



Document

originally published: Fish and Wildlife Service September 2011

excerpt from
Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge
Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan
a portion of Appendix F
Refuge Recommendations for WSAs
September 2011

F.3 Refuge Recommendations for WSAs

In total, Sheldon Refuge recommends 341,598 acres or 88% of the 388,802 acres found suitable for wilderness study be designated by Congress as wilderness as defined by the Wilderness Act of 1964. Nearly all of Sheldon Refuge possesses wilderness character but also has been influenced by human activities. Several WSAs determined to meet the definition of wilderness for the purposes of this review include lands previously proposed for wilderness designation. These WSAs continue to contain valuable wilderness resources and, with the exception of vehicle trespass, have been effectively managed to meet the mission of the Service, the purposes for Sheldon Refuge, and the purposes of the Wilderness Act for the past 36 years. Upon further review, Sheldon Refuge has determined the existing situation is not substantially different so as to preclude the effective and continued management of these lands as wilderness. Sheldon Refuge has also determined that lands within certain WSAs acquired subsequent to the initial 1974 wilderness recommendation are substantially similar to surrounding proposed wilderness areas both in terms of resource values and management requirements. Therefore, Sheldon Refuge makes the following recommendations for these WSAs.

F.3.1 Big Mountain WSA (#4 on map)

The entire 23,361-acre Big Mountain WSA is recommended for wilderness designation. This recommendation is consistent with the original 1974 recommendation and proposal. Today there are six additional permanent structures (i.e., guzzlers) within the WSA. No routes provide access to any of the six guzzlers and use of a helicopter would likely be necessary to conduct major maintenance or replacement, similar to initial construction. However, these guzzlers and the use of aircraft for their maintenance would not preclude the designation or management of this area as wilderness. Other developments and disturbances noted during the 1974 wilderness inventory are less visible today and no other management manipulation or intrusion has been identified as necessary for the management of the Big Mountain WSA, which would be inconsistent with wilderness purposes.

F.3.2 Sage Hen Hills WSA (#28 on map)

The entire 21,068-acre Sage Hen Hills WSA is recommended for designation as wilderness. This is not consistent with the original 1974 recommendation. No specific reason was given as to why this unit was not

recommended for wilderness designation in 1974, but Map 6 of the Wilderness Study Report (USFWS 1974) indicated “range rehabilitation” was planned for nearly the entire unit. Presumably, activities would have included additional fencing and intensive artificial water development listed as recommended management activities in Step 1 of the Management Framework Plan for the Catnip Mountain grazing allotment (BLM 1972). These planned activities did not occur, and today the Sage Hen Hills WSA remains some of the most undeveloped, pristine, and productive habitat for pronghorn and Greater sage grouse within Sheldon Refuge. Other than maintenance of fences along the Sheldon Refuge boundary, no specific actions have been determined necessary for the continued management of lands within this WSA which would be inconsistent with wilderness purposes.

F.3.3 Gooch Table WSA (#12 on map)

The entire 40,038-acre Gooch Table WSA is recommended for wilderness designation. This is consistent with the original 1974 wilderness recommendation and proposal. The Gooch Table WSA retains the same wilderness character as in 1974. The majority of the WSA was previously proposed for wilderness designation, but also includes 3,000 acres near Highway 140. which has not been proposed. Most of the 3,000-acre area near Highway 140 is open to the location of mining claims, but little prospecting has occurred, no claims have been established, and there is little or no need for management activities within the unit which conflict with wilderness designation. Therefore, the recommendation would protect and preserve wilderness character of the WSA but would not interfere or hinder any ongoing or planned mining activities. With the exception of a few historic vehicle routes and disturbances that are gradually recovering to a more natural appearance, the WSA remains unchanged from its natural condition and there is no need for active management to remove developments or conduct habitat restoration work. The isolation of the table topography and abundance of low sagebrush habitat create conditions such that the likelihood and need for aggressive wildfire suppression is low, but the importance and value to pronghorn and other sagebrush-dependent wildlife is high.

