

Backyard Briefs

A weekly column

By Judy Jessop, A Nature Conservancy Volunteer

Wild creatures, like men, must have a place to live. As civilization creates cities, builds highways, and drains marshes, it takes away, little by little, the land that is suitable for wildlife. And as their space for living dwindles, the wildlife populations themselves decline. Refuges resist this trend by saving some areas from encroachment, and by preserving in them, or restoring where necessary, the conditions that wild things need in order to live.

~ Rachel Carson, US Fish & Wildlife 1939-1952~

In the lower 48 states we have lost over 50% of our wetlands since 1790. The alarming loss of wetlands in the Southeast (over 12 million acres in NC, SC, GA, and FL alone) reflected the decline of waterfowl habitat throughout North America. So it was not surprising the US Fish and Wildlife Service, an agency responsible for managing wildlife refuges, was interested in establishing a National Wildlife Refuge along the Roanoke River in 1989. It was here in our quiet undeveloped region of North Carolina that they found a vast array of fish and wildlife with the large tracts of mature forested wetlands to support them. There were also conservation organizations, such as The Nature Conservancy and the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission, as well as host counties, waiting to help because they recognized the unique natural resources harbored here.

When the idea was presented in public hearings for the counties in which a refuge would lie there was some degree of reluctance in accepting the idea. Some concerns were that the Government might seize private land within the proposed refuge boundaries and private hunting groups that had leased these lands for decades did not want to lose their exclusive hunting rights. Another concern was that the establishment of the refuge would mean a loss of tax revenue.

However, the Roanoke River National Wildlife Refuge has not seized any land, the Refuge is open for public hunting through a lottery system and the Refuge provides payment to counties in lieu of taxes—something I'll explain in more detail in future columns.