

# National Wildlife Refuge Engagement and Stewardship Plan



**Congress of the United States**

**House of Representatives**

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**GA-D1**

# District 1 National Wildlife Refuge Engagement and Stewardship Plan

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Georgia's 1st Congressional District

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## Executive Summary

Georgia's 1st Congressional District is home to six National Wildlife Refuges, representing some of the most biologically diverse and historically significant lands in the southeastern United States. These refuges belong to the American people, yet too often citizens are disconnected from their stewardship and the opportunities they provide for service, recreation, and healing.

The District 1 National Wildlife Refuge Engagement and Stewardship Plan creates a framework to reconnect citizens to these lands through **three annual "Special Weekends"** hosted at each refuge:

1. **Volunteer Stewardship Weekend** – Citizen-led maintenance and conservation.

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2. **Youth Hope Hunt** – Outdoor experiences for children battling serious illnesses.
3. **Wounded Warriors in the Wild** – Healing outdoor experiences for combat-wounded veterans.

This plan unites patriotism, service, and conservation while enhancing the visibility of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) and promoting District 1 as a national model for public-land engagement.

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## Participating Refuges within Georgia's 1st Congressional District

1. **Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge** – Folkston, GA
2. **Blackbeard Island National Wildlife Refuge** – Near Sapelo Sound, GA
3. **Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge** – Townsend, GA
4. **Wolf Island National Wildlife Refuge** – Near Darien, GA
5. **Wassaw National Wildlife Refuge** – Near Savannah, GA
6. **Savannah National Wildlife Refuge** – Hardeeville, SC / Port Wentworth, GA

Each refuge will tailor the program to its unique environment, wildlife, and visitor infrastructure.

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## I. Volunteer Stewardship Weekend: “Take Care of What’s Ours”

### Objective

Empower citizens to actively maintain, restore, and improve the lands they collectively own by working side-by-side with refuge staff and biologists.

### Implementation

Each refuge will host one annual **three-day volunteer camping trip** (Friday–Sunday). Registration will occur through a central **District 1 Volunteer Portal**, managed in partnership with USFWS and local refuge offices.

### Core Activities by Refuge:

- **Okefenokee NWR:** Dock and boardwalk staining, trail clearing, and waterway cleanup along the Suwannee Canal.
- **Blackbeard Island NWR:** Beach and dune cleanup, trail maintenance through maritime forest, habitat restoration for nesting sea turtles, and signage repair.
- **Harris Neck NWR:** Painting historic structures, improving picnic and educational areas, and maintaining nature trails.
- **Wolf Island NWR:** Beach and marsh restoration (boat access only), removal of marine debris, and erosion control work.
- **Wassaw NWR:** Dune fencing and sea turtle nesting site protection, invasive plant removal, and trail marking.
- **Savannah NWR:** Visitor center improvements, impoundment litter collection, tree planting, and facility painting.

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## Refuge Support & Logistics:

- Primitive camping or bunkhouse lodging where available.
- Tools and materials supplied by refuge maintenance staff and community partners.
- Meals coordinated through local civic groups, churches, and businesses.
- Evening programs featuring guest speakers from USFWS, local conservation organizations, and tribal representatives.

## Outcome Metrics:

- Total volunteer hours and conservation projects completed.
  - Local media coverage and public engagement statistics.
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## II. Youth Hope Hunt: “Healing in the Woods”

### Objective

Offer children facing cancer and other serious illnesses the chance to experience the peace and joy of nature through safe, accessible, and life-affirming outdoor activities.

### Implementation

Each refuge will host one annual **Youth Hope Hunt Weekend**, with participants selected via a **lottery system** coordinated with regional hospitals and non-profits (Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta, Outdoor Dream Foundation, etc.).

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## Core Features:

- **Eligibility:** Children ages 10–17 with qualifying medical documentation.
- **Safety & Accessibility:** Adaptive blinds, mobility assistance, and medical volunteers available on-site.
- **Supervision:** Refuge officers and certified guides ensure compliance with USFWS safety and hunting regulations.

