

Lake Wales Ridge

National Wildlife Refuge



photo: USFWS



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Refuge Facts

- Established: 1990.
- Acres: 1,194 (Currently four tracts).
- Located in Polk and Highlands Counties, FL.
- Location: Lake McLeod Tract (30 acres) located one mile south of the community of Eagle Lake on Gerber Dairy Road.
- Snell Creek Tract (135 acres) located five miles east of Davenport on SR 531.
- Carter Creek Tract (629 acres) located ten miles southeast of Avon Park on Arbuckle Creek Road.
- Flamingo Villas Tract (1171 acres) located five miles east of Sebring on SR 98.
- Administered by Merritt Island NWR.

Natural History

- First refuge established specifically for recovery of endangered and threatened plants.
- Contains 23 listed plants, more than 40 endemic plants, and four threatened wildlife species.
- The ridge is an ancient beach and sand dune system formed one to three million years ago. The sandy, nutrient poor soils support a unique community of plants and animals. Many of the plants are found nowhere else in the world outside the Lake Wales Ridge.
- Today, about 85% of the original scrub habitats have been lost to development. The refuge is part of a network of scrub preserves owned by the state of Florida, The Nature Conservancy and others.

Financial Impacts of Refuge

- Refuge is an unmanned satellite of Merritt Island NWR.
- The refuge is currently being acquired and it will be some time before sites are opened to the public.

Refuge Objectives

- Protect, restore and manage ancient scrub habitats.
- Work in partnership towards the recovery of unique, threatened and endangered endemic plants and animals.
- Increase public understanding and appreciation through outreach, environmental education and compatible recreation.

Management Tools

- Prescribed fire to restore and maintain the scrub ecosystem.
- Mechanical chopping of overgrown scrub prior to prescribed fire.
- Mechanical/chemical control of exotic plants.
- Fencing and signing to protect sites.
- Law enforcement to provide site protection.
- Public outreach and education to build public understanding, appreciation, and support.
- Partnerships.
- Research relative to best management practices for species recovery.

Public Use Opportunities

None at this time.

Calendar of Events

March: Greater Lake Wales Ridge Birding Festival.

October: Scrub Appreciation Day.

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Questions and Answers

Why was the refuge established?

The Lake Wales Ridge NWR is home to plants and animals found nowhere else in the world. Unfortunately, 85 percent of the original ridge habitat has been lost to citrus production and residential development.

During the late 1980s, a group of scientists conceived the purchase of a system of sanctuaries that would protect the best remaining parcels of habitat to ensure the survival of the plants and animals of this vanishing ecosystem. The State of Florida, The Nature Conservancy, and the Fish and Wildlife Service are working in partnership to ensure the long term protection of the native plants, animals and natural communities of this unique region of central Florida.

What makes the Lake Wales Ridge NWR unique?

The 2.3 million year old scrub ecosystem of the Lake Wales Ridge NWR is Florida's oldest natural system. The ridge formed when sea levels were much higher than today. During this period all that remained above sea level of the Florida peninsula was a series of islands, similar to the way the Bahamas appear today. Isolated from other populations the plants and animals on these isolated archipelagoes evolved in response to their environmental conditions.

Today, the seas have receded and the sandy hilltops along the central Florida ridge are home to 23 of the nation's rarest plants, four rare animal species, and four globally rare plant communities. In addition, scientists estimate that fully one-third of the species in the region including a variety of arthropods have evolved only here.

How is the Lake Wales Ridge NWR being preserved?

Since the mid-1980s, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the State of Florida, The Nature Conservancy, and other government and private entities have invested more than \$75 million in purchasing 19 scrub parcels.

In 1994, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service purchased its first scrub tract on the ridge, establishing the country's first national wildlife refuge for endangered plants. The Service is currently purchasing four tracts that may eventually total about 2,400 acres.

The State of Florida has made the Lake Wales Ridge NWR one of their highest priority purchases and is purchasing 10 tracts. The Nature Conservancy, Archbold Biological Station and Bok Tower Gardens are private conservation landowners involved in the project. As land management programs were being developed managers from the private, state and Federal agencies recognized the need to coordinate and share information, planning, and problem solving across the landscape. To this end, the Lake Wales Ridge Ecosystem Working Group was established in 1991.

In 1996, the working group began developing an ecosystem management plan that includes fire management, species inventory and monitoring, development of GIS data sharing, and an ecosystem-wide community education and outreach plan.