RHODE ISLAND

NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE COMPLEX

As the cliché goes, good things come in small packages. In the tiny state of Rhode Island, on a handful of small parcels of land totaling only about 2,600 acres, a colossal and diverse congregation of wildlife gathers. Among its numbers are species rare, or rarely seen, and also the numerous and conspicuous. In winter, flamboyantly costumed harlequin ducks—daredevils that summer in isolated whitewater rivers and turbulent ocean environs in northern Canada and Alaska—share the Atlantic shoreline with scores of other wildlife, including harbor seals. Male woodcocks perform aerial dances in refuge skies, under the appraising eyes of females. Migrating raptors pepper the sky with bird traffic in fall. Snow buntings, eiders, scoters and loons, yellow-breasted chats and American black ducks, along with some 300 other species of birds, can be found here at the Rhode Island National Wildlife Refuge Complex.

Congress established this cluster of five refuges in the mid-1970s, primarily for birds migrating along the Atlantic Flyway, and it has become a gem in the refuge system. The complex contains some of the most important migratory bird habitat on the East Coast. Nearly half a million people visit Rhode Island wildlife refuges each year to experience a flock of tree swallows passing over like a dark cloud, or to watch thousands of migratory waterfowl at Ninigret Pond, or for the glimpse of a flying squirrel nesting in an aged tree, or perhaps just for a moment of peace away from harried East Coast roads and cities at Rhode Island's last undeveloped coastal ponds.

But all is not well at Rhode Island refuges. Despite Congress's clear direction to prioritize environmental education and other wildlife-dependent recreational uses, years of inadequate budgets and staffing have steadily eroded the refuges' ability to adequately comply with the mandates of the refuge improvement act. Such a collection of wildlife habitats within close proximity to population centers naturally provides ample opportunity for valuable environmental education, but an extreme budget shortfall for national wildlife refuges in the state has left the refuge system struggling to maintain basic educational programs.[21] These programs—which bring children from city schools to the refuge to learn of salt ponds, vernal pools and the wildlife dependant on these unique and ever-decreasing habitats—are being slashed and visitor facilities are closing. For many students, these refuge programs are their only introduction and link to the natural world.

Rhode Island National Wildlife Refuge Complex | © William H. Johnson

Harlequin ducks | © Gary Kramer/garykramer.net

Along with the outreach funding crunch, these refuges, like so many others, have long faced declining land acquisition dollars. Funding in the past two years is merely a third of what it was five years ago, making it incredibly difficult to compete in the race against fast-paced, high-dollar developments. Given that the improvement act requires that U.S. ecosystems be conserved by strategically expanding the refuge system, the paltry land acquisition dollars provided by the Bush administration and Congress in recent years have been grossly inadequate and do not fulfill the promise of the 1997 legislation. Though the Rhode Island refuge complex maintains the ultimate goal of protecting approximately 5,000 acres, it currently has managed to cobble together only half of that. Much of the surrounding acreage has already been lost to development, making it all the more important to protect what's left.