

[LOCATIONS]

Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife And Fish Refuge, MISSISSIPPI

Text And Photography By Clint Farlinger

Photo Experience

It's easy to explore and photograph the refuge for weeks without duplicating subjects since it's so large. Favorite spots for photographing landscapes of the refuge include: Great River Bluffs State Park and Millstone Landing in Minnesota; North Marquette Access and Pikes Peak State Park in Iowa; Wyalusing State Park in Wisconsin; and Mississippi Palisades State Park in Illinois.

The area hosts hundreds of bald eagles, with more than 130 active nests. During the coldest parts of winter, the Mississippi River freezes over, except for areas immediately downstream from the Army Corps of Engineers dams. In winter, bald eagles congregate around these open pools of water to feed.

Essential Gear...

When exploring waterside wildlife refuges, the Trek-Tech TrekPod monopod/tripod/hiking staff is a handy companion. As a staff, it provides balance when you're moving on tough terrain. As a monopod, it steadies that long lens, yet is much easier to carry than a tripod. And you can extend the three legs at the bottom to convert it to a convenient stand to support your camera and lens while you're waiting for that perfect moment. List Price: \$139. **Contact:** Trek-Tech, (503) 459-0030, www.trek-tech.com.

Thousands of tundra swans migrate through the refuge, usually in March and November. In addition, two-fifths of the continent's entire waterfowl population uses this flyway during migration, and half of the world's canvasback ducks stop here. The refuge also hosts more than 5,000 nests in 15 heron rookeries.

The federally endangered northern monkshood blooms in mid-June on several slopes adjacent to the Mississippi River. Later in the summer, water lilies bloom in profusion in lowland areas and offer wonderful opportunities to photograph vast seas of color from watercraft.

Best Times

Spring and fall host the migration of not only waterfowl, but dozens of species of songbirds as well, with the peak of migration normally from mid-March to mid-May and from mid-October to mid-November. During summer, morning valley fog adds wonderful mystique to the landscape. Autumn color normally peaks between October 5 and 20, when sugar maple, basswood, oak and hickory display vibrant colors on the bluffs surrounding the Mississippi River. Winter reveals interesting ice and snow patterns on the frozen river, along with occasional hoarfrost and active bald eagles.

Contact: Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge Headquarters, (507) 452-4232, uppermississippiriver@fws.gov, www.fws.gov/midwes/uppermississippiriver/. District offices are located in LaCrosse, Wis., McGregor, Iowa, and Savanna, Ill.