

WICHITA WONDERLAND!

By JUANITA MAHAFFEY

THERE was another great Roosevelt who occupied the Presidential chair forty years ago. His keen foresight and love of the out-of-doors was responsible for saving much of the wild beauties, including animal life, of the Old West for future generations.

When you make your tour of the great Wichita Mountains (national) Wildlife Refuge in southwest Oklahoma's Comanche county, remember with reverent thanksgiving that that staunch and lovable Rough-Rider, President Theodore Roosevelt, probably visioned the gigantic playground and forest and wildlife sanctuary just as you see and enjoy it today.

Area and Early History

Embracing the major portion of the rugged Wichita Mountains, this great refuge covers 61,480 acres. Administered by the Fish and Wildlife Service under the United States Department of the Interior (formerly the Bureau of Biological Survey, U. S. Department of Agriculture), the past ten years, the area was once a part of the Apache, Comanche, Kiowa Reservation in old Indian Territory. Thrown open to settlement in 1901, Congress set it aside as a forest reserve. It received the added designation of a national game preserve, dedicated to the preservation of wild animals and birds of national importance, by Theodore Roosevelt's presidential proclamation of June 2, 1905, based upon a special act of Congress earlier that year.

In March, 1907, the great preserve was redesignated the Wichita National Forest and Game Preserve. This title remained until 1935 when its present name came into being. In that same year the present refuge manager, Ernest J. Greenwalt, took over supervision of the refuge. In his decade of service there, this genial and hospitable naturalist has grown to love every crevice and cranny of the "funny old hills" whose rock-ridden majesty, I am certain, came into being on a day when the Creator was in a particularly gracious and jubilant mood! Guests at the refuge headquarters near Cache, Oklahoma, invariably are infused with Greenwalt's enthusiasm for his Wichita Wonderland.

Don't Rush

Don't make the mistake of joining the rushing crowds who frequent this vast treasure filled storehouse of Nature's riches, merely skimming through and taking for granted that here are some pretty lakes, some queer, jagged mountains, a lot of good fishing, with that "Oh-lookie-there's-some-buffalo" attitude. You'll miss a priceless opportunity to see one of Oklahoma's finest pieces of natural handiwork combined with Man's magnanimous additions to a primitive setting.

Fishing, bathing, camping and beautiful scenery are free and plentiful in the Wichitas. More than forty lakes, built in the early 1930s by CCC, WPA and other public

works agencies, impound a total of 1,200 acres of sparkling, fish laden waters for angler indulgence. Much of the construction was financed by public subscription of Lawton, Oklahoma citizens. Lawton lies a few miles to the southeast of the refuge. Twenty-three of the refuge lakes are behind concrete dams. They range in surface area from a few acres to Lake Elmer Thomas's 542 acres. Lake Lawtonka, owned and operated by the City of Lawton, lies just outside the refuge area at the east end, and covers 2,300 acres.

Big Game

Quite naturally the wildlife enthusiast's attention is likely to center first upon the big game animals on the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge—for here the mighty buffalo, the historic longhorn cattle, the fleet-footed antelope, the majestic elk, and the flashy white-tailed deer live in unfettered freedom on the 61,000 acres of lush grazing and forest lands. Eighty-one miles of strong 7 1/2 foot steel fence line separate the refuge and its wild inhabitants from the encroachment of civilization and its domestic flocks and herds.