## Refuge Customization:

- **Okefenokee NWR:** Ground-blind deer hunts near custom food plots and canal edges.
- **Blackbeard Island NWR:** Youth archery deer hunts and wildlife observation programs focusing on deer, shorebirds, and sea turtles (depending on season).
- **Harris Neck NWR:** Youth deer hunts in open fields and managed habitats, with adaptive blinds.
- **Wolf Island NWR:** “Camera hunts” and wildlife photography competitions for non-lethal engagement.
- **Wassaw NWR:** Guided wildlife viewing and fishing experiences for children with mobility challenges.
- **Savannah NWR:** Managed deer or hog hunts with full safety oversight and family inclusion.

## Community Role:

Local hunting clubs, outdoor retailers, and volunteer groups will donate equipment, meals, and lodging. Each participant receives a “**Junior Steward**” **Certificate** recognizing their contribution to conservation.

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## Outcome Metrics:

- Participant numbers and diversity.
  - Family and healthcare provider testimonials.
  - Social and local media engagement outcomes.
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## III. Wounded Warriors in the Wild: “Honor, Heal, and Hunt”

### Objective

Provide wounded veterans with therapeutic outdoor experiences designed to promote healing, fellowship, and reconnection to nature.

### Implementation

Each refuge will host one annual **Wounded Warriors Weekend** in partnership with the **Wounded Warrior Project**, **DAV**, **VFW**, and local veteran service organizations.

### Refuge Activities:

- **Okefenokee NWR:** Guided deer and hog hunts with adaptive UTV transport.
- **Blackbeard Island NWR:** Saltwater fishing and shoreline hunting opportunities for mobility-limited veterans; boat access coordinated through USFWS.

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- **Harris Neck NWR:** Ground-blind deer and turkey hunts, plus evening fireside recognition events.
- **Wolf Island NWR:** Beach fishing, bird photography, and boat-access recreation for veterans.
- **Wassaw NWR:** Coastal nature excursions and group reflection sessions.
- **Savannah NWR:** Multi-day deer and waterfowl hunts capped with a **Veterans Honor Banquet** hosted by local civic organizations.

### Support Components:

- Lodging, transportation, and meals arranged through local sponsors.
- Volunteer medical and counseling staff on-site.
- Closing flag ceremony recognizing all participants.

### Outcome Metrics:

- Number of participating veterans and volunteers.
- Post-event satisfaction surveys and health outcomes.
- Public engagement and awareness metrics.

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## IV. Administration & Oversight

- **Lead Agency:** U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS)
- **District Coordination:** Office of the Georgia 1st Congressional District Representative
- **Local Partners:** County governments, chambers of commerce, veteran organizations, civic clubs, conservation NGOs

## National Wildlife Refuge Engagement and Stewardship Plan

- **Funding:** Combination of federal grants, private sponsorships, and voluntary contributions
  - **Reporting:** Annual “District 1 Refuge Engagement Report” submitted to Congress and the USFWS Southeast Region
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## V. Economic, Educational & Environmental Benefits

1. **Economic Impact:** Increased eco-tourism and community business participation during event weekends.
  2. **Educational Benefit:** Enhances public understanding of wildlife management, habitat protection, and civic conservation.
  3. **Environmental Stewardship:** Tangible habitat restoration and maintenance.
  4. **Civic Engagement:** Unites veterans, youth, and citizens in shared service to their land and country.
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## Conclusion

The District 1 National Wildlife Refuge Engagement and Stewardship Plan transforms Georgia’s coastal and inland refuges into models of community service, patriotic stewardship, and environmental care. These three annual events — **Volunteer Stewardship**, **Youth Hope Hunt**, and **Wounded Warriors in the Wild** — restore the vital connection between people and the public lands they own, setting a precedent for national replication and long-term refuge sustainability.

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