

TREMPEALEAU

NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

In spring, at the edge of marshlands thick with water lilies and bulrushes, black terns and wood ducks go to work assembling a family home and nursery for the season. Terns dredge marsh plants decaying on pond bottoms and make small floating nests for their eggs. Wood ducks arrange twigs and grasses in the cavities of hardwood trees, softening the cradle with down from the female's breast. And so begins the next generation at Trempealeau National Wildlife Refuge.

Thousands of wood ducks and black terns share the Wisconsin skies above the confluence of the Trempealeau and Mississippi rivers with monarch butterflies, blue-winged teal and hooded mergansers. Some 250 species of birds appear here, including double-crested cormorants, indigo buntings and more than a dozen species of warblers.

Congress set aside this land in 1936 as habitat for migratory waterfowl and other wildlife in the heart of the Mississippi Flyway. Though much of the refuge's 6,200 acres is marsh and open pools favored by water birds, it also contains hardwood forests, meadows and a rare remnant of sand prairie, long ago sculpted by glacial sand deposits. Several centuries ago, natives referred to this entire region as the Trempealeau Prairie. Back then, it was a land filled with prairie chickens and meadowlarks amid Indian grass, switchgrass and big bluestem, which reached 8 feet tall. With the spread of agriculture, most of the prairie disappeared, along with the prairie chickens. But at Trempealeau refuge, patches of prairie have rebounded and come alive with meadowlarks, grasshopper sparrows, wild turkey, Blanding's turtles and white-tailed deer.

This revival, however, could be a hard-fought but short-lived victory. The salvaged land along with the forests and wetlands here are now under invasion by non-native plants, such as leafy spurge, purple loosestrife, quackgrass, smooth brome grass and black locust trees. These plants are choking out native hardwoods, grasses and forbs and transforming the landscape. In the bottomland forests, invasive species have devoured up to 90 percent of the understory.¹³ And while maintaining the biological integrity and diversity of the refuge is a priority issue—as called for by the refuge improvement act—the

Monarch butterfly | © Allen Blake Sheldon



emaciated refuge system budget has crippled Trempealeau's defenses. Due to lack of funding and inflexibility on how available money is spent, the refuge has had to devote most of its meager resources to guarding the rare and fragile prairie habitat, while conceding to the invasion of forestlands.

Trempealeau is merely one refuge in a system crumbling under the weight of invasive plants and animals. Invasive species are the top threat to refuges listed by refuge managers nationwide, and an estimated \$361 million of invasive species control projects sit idle, waiting for resources.¹⁴ Given the enormity of the threat, the Fish and Wildlife Service

implemented mobile "strike teams" to assist in controlling the problem. Unfortunately, implementation of these teams has been uneven across the country, and funding for invasives control has been far from adequate. The situation grows worse each year that funds are withheld. At Trempealeau, the staff's ability to monitor and control invasive species is being further eroded by staff cuts while invasive species march unimpeded across the landscape. For species like the wood duck, which is now slowly rebounding from population setbacks in the 1980s, the decline of mature forest habitat caused by invasive trees such as the black locust, Siberian elm and Scotch pine will take its toll. Staff reductions will also mean the end of waterfowl surveys, duck banding and prairie and stream restoration programs, all of which help restore and protect the biological integrity of this refuge.¹⁵



Wood duck | © Allen Blake Sheldon