



JAMES JOHNSTON

Where Eagles Fly

Klamath National Wildlife Refuge is for the birds

The Pacific Northwest has hundreds of National Wildlife Refuges of every size, managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for the benefit of everything from antelope to butterflies. There's a best time of year to visit each, depending in part on the type of the wildlife for which the different refuges are managed. The granddaddy of them all — sometimes called the Everglades of the West — is the Lower Klamath Wildlife Refuge. The best time of year to visit is the dead of winter, when almost three quarters of Pacific Flyway waterfowl flock to this giant 50,000-acre sanctuary.

Although the refuge itself is just across the border in California, the nearest town of any size, and your jump off point for refuge adventures, is Klamath Falls, county seat of Klamath County and the largest town in south-central Oregon. The quickest way get there is to drive Hwy. 58 east of Eugene over Willamette Pass and turn south on Hwy. 97. The trip will take you approximately 3 hours if pass conditions cooperate.

Unless you're prepared for cold weather, reserve a motel room in Klamath Falls and proceed south on 97 for approximately 17 miles. Just across the border, turn east (left) on Hwy. 161 at the sign for the Lower Klamath Refuge. In 9.8 miles, turn south (right) on a wide gravel road. This is the starting point for an auto tour.

Before European settlement, the headwaters of the Klamath River formed a massive wetland complex composed of almost 200,000 acres of shallow lakes and freshwater marshes stretching almost a hundred miles from Tule Lake in California to upper Klamath Lake on the Oregon side of the border. Over six million birds visited the basin during their migration.

In 1905, the US Bureau of Reclamation launched the Klamath Reclamation Project, which drained more than 75 percent of historic wetlands to create farmland. As homesteaders rapidly ate up prime farmland, market hunters swarmed the Klamath Basin, slaughtering huge numbers of ducks, herons, grebes and egrets for meat and plumage. Today, bird populations peak at about a million.

In 1908, Teddy Roosevelt leaped into action, designating the remaining unclaimed lands as the nation's first waterfowl refuge. Today, most of the refuge is very flat and covered with water for all or part of the year. The rest is grassy uplands and cropland that is in-

tensively managed to produce forage and habitat for birds. Much of what appears to be shallow marshland and streams is, upon closer inspection, controlled by a complicated network of canals and irrigation gate valves. The entire Klamath Basin, in fact, is a vast, man-made plumbing system. Most of the water goes to farmers; some of it goes to the birds.

The 10-mile driving tour takes you through the heart of the refuge and a variety of habitats. Tundra swans and geese are most prominent in the winter. Spring brings avocets, stilts, teals, American bitterns, curlews and American white pelicans.

The most impressive winter spectacle is the sunrise "flyout" of hundreds of bald eagles from the woody slopes of the nearby Bear Valley National Wildlife Refuge to their perches on gnarled cottonwoods at the Lower Klamath Refuge. To see it for yourself, position yourself on the Ward-Keno Road, a couple miles west of Hwy. 97. The eagles travel from as far north as the Yukon and scavenge on a veritable smorgasbord of frozen bird and animal carcasses. In a good year, more than 500 eagles roost at night on old growth snags at Bear Valley.

A smaller but equally attractive destination for bird viewing is the Tule Lake Refuge. To get there, continue east on Hwy. 161 and turn south (right) on Hill Road (the corner store at the junction has one of the best collections of arrowheads anywhere). Tule Refuge is a system of marshes and swamps built around Tule Lake. At 13,000 acres, it's just 13 percent of its pre-settlement size. Like the Lower Klamath, an auto tour is the best way to experience the birds. And like the Klamath, a number of short trails lead to wildlife blinds, excellent habitat for wildlife photographers.

Continuing south from the Tule Lake Refuge takes you into Lava Beds National Monument, a bizarre volcanic moonscape with prominent views north to the wildlife refuges. The lava beds feature numerous caves and tunnels, from which the Modoc war chief Kintpuash (often known by his moniker Captain Jack) and 53 of his warriors held off a thousand cavalry troopers for seven months between 1872 to 1873 during one of the more interesting and bloody conflicts in California's history.

As fabulous as the wildlife viewing and scenery is today, it's hard not to think about how much more spectacular the scene would have been 140 years ago. **EW**

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