F.3.4 Fish Creek Mountain WSA (#9 on map)

The entire 13,786-acre Fish Creek Mountain WSA is recommended for wilderness designation. This is consistent with the original 1974 recommendation and proposal. There are two parcels of private land within the WSA, but motorized access has not been documented and is not likely necessary for their use or development. Currently the Service is in negotiations to acquire one of these parcels from a willing seller. It is expected that some management intrusion and use of motorized equipment would be necessary to remove abandoned water troughs and restore three developed springs within the unit. Otherwise, no specific management actions have been determined necessary for the continued management of the WSA that would be inconsistent with wilderness purposes.

F.3.5 Rye Creek WSA (#27 on map)

An area 17,453 acres in size within the eastern portion of the Rye Creek WSA is recommended for wilderness designation. The remaining 10,698 acres are not recommended primarily to allow the use of mechanical thinning of encroaching western juniper and prescribed burning to restore natural habitat and fire regime conditions to this portion of Sheldon Refuge. It is anticipated these activities would require repeated use of motorized and mechanized equipment and vehicles along previous established routes which would substantially affect opportunities for solitude and would reduce the natural appearance of the area. The cutting, thinning, and burning of native vegetation on the lands that are not recommended is also not consistent with the principles of wilderness management and would reduce the untrammeled natural character within this portion of the unit.

F.3.6 Round Mountain WSA (#26 on map)

Sheldon Refuge recommends this WSA be divided into two separate proposed wilderness areas allowing a former primitive route corridor to be reopened to public vehicle access. The eastern portion of the Round

Mountain WSA (15,548 acres) would be separated from the western portion of the Round Mountain WSA (20,600 acres) by a designated route corridor 100 feet wide consisting of approximately 172 acres extending from the northern Sheldon Refuge boundary to County Road 34A and including a 3-mile dead-end route extending to the west. This would be consistent with the original 1974 wilderness review and study, which recommended allowing this north-south route to remain in place. These routes are necessary for the removal, rehabilitation, and monitoring of several abandoned livestock developments located in the western portion of the Round Mountain WSA. Despite the fact both routes have officially been closed since the 1974 wilderness proposal, recreation users continually use OHVs and other vehicles on these popular routes, making rehabilitation ineffective. Sheldon Refuge anticipates regular vehicle use of these routes to support future management activities and continued use by the public. Once re-established, these routes would provide legal access to an existing BLM vehicle route connecting to Highway 140 in Oregon.

F.3.7 Catnip Mountain WSA (#8 on map)

An area 11,737 acres in size, which includes the southern portion of the Catnip Mountain WSA, is recommended for wilderness designation. The remaining 21,490 acres, which include the northern portion of the WSA, are not recommended. Disturbances from past vehicle use in the northern portion of the WSA have altered the natural appearance and are not recovering naturally. Sheldon Refuge is seeking to increase the range of wildlife-dependent recreation opportunities available, and recommending the entire WSA would conflict with this management direction. Currently there are few remote areas within Sheldon Refuge that provide vehicle access and opportunities for high quality wildlife viewing and hunting. Recommending the southern portion of the WSA would preserve wilderness character in the most undisturbed and naturally appearing portion of the WSA and enhance other remote recreation opportunities by allowing vehicle use along existing routes in the remaining portion of the WSA.

