

D. Maintaining Existing Conservation Areas

More than 50% of Alaska has been designated in federal or state conservation units. These units have differing levels of conservation and management for wildlife species and their habitats, offering varying challenges and opportunities for wildlife managers. In total, Alaska has 208 major state and federal land management units that can be considered as having been designated for, or otherwise engaged in some aspect of, wildlife conservation (Chris Smith, Alaska Public Lands Information Office, personal communication).

Many people think of Alaska's conservation lands as its state and national parks and preserves, forests, wildlife refuges, and recreation areas. However, there are surprises in the mix. For example, seven land units with very active wildlife habitat management programs are run by the DOD, making that agency—like many others—a valuable prospective partner in implementing the goals and objectives of Alaska's CWCS.

Regardless of their jurisdiction and management goals, managers of wildlife conservation lands face similar challenges; among them are:

- a) growing numbers of visitors, whether residents or tourists;
- b) increasing demand for, and effects from, public access (e.g., off-road vehicles, kayaks, aircraft);
- c) insufficient fiscal resources for day-to-day management and/or long-term planning;
- d) reduced connectivity among and between conservation lands (including shrinking numbers of safe stopover habitats for migratory bird populations);
- e) fragmentation of habitats outside conservation areas; and
- f) natural changes (e.g., climate change or isostatic uplift that reduce the wildlife values for which an area was originally designated).

Some of these challenges have become particularly acute for the land units designated by the Alaska Legislature for management by ADF&G as "Special Areas."

State Special Areas

Anticipating growth and change in the state, Alaska's early legislators began formally recognizing lands needed for the conservation of wildlife under the tenets of Article VIII, Section 7 of the Alaska Constitution: "The legislature may provide for the acquisition of sites, objects, and areas of natural beauty or of historic, cultural, recreational, or scientific value." Now evolved into a system of 32 individual state game refuges, critical habitat areas, and game sanctuaries, Alaska's special areas encompass nearly 3 million acres ranging from Cape Newenham State Game Refuge in the Bering Sea to Stan Price State Game Sanctuary in Southeast Alaska. See Figure 35, below.

