

# **Great Meadows National Wildlife Refuge Dog Policy**

Effective July 1, 2005, consistent with the Eastern Massachusetts National Wildlife Refuge Complex Comprehensive Conservation Plans, dogs will no longer be permitted on refuge lands at Great Meadows and Oxbow National Wildlife Refuges. Dogs have never been permitted at the Assabet River National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) and that policy will remain in effect.

## **Why are dogs no longer allowed?**

The Fish and Wildlife Service evaluated whether continued dog walking on National Wildlife Refuges was compatible with public safety and wildlife resource conservation in our recently completed Comprehensive Conservation Plans. We found that continuing to allow dog walking on National Wildlife Refuge lands was not advisable because:

- Such use has, and would continue to compromise public safety;
- Such use is likely to continue to result in conflicts with other refuge visitors;
- Such use poses a threat of harassment, disturbance, and harm to wildlife resources, which the Service is mandated by federal law to manage for – first and foremost.

National Wildlife Refuges are established and managed, by law, to ensure that wildlife conservation and protection comes first. Today, over 220 individual species of birds, numerous mammals, and amphibian & reptile species depend on the Eastern Massachusetts refuges for survival. (No formal surveys or inventories have been conducted on the refuge for mammals, amphibians, or reptile species).

National Wildlife Refuges are also places for people. We encourage visitors to come and enjoy the natural environment through nature walks, wildlife observation, photography, environmental education, fishing, and hunting. These are the priority public uses for which we will continue to manage. There is special focus on these activities because they help foster an appreciation and understanding of wildlife and the outdoors. The number of visitors to our refuges is rapidly expanding. The Conservation Plans find that allowing dogs on the refuge conflict with these priority public uses.

### **Has the public had an opportunity to Comment on this Action?**

Yes. The public was invited on several occasions to provide comment regarding this and all other public uses, including how we manage wildlife refuges during development of the Comprehensive conservation plans for each refuge. These Conservation Plans were finalized in January of 2005.

Public workshops were developed, public hearings held, formal public comment periods were opened, and a draft of Comprehensive Conservation Plans were distributed to solicit public input on management of the refuges. The Service distributed responses to the many public comments we received. In accordance with results from the final review, the Comprehensive Conservation Plans call for elimination of dog walking on area National Wildlife Refuges by 2005. For more information, you may request a copy of the Comprehensive Conservation Plans from our office, or obtain them on the web at <http://www.fws.gov/northeast/easternmanwrcomplex>.

### **Why aren't dogs compatible with the mission of putting wildlife first on the Eastern Massachusetts Refuges?**

- Dogs can intimidate other refuge visitors, and deprive them of the peace that refuges provide. Visitation to the National Wildlife Refuges is expanding, potentially aggravating user conflicts;
- Dog feces left on trails are an unhealthy and unsightly nuisance to refuge visitors and impact refuge vegetation. The presence of dog feces on public trails is one of the most common complaints we receive.
- Dogs, whether leashed or unleashed, conflict with the refuge efforts to provide recreational opportunities for a myriad of visitors and many school groups which visit the refuges for environmental education,
- Dog walking has resulted in user conflicts with persons engaged in priority public uses (wildlife observation, photography, etc.);
- Instinctively, dogs want to chase wildlife. Unleashed dogs commonly chase nesting wildlife, which can result in destruction of ground nests and young. Dogs may step on nests or young chicks, as they “freeze” in response to danger;
- Wildlife can't distinguish between dogs on leashes or unleashed dogs. Many will leave their nests or young, leaving them vulnerable to be killed by predators, or a long separation can result in death;
- Even a tame dog can cause alarm or fear of wildlife;

- Resources needed to manage dog use detract from our ability to focus efforts on providing high quality wildlife dependent priority use programs;

**Did you consider allowing dogs on leash?**

Yes. Despite the many dog owners who responsibly keep pets leashed, there are many who do not. Our staff and volunteers estimate that as many as 25% to 40% of the persons walking their dogs do not keep them on leash.

Wildlife does not differentiate between dogs on or off a leash. Dog walking is not a priority public use on National Wildlife Refuges, and interferes with or detracts from the mandated purpose of the refuge in putting wildlife conservation first.