F.3.8 Big Spring Table WSA (#6 on map)

Sheldon Refuge recommends those portions of the Big Spring Table Unit and the Jackass Flats Unit, which are west of the identified primitive route be combined to form the approximately 48,915-acre Big Spring Table WSA and that this WSA be designated as wilderness. Despite the fact most lands within the Jackass Flats Unit have been open to location of mining claims, little prospecting has occurred, no claims have been established, and there is little or no need for management activities within the unit that conflict with wilderness designation. The only portion of the Big Spring Table and Jackass Flats units not recommended for designation is a 100-foot-wide corridor extending 8.3 miles from Highway 140 to the northern boundary of Sheldon Refuge consisting of approximately 100 acres. This corridor would continue to provide administrative vehicle access through the Jackass Flats portion of the WSA and would re-establish administrative vehicle access through the current proposed wilderness area to Oregon for maintenance of fence lines and wildlife water guzzlers within Sheldon Refuge. This recommendation would effectively split the proposed wilderness area leaving the portion containing Railroad Point as a separate area approximately 11,000 acres in size. Recommending the Big Spring Table WSA for wilderness designation would protect and preserve one of the most pristine and ecologically intact portions of Sheldon Refuge. When considered in combination with the adjacent Hawk Mountain and Sage Hen Hills WSAs managed by BLM, this recommendation would protect and preserve wilderness character of a continuous area approximately 102,600 acres in size.

F.3.9 Railroad Point WSA (portions of #6 and #17 on map)

Sheldon Refuge recommends those portions of the Big Spring Table Unit and Jackass Flats Unit east of the identified route (refer to unit maps) be combined to form the approximately 11,000-acre Railroad Point WSA and designated as wilderness. Despite the fact most lands within the Jackass Flats Unit have been open to location of mining claims, little prospecting has occurred, no claims have been established, and there is little or no need for management activities within the unit that conflict with wilderness designation. The only

portion of the Big Spring Table and Jackass Flats units not recommended for designation is a 100-foot-wide corridor extending 8.3 miles from Highway 140 to the northern boundary of Sheldon Refuge consisting of approximately 100 acres. This corridor would continue to provide administrative vehicle access through the Jackass Flats portion of the WSA and would re-establish administrative vehicle access through the current proposed wilderness area to Oregon for maintenance of fence lines and wildlife water guzzlers within Sheldon Refuge. This recommendation would effectively split the proposed wilderness area leaving the portion containing Railroad Point as a separate area approximately 11,000 acres in size.

F.3.10 Alkali Peak WSA (#1 on map)

Sheldon Refuge recommends nearly the entire 61,370-acre Alkali Peak WSA for designation as wilderness. The WSA includes the Alkali Peak Unit (51,414 acres) which was previously proposed for wilderness designation, the Upper Virgin Creek/Alkali Reservoir Unit (5,715 acres) which was acquired by the Service through purchase, and the Sagebrush Basin Unit (4,241 acres). The only portion of the WSA not recommended for designation is a corridor that is 100 feet wide and 4.25 miles in length consisting of approximately 51.5 acres. This corridor extends downstream along Virgin Creek from Alkali Reservoir and contains an administrative vehicle access route and several historic ranching structures. Management efforts for preservation of these permanent structures and regular vehicle use for administrative purposes are not be consistent with wilderness values. The Sagebrush Basin Unit was not recommended for wilderness designation in 1974 primarily due to anticipated mining and planned restoration activities that were inconsistent with wilderness management and necessary to meet the purposes for Sheldon Refuge. The area was subsequently withdrawn from mineral entry, which precluded additional mining activities, and the remaining management restoration activities (primarily the construction of erosion control structures and removal of sagebrush) have either been completed or are no longer considered necessary. The reaches of Virgin Creek within the WSA are relatively undisturbed and intact. Preservation and protection of wilderness characteristics would benefit the various nesting raptors and other wildlife sensitive to human activities and disturbances. Protecting and preserving the undeveloped low sagebrush habitats of Rock Spring Table in their natural conditions are important for the conservation of pronghorn, Greater sage grouse, and other sagebrush-dependent wildlife. Overall the Alkali Peak WSA contains truly remarkable scenery characterized by the broad high expanses of Rock Spring Table and the high vertical cliffs that form the canyon along Virgin Creek. The canyon affords isolation and remoteness to create outstanding opportunities for wilderness solitude.

