

Whitewater WMA Management Plan Update

At about 27,000 acres, the Whitewater Wildlife Management Area is the eighth largest WMA in the state, providing habitat for a range of species. Located within two hours of the Twin Cities and halfway between Rochester and Winona, its proximity to much of the state's population also makes it one of the most popular units open to the public for hunting, trapping, wildlife watching and other activities. The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources is now in the process of revising the WMA's management plan, to make sure it continues to provide healthy habitat and quality recreational opportunities.

Overview

The Whitewater WMA extends across portions of Winona, Wabasha and Olmsted counties. It's located in rugged coulee country, a "driftless area" missed by glaciers in the last ice age 12,000 years ago. Because of this, the erosive forces of water and wind have carved valleys with elevation differences of 500 feet in some areas. Named for the Whitewater River, which flows through it, the WMA is one of eight major wildlife areas where DNR stations permanent staff.

Habitat types

Whitewater includes a mosaic of plant communities and habitat types, including some that are rare or unique. Mixed hardwood forests of oak, hickory, maple, basswood and walnut cover the steep hillsides. Bluff prairies dot south-facing slopes, and trout streams dissect the valley floor. Seventeen wetlands (both naturally occurring and man-made) dapple the valley.

Wildlife

Whitewater is home to a variety of wildlife, including nearly 40 rare species. Commonly hunted species found there include white-tailed deer, turkeys, ruffed grouse and squirrels. Waterfowl, shorebirds, wading birds and aquatic furbearers benefit from the 15 water impoundments that are drawn down every few years to mimic natural drought cycles and to encourage aquatic plant regeneration that attracts invertebrates. Wildlife

watchers can spot sandhill cranes, ducks, geese, swans, black terns, hawks, eagles, owls and many other birds, both residents and those passing through during spring and fall migrations.

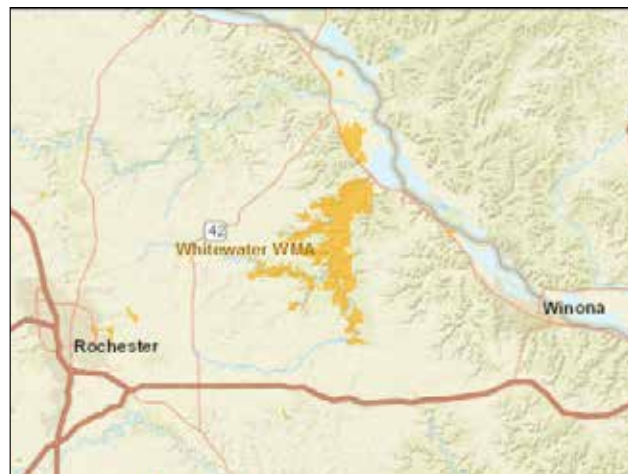
Recreational use

Whitewater's location within an easy drive of major population centers such as the Twin Cities, Rochester and Winona, make it a popular destination. Recreation in the WMA is dominated by hunting and fishing. Approximately 48 percent of the use is deer hunting. Trout fishing makes up 25 percent, small game hunting, 12 percent; all other activities such as berry picking, bird watching, hiking and environmental study account for 15 percent.

Wildlife watching is growing in popularity. Springtime brings many shed hunters looking for lost deer antlers.

Management activities

Typical management activities at Whitewater may include efforts to control invasive species such as garlic mustard and European buckthorn; prescribed fire to regenerate native plants; timber harvests to enhance forest wildlife habitat; cooperative farming agreements where food plots are consistent with management goals; maintaining or enhancing user access via improvements to parking and hunter trails; and water level manipulation in wetlands.



Q: What is the Whitewater WMA management plan?

A: Wildlife Management Areas are state-owned public lands acquired and managed to benefit native wildlife populations, and to provide the public with opportunities for hunting, fishing, trapping, wildlife watching and other compatible outdoor recreational uses. The management plan identifies goals, objectives, and actions to achieve these ends.

Q: Why is Whitewater's management plan being revised now?

A: The previous management plan was prepared in 1977. Many environmental and social changes have occurred since then. Minnesota's population has grown, the climate has warmed, invasive species have proliferated, new state and federal policies have been enacted, and many wildlife and plant populations have declined in southeast Minnesota and elsewhere in the state. A revised management plan is needed to address and manage for these changed conditions.

Q: What are some of the issues and concerns that have been identified?

A: Beginning in mid-August 2016, DNR staff surveyed users of the WMA. This feedback, along with information from resource professionals, helped identify issues of concern or opportunity. These include:

- the spread of invasive species
- excessive littering
- lower than desired abundance of game species
- a desire for improved habitat quality
- protection of rare plants and animals
- continuation of private farming within the WMA
- too many people using the WMA.

Q: What will be addressed in the management plan?

A: The revised Management Plan will give direction on:

- Protecting, restoring, and maintaining wildlife populations, including deer, turkey, ruffed grouse,

squirrel, waterfowl, cavity nesting birds and mammals, and species of greatest conservation need.

- Protecting and enhancing habitat -- including healthy and diverse forests, savannas, prairies, and wetlands -- to sustain a full suite of native wildlife species.
- Enhancing human use of the WMA in a manner that provides a quality experience while ensuring a sustainable natural environment. Human use includes hunting, fishing, wildlife viewing and hiking.

Q: Why is public involvement important?

A: DNR's mission is to work with citizens to conserve and manage the state's natural resources, and to provide outdoor recreation opportunities. Public feedback is essential to mapping out the future of WMAs, which are established to provide habitat for healthy populations of wildlife, and to provide quality opportunities for hunting, fishing, trapping, and other outdoor recreational uses.

Q: How will public input be used in revising the Management Plan?

A: DNR needs public feedback to make sure we're dealing with the issues that matter to people, and not missing topics that should be covered in the plan.