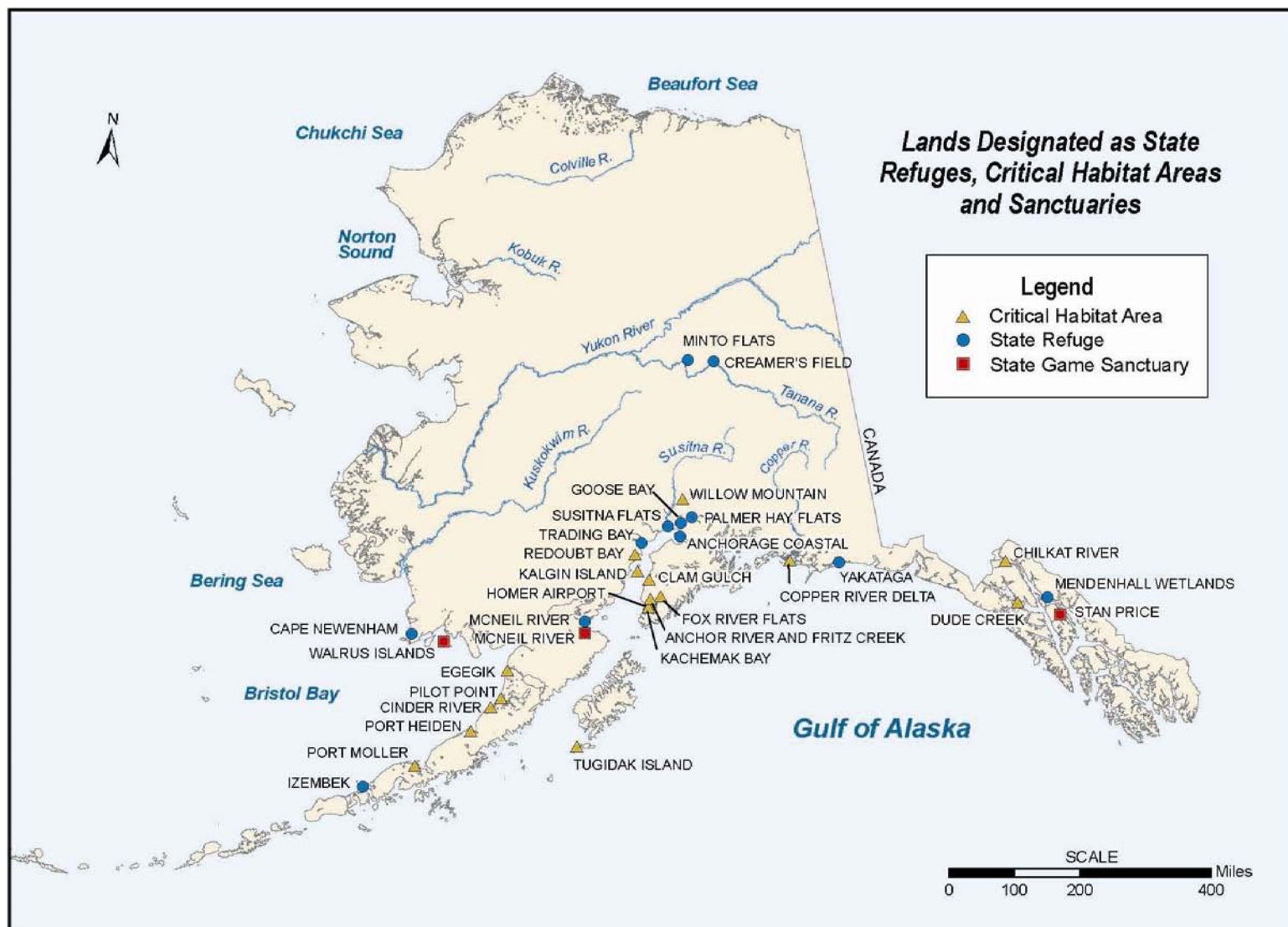


Figure 35. Lands Designated as State Refuges, Critical Habitat Areas and Sanctuaries

Each special area is characterized by a habitat that is optimal to a species or group of species. While some areas were set aside to benefit hunted species and ensure hunting opportunity, others were created to benefit multiple species.

Many of the areas were designated specifically because they contain rich wetlands, tidelands, and nearshore waters that are critical to waterbirds and shorebirds. For example, state critical habitat areas along the Bristol Bay side of the Alaska Peninsula are important staging and stopover sites for shorebirds dispersing to nonbreeding areas through the Americas, Oceania, and Australasia, and for breeding birds returning to arctic and subarctic habitats in the spring. Some species depend heavily on state-designated and other conservation units because they have specialized habitat needs. Examples include Brant and Emperor Goose use of Izembek State Game Refuge, and the Marbled Godwit, whose nesting appears restricted to the Egegik Bay and Port Heiden Critical Habitat Areas.

Background

Alaska's first special areas were established in 1960, immediately after statehood. One of the first was Walrus Islands State Game Sanctuary, created to protect a world-renowned haulout for walrus. The primary purpose of the sanctuary at the time of its creation was to protect the last remaining land haulout for walrus (*Odobenus rosmarus*) in North America. All other land haulouts had been



Walrus at Walrus Islands State Game Sanctuary

J. Hyde, ADF&G

abandoned, presumably due to harassment from commercial hunters and other disturbances. The sanctuary provides important habitat for walrus and now comprises one of four primary haulout sites used by walrus in Bristol Bay. The sanctuary also protects important habitats for many species of seabirds, Steller sea lions (*Eumetopias jubatus*), and other marine and terrestrial birds and mammals.

The sanctuary protects a group of seven small islands and their adjacent waters in northern Bristol Bay, approximately 80 miles southwest of Dillingham. One of the islands, called Round Island, is known for extraordinary scenic views and wildlife watching: Each summer, 8,000 to 12,000 male walrus haul out on the exposed rocky beaches of Round Island. The department manages the sanctuary primarily to protect these important species and habitats, but also to foster opportunities for public use and enjoyment, including scientific and educational study, viewing, and photography.

McNeil River State Game Sanctuary, an area world-famous for its unique summer concentrations of feeding brown bears, was established in 1967. A population of 60 to 100 brown bears travels from up to 30 miles away to feed on migrating salmon at McNeil River Falls, providing premier wildlife viewing opportunities in relatively close proximity to Anchorage. A third sanctuary, Stan Price near Juneau, is also world-famous for bear photo and viewing opportunities.

In the 1970s and 1980s, additional refuges and critical habitat areas were created in rapid succession as citizen groups around the state became concerned about protecting their most productive hunting, fishing, and wildlife viewing areas.

The majority of the special areas were created for the protection of waterfowl and shorebirds. Spectacular concentrations of waterfowl and shorebirds stop to rest and feed in Alaska's coastal wetlands on their way to and from Arctic nesting grounds. Each spring and fall, these protected wetlands provide a critical stop for millions of migrants along the Pacific flyway. One of these areas, Izembek State Game Refuge, has been designated a Wetland of International Importance in recognition of its use by millions of migrating waterfowl and shorebirds. Four state critical habitat areas (CHAs)—Copper River Delta, Kachemak Bay, Homer Airport, and Fox River Flats—are included in units of the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network because of their importance to shorebirds. In fact, the Copper River Delta Critical Habitat Area supports the largest gathering of shorebirds in the Western Hemisphere.