F.3.11 Hell Creek WSA (#14 on map)

Sheldon Refuge recommends the entire 13,969-acre Hell Creek WSA for designation as wilderness. The WSA includes a small portion of land previously proposed for wilderness designation, but primarily consists of that portion of Sheldon Refuge used to support the reintroduction of California bighorn sheep. This area was previously not recommended for wilderness designation due to the need for a large fence enclosure, water developments, and associated vehicle use and access routes. The reintroduction was successful, and the developments and access routes are no longer necessary for management purposes. The Hell Creek WSA possesses a diversity of habitats, remarkable scenery, and nationally important prehistoric resources in a remote and undeveloped setting. These characteristics provide outstanding opportunities for wilderness solitude and primitive and unconfined types of recreation.

F.3.12 Guano Creek WSA (#13 on map)

Sheldon Refuge recommends the entire 4,133-acre Guano Creek WSA for designation as wilderness. This area was not found suitable during the 1973 wilderness review due to historic cultivation for agriculture. Subsequent management by Sheldon Refuge has substantially restored the natural designation. When combined with the recommended Rye Creek WSA and Sheldon Contiguous WSA managed by BLM, this recommendation would protect and preserve wilderness character on a continuous area approximately 45,183 acres in size.

F.3.13 Massacre Rim Contiguous WSA (#20 on map)

Sheldon Refuge does not recommend the 334-acre Massacre Rim Contiguous WSA for designation as wilderness. This recommendation is consistent with the current BLM recommendation for adjacent lands in the Massacre Rim WSA.

F.3.14 Sheldon Contiguous Inholdings WSA (#30 on map)

Sheldon Refuge recommends the entire 119-acre Sheldon Contiguous Inholdings WSA for designation as wilderness. This recommendation is consistent with the current BLM recommendation for adjacent lands in the Sheldon Contiguous WSA.

F.3.15 Fish Creek Table-Little Catnip WSA (#10 on map)

Sheldon Refuge recommends two separate portions of WSA be designated as wilderness. The recommendation would include an area approximately 8,755 acres in size west of Little Catnip Spring Road and another area approximately 20,371 acres in size north of County Road 8A. These lands represent some of the most intact natural habitats on Sheldon Refuge. The vast expanses of intact undeveloped sagebrush habitat, which are only occasionally visited by people, provide a sense of complete isolation and outstanding opportunity for wilderness solitude. Natural conditions are untrammelled, and ecological function is largely intact requiring few management activities. The remaining 14,483 acres of the Fish Creek Table-Little Catnip WSA is not recommended for wilderness designation to allow continued and planned activities to restore and manage wildlife habitats. These management activities include prescribed burning along Andy's Place Road, maintenance of Swan Lake Reservoir and the earthen dam, and mechanical thinning of shrubs and trees on and around Bitner Butte. All of these activities are anticipated to require repeated long-term use of large vehicles and associated access routes, motorized and mechanized equipment, and other tools to manipulate the structure and function of habitats within portions of Sheldon Refuge. These tools and activities are considered necessary to fulfill the purposes for Sheldon Refuge but are generally not consistent with the principles of wilderness management.

F.3.16 Bateman WSA (#3 on map)

Sheldon Refuge recommends the entire 5,772-acre Bateman WSA for designation as wilderness. This recommendation would protect and preserve relatively pristine and intact mountain mahogany habitats in their natural condition. These habitats are considered essential for fulfilling the purposes of Sheldon Refuge and for maintaining biological health, integrity, and natural diversity.

F.3.17 Tenmile WSA (#31 on map)

Sheldon Refuge recommends the entire 3,702-acre Tenmile WSA for designation as wilderness. This recommendation would be consistent with the 2009 BLM findings and conclusion for the Ten Mile Spring WSA and would protect and preserve relatively pristine and intact mountain mahogany habitats in their natural condition. These habitats are considered essential for fulfilling the purposes of Sheldon Refuge and for maintaining biological health, integrity, and natural diversity.

