

# Sportsmen Speak Out for the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge

## Background

Sprawling more than 1.1 million acres, the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge (CMR) in north-central Montana is truly a sportsman's paradise. Healthy populations of mature mule deer, elk and bighorn sheep range along the refuge's remote coulees and ridgelines, as do large flocks of sharp-tailed grouse and sage-grouse. In 1935, Olaus Murie, the Missouri Breaks' pioneering wildlife biologist, wrote in a report,

*"There is a glamour of early exploration over it all, the romance of historical events. The very landscape is appealing. A camp out in the badlands, with the jumble of carved and stratified buttes perhaps mellowed by the setting sun or set off by cloud formations at dawn, leaves nothing to be desired."*

The following year Franklin D. Roosevelt issued an executive order establishing the area we now know as the CMR (it was first known as the Fort Peck game range).

Every 15 years the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) is required to undergo a Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) and Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) that defines the long-term management for the refuge. The initial draft documents are expected to be released for public comment this Fall. The FWS has already identified four alternatives and has identified alternative D ("managing for ecological processes") as their preferred draft alternative. The National Wildlife Federation (NWF) and the National Wildlife Refuge Association (NWRA) strongly believe this is the best option for maintaining quality hunting and wildlife viewing, as well as for improving wildlife habitat. Sportsmen have played a crucial role in conserving this treasured landscape and FWS greatly needs your support.

## Key Issues

### Wildlife Habitat

FWS wants to aggressively reduce weeds, monitor key plants, and allow important shrub species to recover from the impacts of grazing. They anticipate such management will benefit upland bird species like sharp-tailed grouse, as well as elk, mule deer and pronghorn. The FWS is striving for landscape-level biological diversity while maintaining the primary mission of the refuge - sustaining balanced wildlife populations.

### Big Game

Big game on the CMR has been managed to provide a high-quality experience for sportsmen. Diverse age classes of animals can be found in a variety of habitats. Mature buck deer and bull elk are found in far greater numbers on the CMR than other public land in eastern MT. From a single vantage point, a lucky hunter might be able to spot bighorn sheep, mule deer, elk and antelope.

### Fire

While historically fire occurred every 7-14 years on the refuge, many areas have not seen fire for more than 100 years. Their preferred draft alternative recommends re-establishing the naturally occurring fire cycles with small prescribed patch burning and utilizing naturally occurring burns during the summer. Prescribed burning on some areas on the refuge could benefit wildlife dramatically and provide quality habitat for nesting sage grouse, sharp-tail grouse, mountain plovers and large ungulates. The lush grasses that come up after a burn will provide game with quality forage and decrease the number of animals wandering onto private land. While we understand the crucial role fire plays on the refuge, we, however, also understand the necessity to protect key sage-grouse habitat from fire. In recent history, naturally occurring fire has left its mark on the CMR landscape. FWS reports that 20% of the refuge has burned in the past 10 years as a result of naturally occurring lightning strikes. Through the use of fire and grazing, plant species not seen in decades should recover to their historical occurrence.



Bull elk © Robin Poole

### Grazing

The CMR has a long and complicated history of grazing and livestock management. Established in 1936 as a game range, livestock were managed by the Bureau of Land Management until 1976, when Congress determined all game ranges be converted to National Wildlife Refuges. Since then, grazing has been administered by the FWS under the National Wildlife Refuge Administration Act of 1966 rather than the Taylor Grazing



