



Globally Important Bird Areas



Big Oaks National Wildlife Refuge, Indiana (formerly Jefferson Proving Ground)

Ornithological Highlight: Grassland on the site supports one of the largest known populations of the watch-listed Henslow's Sparrow, populations of which have declined precipitously throughout much of its range.

Ownership: U.S. Army; most of the area is managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as an "overlay" refuge.

Size: Refuge is approximately 50,000 acres; Jefferson Proving Ground originally was 55,264 acres.

Location: Jefferson, Jennings and Ripley Counties

- *Central Hardwoods* (NABCI Bird Conservation Region #24)
- *Interior Low Plateaus* (PIF Physiographic Area #14)

Habitats: mature forest; successional forest; shrubland; grassland; wetlands

Site description: Found on the closed Jefferson Proving Ground, historically the majority of the site was forest, but most had been cleared and converted to agriculture prior to 1940, when the U.S. Army acquired it as an ammunition testing site. Surrounded by agriculture, the site has largely reverted to forest, in various stages of succession, though periodic burns originally prescribed to reduce the threat of fire connected with munitions testing have maintained about 5,000 acres of grassland. The refuge is very important as the largest tract of public land in the region, with many rare plants and animals found on it, including several maternity colonies of the federally endangered Indiana Bat. Big Oaks NWR is an "overlay refuge." The area is managed as a national wildlife refuge by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, though it remains in Army ownership because of the liability problems associated with munitions.

Birds: A recent census counted 900 pairs of Henslow's Sparrow, one of the largest known breeding populations of this species. The site also supports many area-sensitive nesting birds in both the grassland and the forest. Northern Harrier, Dickcissel and Prairie Warbler breed there; the latter is common. Cerulean Warbler breeds in the forests in good numbers, as do Wood Thrush, Acadian Flycatcher, Ovenbird, Kentucky Warbler, Hooded Warbler and Worm-eating Warbler. Red-headed Woodpeckers are also found on the site.

Conservation issues: Under a recent agreement with the Army and Air Force, the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service will operate Big Oaks NWR through a 25-year real-estate permit with the Army retaining ownership of the land. The Air Force will retain use of a bombing range (Jefferson Range; 1,033 acres), which is not included in the portion designated as a national wildlife refuge, and is located near the center of the former proving ground. Large safety buffer areas separate the Air Force range from public use areas of the refuge. Most of the grasslands located on the

former installation's cantonment area (the area south of the former firing line) have been leased to commercial enterprises and subsequently converted to agriculture. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service manages the grasslands on the refuge through an annual prescribed burning program. Since the military mission ceased in 1995, fires associated with munitions testing were discontinued, and the refuge reinstated periodic fire for the welfare of the Henslow's Sparrow. Successional forest areas are being allowed to reconnect larger blocks of mature forest for neotropical migrants. Development potential on much of the refuge is limited because of the presence of unexploded munitions and the prohibitive cost associated with efforts to remove it—some of the bombs are seven feet below the surface of the ground. Much of the munitions are on areas which are burned; since the hazard precludes entry, the fires are managed from the edges and the area cannot be mowed. Complete census of the birds there are not possible, but birds are surveyed through road transects and study plots.

Visitor information: Due to the presence of unexploded ordnance, visitor access to the refuge is limited. Four thousand acres in the northeastern corner of the refuge is seasonally open for wildlife observation, fishing, photography, interpretation and environmental education. An additional 15,000 acres is open to seasonal deer and turkey hunting. The refuge can be contacted at 1661 West JPG Niblo Road, Madison, IN 47250, tel. 812-273-0783.