid of club members in legislation he was promoting in the Senate,” wrote William Sheldon in *A History of the Boone and Crockett Club: Milestones in Wildlife Conservation*.

Walcott, along with Boone and Crockett member J.N. Ding Darling, and the American Game Protective Association favored the sale

of a \$1 federal stamp, which waterfowlers would need to purchase prior to hunting. The proceeds from the stamp would be set aside for the purchase, development and management of wildlife refuges. The bill was introduced in the Senate by Walcott, and the Migratory Bird Hunting Stamp Act became law on March 16, 1934. While Darling certainly drew public attention to the Duck Stamp idea, it was Walcott who, decades prior, wrote about the idea. And it was Walcott who guided the legislation through until the very end.

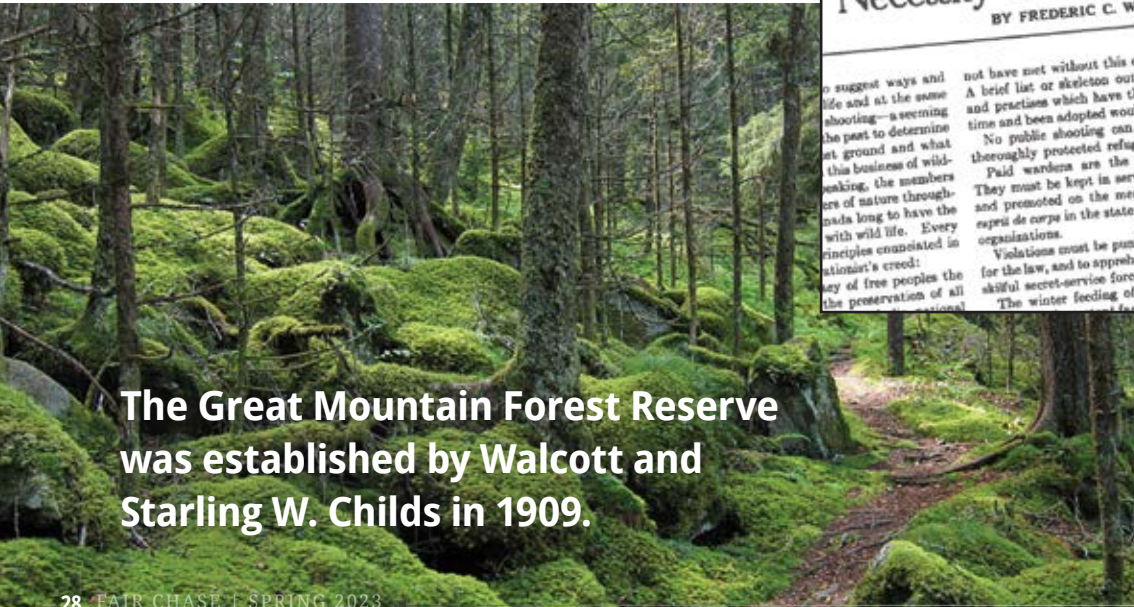
“He [Walcott] was instrumental in having the Senate Special Committee on the Conservation of Wildlife Resources organized and became its first chairman. As such, he aided in the passage of the Duck Stamp Bill,” wrote Albert Day, former chief of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

### A HUMANITARIAN LIFE

While we still reap the benefits of Walcott’s foresight and leadership in conservation, he is perhaps best known for his humanitarian

work. At the request of John D. Rockefeller, Walcott investigated the conditions of refugees in German-held Belgium during WWI—years before he worked in politics. He worked with Herbert Hoover to bring relief to refugees in Belgium and Poland. On assignment, he was accompanied by fellow Boone and Crockett member Caspar Whitney, director of the Commission for Relief in Belgium. When Walcott returned home, he called attention to the plight of refugees by publishing articles in *National Geographic*. Once the United States entered the war in 1917, Walcott would work for Hoover in the newly created United States Food Administration.

There is little doubt that Walcott’s service-oriented personality played a role in his later conservation work. He served as a U.S. Senator from 1929-1935 and would later serve as president of the Boone and Crockett Club from 1940 until 1948. One year later, the “Father of the Duck Stamp” would die in Stamford, Connecticut, at 80 years old. ■



**The Great Mountain Forest Reserve was established by Walcott and Starling W. Childs in 1909.**



In 1921, Walcott published an article in which he pitched the idea of a federal license system for hunters. Fellow Boone and Crockett member and artist Belmore Browne sketched out the first Duck Stamp to accompany Walcott’s idea.