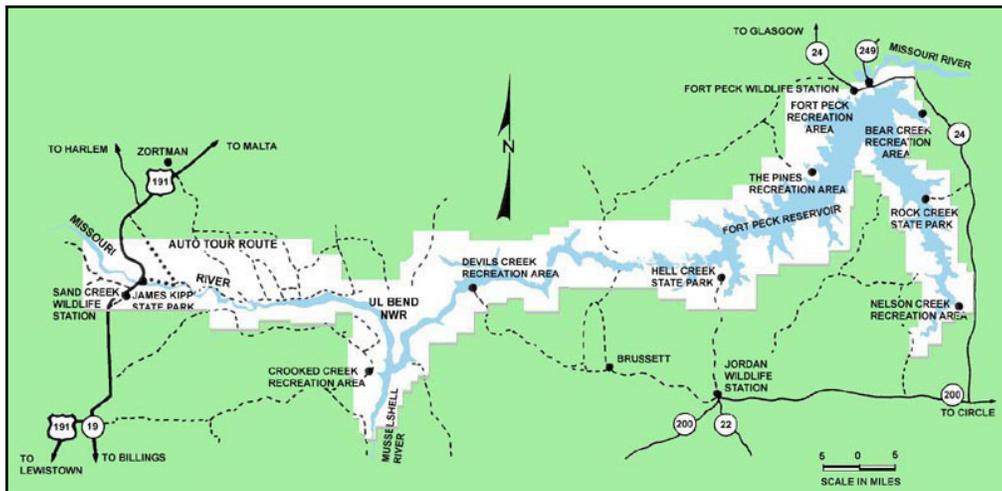
Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge  
© Matt Lavin

*On some places on the refuge, a lucky hunter can see bighorns, mule deer, elk and antelope from one vantage point.  
Pronghorn antelope © Barrett Walker*



Act. This means FWS can charge fair market value for grazing (as much as \$20 per animal unit month [AUM] as compared to \$1.50 on BLM or Forest Service lands).

In the 1986 EIS, FWS determined that wildlife habitat was not being adequately protected with the amount of livestock grazing permitted on the refuge. It subsequently reduced grazing from 66,000 AUMs to 44,000 AUMs. Grazing levels have continued to decline since, mostly because the refuge does not allow transfer of grazing permits outside of family members.



The 1.1 million acres Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge (CMR) in North-central Montana.

In its preferred draft alternative, the refuge proposes to move from the existing method of “term” grazing (where ranchers are assured of grazing on an annual basis on a specific area of the refuge) to “prescriptive grazing” (where livestock grazing is used as necessary to improve wildlife habitat). Such a move to prescriptive grazing would allow FWS to remove more interior fencing to facilitate the long-distance movement of wildlife species such as elk and antelope. Moreover, fewer cattle on the refuge translates into more forage available for large ungulates and increased shrub cover for upland birds.

### Public Use/Recreation

The CMR is visited by nearly 250,000 people annually, according to a recent FWS survey. During the fall months, hunters spend a combined 100,000 days pursuing game on the refuge. The bird-watching, elk viewing, and fishing and hunting opportunities are endless. The FWS understands the value of public use on the refuge and has stated they will “meet needs of all users”. The CMR is extremely accessible. According to a recent FWS survey, 82% of the refuge is accessible within one mile of a road or waterway. Of the current 680 miles of road on the refuge, their preferred draft alternative proposes to reduce only a small number of roads. These closures include roads that are only accessible from private land or areas where greater security is needed for big game populations.



Canoeing the CMR © Barrett Walker

### Wilderness

What makes for a quality hunt varies from sportsman to sportsman. While many hunters depend on road access within the CMR, others prefer to have large tracts of roadless lands to pursue their game. The proposed alternative would decrease acreage in several proposed wilderness areas while adding to several existing areas.

### Reintroductions

The refuge proposes to defer to Montana’s Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks regarding restoration of species native. Future reintroductions considered for the CMR include bison, swift fox, pallid sturgeon and bighorn sheep. The highest interest reintroductions involve bison and bighorn sheep. The NWF and the NWRA support the concept of having a free-ranging bison herd on the CMR where fair chase hunting could take place. Significant potential for a major bighorn sheep herd exists on the south side of the Missouri River in Garfield County. We would like to work with landowners in the area to see if a possible reintroduction could proceed there.



Sage-grouse © BLM

### Endangered Species

Federal agencies are required to “use all methods and procedures necessary” to restore threatened and endangered species. The CMR continues to maintain a fragile black-footed ferret population. Other species proposed for listing include the mountain plover, sage-grouse, and black-tailed prairie dogs.



Bird hunter © Robin Poole

For more information, visit [www.fws.gov/cmrf](http://www.fws.gov/cmrf) or contact:

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