The Chilkat River CHA in Southeast Alaska was established for the protection of the largest known concentration of bald eagles in the world. Other special areas were established for moose, fish, and shellfish. A recent addition, the Dude Creek CHA, was established for the protection of an important sandhill crane staging area.



Chilkat River eagles

J. Hyde, ADF&G

Kachemak Bay and Fox River

Flats CHAs were legislatively designated in the early 1970s to protect natural habitat crucial for perpetuation of fish and wildlife, especially fish, crab, shellfish, shorebirds, and waterfowl. In 1999, Kachemak Bay was included in the national system of NERRs (National Estuarine Research Reserves); boundaries of the federally designated Kachemak Bay NERR include over 365,000 acres of lands and waters, mostly (228,000 acres) within the Kachemak Bay and Fox River Flats CHAs but with approximately 137,000 acres falling within the Kachemak Bay State Park and Wilderness Area.

Kachemak Bay has been identified by the World Bank as a regional priority for the conservation of marine biodiversity. The bay's protection and international designations have attracted researchers from around the world to study temperate marine ecosystems and climate change. Little research currently exists on temperate marine protected areas; thus, Kachemak Bay offers unique opportunities for understanding biological responses to special management and exogenous variables, such as climate change or fishing pressure.

Human Uses of Special Areas

As Alaska's population has increased, so has public use of special areas, many of which are among the most popular hunting, fishing, and wildlife viewing areas in the state. Besides the game sanctuaries and CHAs noted above, nine other special areas are within easy air or automobile access of Anchorage and Fairbanks: Anchorage Coastal Wildlife Refuge; Palmer Hay Flats, Susitna Flats, Minto Flats, and Trading Bay State Game Refuges; Kachemak Bay, Redoubt Bay, and Clam Gulch



Fishing, viewing, and brown bears at Wolverine Creek, Redoubt Bay Critical Habitat Area
J. Meehan, ADF&G

CHAs; and Creamer's Field Migratory Waterfowl Refuge. The pressures on these areas to provide for the sometimes competing needs of hunters, anglers, wildlife watchers, subsistence users, mushers and retriever training enthusiasts has increased tremendously in the past two decades. Meanwhile, the state budget dollars with which to prepare, update, and implement balanced management plans have withered. As shown in Appendix 10 (Alaska's Special Areas: Management Planning Status), over a dozen special areas remain without a site-specific management plan. With greater access and human use, degradation of these areas and increasing conflicts among user groups are likely.

Land Status and Regulatory Framework

State special areas are jointly administered by DNR and ADF&G. While DNR holds title to all state lands, including special areas, ADF&G has day-to-day management authority for most special areas and is responsible for managing uses of the land through the issuance of special area permits. Special areas are managed to minimize habitat alteration and species disturbance and to ensure recreational access. An ongoing challenge is to educate the public about the difference in requirements for use of general "multipurpose" state lands and state special areas. The latter are managed to a higher standard, expressly for the purpose of conserving unique wildlife resources and opportunities for their use.

Needs and Opportunities

Many of Alaska's conservation lands are highly valued internationally; indeed, Denali National Park is the most visited park or protected area in all of the Arctic. Alaska will benefit from enhanced monitoring of its conservation lands and waters, including with regard to impacts from site usage.

The CWCS is an important tool in identifying opportunities related to Alaska conservation lands and waters. For example, experts noted that such areas can serve as long-term monitoring and research sites to assess species population levels, detect and track effects of a warming climate on habitats, and flag encroachment by nonindigenous species. They also mentioned the need to expand public support by educating people about these unique areas' value to wildlife and to local economies, and providing avenues for local involvement in land use decision-making.

Another opportunity the CWCS provides is to increase the public's understanding and appreciation of the extent to which special areas and other conservation lands and waters can form a critical interlinked network for wildlife, especially migratory birds. Experts in our process strongly recommended identifying and protecting these linkages and partnering across jurisdictions to help maintain the values of Alaska's conservation areas for fish and wildlife. One model for doing so is CAFF's Circumpolar Protected Areas Network (CPAN) initiative. For over a decade, scientists and resource managers from USFWS, ADF&G, NOAA, USGS, and other organizations have participated in this Arctic Council working group, whose purpose is to support and promote protected areas, conserve key habitat throughout the Arctic, and better conserve all biogeographic zones in the circumpolar Arctic, including the marine environment. The Council's Protection of the Marine Environment (PAME) initiative follows a similar model, helping to focus attention on management of the circumpolar marine environment as a series of large marine ecosystems (LMEs), four of which include parts of Alaska (see <http://www.edc.uri.edu/lme/clickable-map.htm>).

Echoing CPAN and PAME participants, experts in Alaska's CWCS support working with fisheries managers and coastal communities to set aside geographic and/or temporal marine reserves to protect benthic habitats used as nursery and feeding areas for multiple species, including commercially important target species. In many cases, these areas need additional inventory to further identify important species, habitats and trophic relationships.

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