



KUFM RADIO COMMENTARY

October 7, 2010

## Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge

Kit Fischer, Charles M. Russell NWR Outreach Coordinator  
National Wildlife Federation  
Northern Rockies and Prairies Regional Center  
Missoula, Montana

Axle deep ruts, mud gumbo so thick it could stop an elk in its tracks, and a scent of sage so strong it hits my nose like a ton of bricks. I've long deserted my coffee as both hands are dedicated to the wheel – navigating the deep interior roads, lost in a maze of coulees and rich green river bottoms.

Exactly a century after the beginning of the Lewis and Clark expedition (1903), President Theodore Roosevelt established in Florida the first of our national wildlife refuges, and the long road toward the preservation and restoration of our wildlife resources was at last underway. There are now more than 550 National Wildlife Refuges across the country, of which the CMR is considered a crown jewel.

Driving east along the Missouri river in the 1.1 million acre Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge it is hard to imagine that much has changed in the 200 years since Lewis and Clark first ventured up the “Big Muddy”. Nearly 250,000 people make the trek out to north central Montana to visit the CMR annually—bird watchers, wildlife viewers, fishermen and hordes of hunters swarm the breaks in the fall for one reason; a chance to experience wild Montana.

The CMR is a sportsman's paradise and has been crowned the most popular hunting area in the state. Hunters spend more than a combined 100,000 days pursuing game on the refuge and hold a large stake in the future of the refuge—and the future of the CMR is being determined now. Every 15 years the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is required to undergo a Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Impact Statement that defines the long-term management of the refuge. This has been an intensive process, years of research and public comments have shaped the proposed plan. The key issues being discussed in the plan are: A change in the livestock grazing patterns on refuge lands, increased prescribed burns, re-evaluating proposed wilderness areas and managing for a diverse age class of big game. The NWF supports the FWS in their proposed alternative “managing for ecological processes.”

In 1805 as Lewis and Clark made their way up the Missouri through the present day CMR, Lewis remarked in his journal the abundance of wildlife. “As usual, saw a great quantity of game today: buffalo, elk, goats or antelope feeding in every direction... the game is now in great

quantities, particularly the elk and buffalo... the country is as yesterday beautiful in the extreme.” Lewis was finally so overwhelmed by the great herds of wildlife that he vowed to make no further mention of their incredible numbers in his journal. Nearly every species of animal that Lewis and Clark viewed on their journey through the breaks can still be found—however, the most notable absence are grizzly bears, wolves, and American bison.

The CMR has been identified as the premiere landscape in MT to restore a free-roaming bison herd. A conservation herd, managed by American Prairie Foundation, already exists north of the UL Bend Wilderness area and most of the livestock grazing in the area has been eliminated. The stage is set for a recovery effort, where once again a free-roaming, huntable population of bison could exist on the vast plains of Eastern MT. But, the stakes are high, and the politics are complex. Many ranchers are wary of the concept—as well as state and federal wildlife officials. The age-old balance of livestock and wildlife has been in a precarious balance for decades and the CMR is no exception. The newest bumper sticker in the area reads “don’t buffalo me”.

The refuge has a long and complex history. First managed as a game range by the BLM and now as a National Wildlife Refuge by the FWS, several factors complicate its future. The refuge boundary is mostly unfenced—and much of the land adjoining the refuge is privately owned or managed by the BLM—most of this land is grazed at much higher levels than would be appropriate for a wildlife refuge. The growing season on the CMR is short and the rainfall is scarce and grass is a valuable commodity.

So what’s the future of the CMR? The current plan recommends “prescriptive” cattle grazing. This is a lower intensity form of grazing designed to benefit wildlife habitat—increasing native shrubs and allowing plants to fully recover from the effects of livestock. This type of grazing, in theory, is to mimic the historical patterns of bison that once roamed throughout the Breaks. With its size and diversity, no other refuge or national park in all the Great Plains can match the Charles M. Russell.

The NWF strongly urges you to submit comments to the CMR FWS management plan. You can learn more about CMR planning by contacting the NWF or by visiting [www.nwf.org](http://www.nwf.org) and search for CMR Refuge. If you have ever visited the Breaks, you understand what a special place the CMR is—a place worth protecting—truly the “big open”.

As Charlie Russell once wrote, “Guard, protect and cherish your land, for there is no afterlife for a place that started out as heaven.”

This is Kit Fischer, Charles M. Russell NWR Outreach Coordinator at the National Wildlife Federation...thanks for listening.