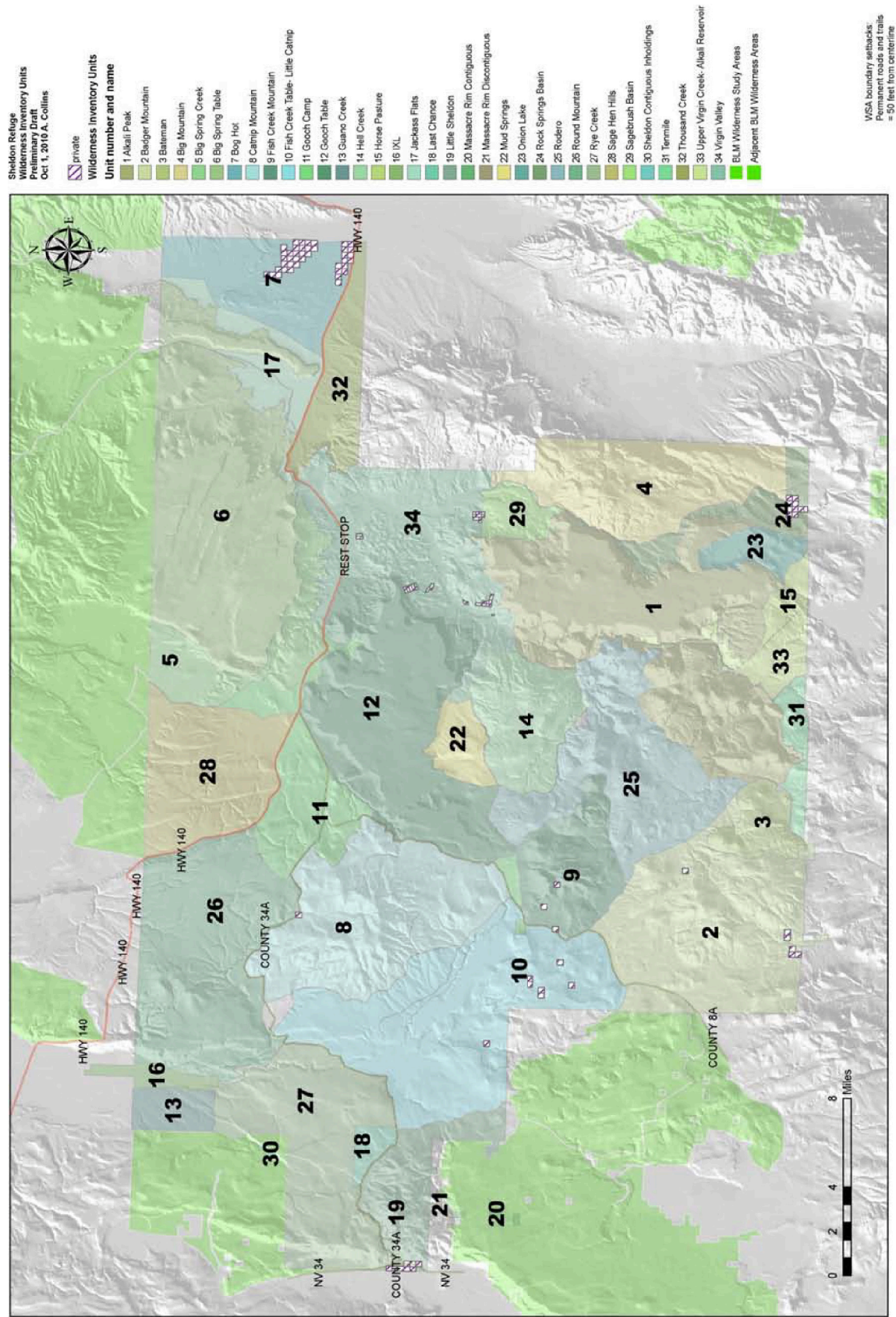


Figure F.1 Sheldon Refuge Wilderness Inventory Units.