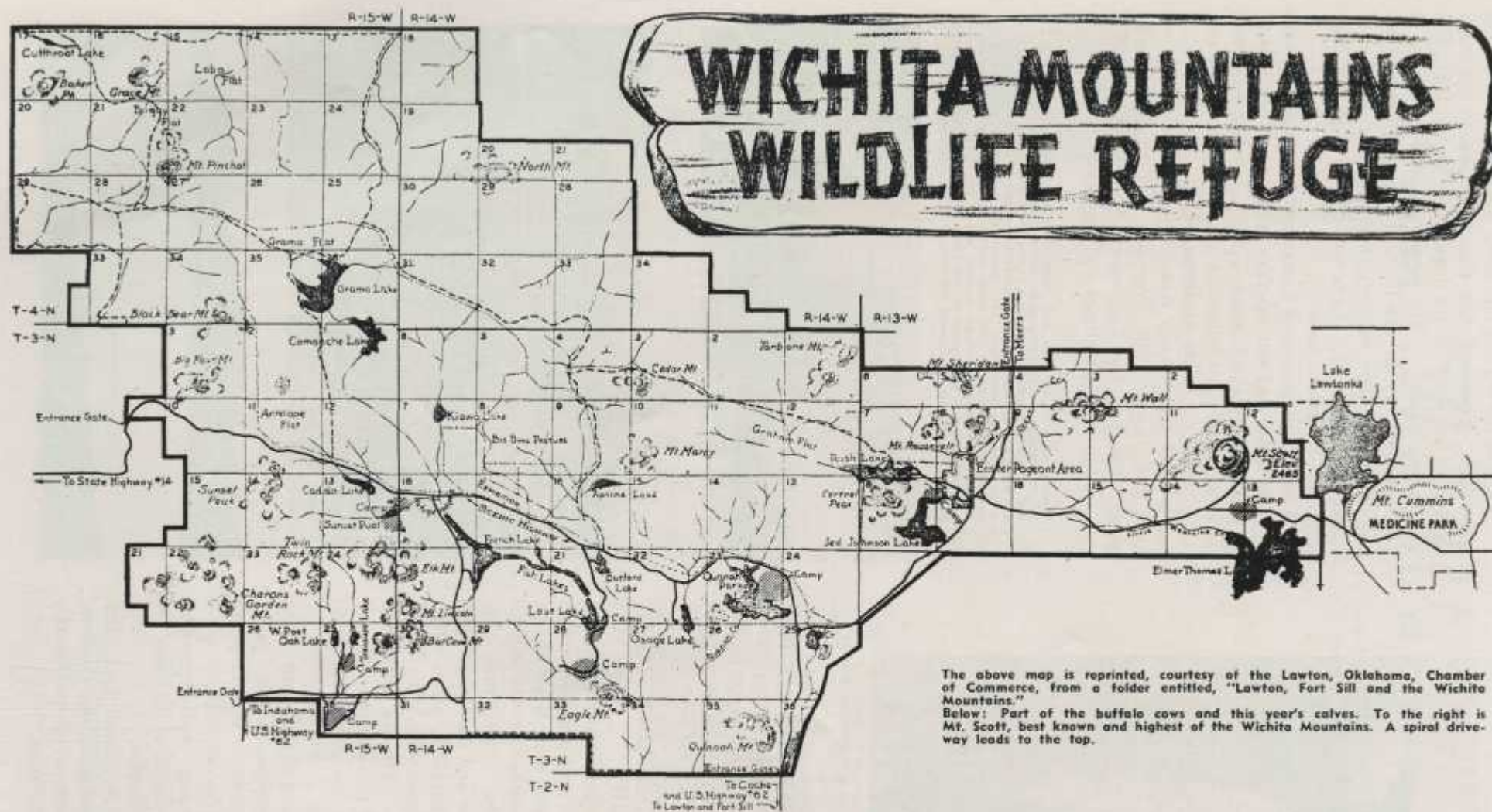
The Wichita refuge is alive with springtime glories and activities just now. New born buffalo and longhorn calves were making their appearance hourly the last week in April. The count of the new babies the morning I visited there was 38 in the buffalo herds, 29 in the longhorn family. These new additions brought the buffalo herd to a total of 566, the longhorn cattle to 261. The elk, at last count, totaled 209, the antelope 35. About 802 white tailed deer are estimated in the Wichita refuge herds, though they are abundant over many square miles of territory surrounding the refuge proper. The adjoining Fort Sill military reservation harbors a thousand head or more.

The Buffalo

By a queer quirk, typical of Man's heedless use of the Old West's vast wildlife supplies, the buffalo herd of the Wichitas had to get its start from animals shipped from the New York Zoological Park in 1907. Here where the rock-bound hills had resounded for centuries with the beat of bison hoofs on the Wichita grasslands, the picturesque old "rough-coats" were gone—totally extinct in their native Oklahoma haunts—before the few prudent naturalists of the early 1900s began to do something about it. An estimated 60,000,000 (that's right, MILLION!) buffalo once inhabited North America!

Fifteen of the finest buffalo in the New York Zoological Park were shipped to the Wichita Preserve in October, 1907. The herd has thrived steadily since, and it now is necessary to thin the herd each year, to avoid overgrazing of existing range facilities. Some noted individuals have been counted

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Ernest J. Greenwalt, Refuge Manager, Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge, Coche, Oklahoma.

among the Wichita buffalo herd. Among these was "Black Dog" who, though a small calf when shipped to the preserve, attained a weight of 2,800 pounds, one of the largest buffalo ever recorded. "General Lawton", the last of the original fifteen, died in November, 1930, being more than 25 years old. He, too, was a remarkable specimen, the hair on his head fully 20 inches long.

The Longhorns

The picturesque longhorn cattle were introduced to the Wichita Refuge in 1927. The breed is said to be the first cattle to set foot on America's shores, brought in by the Spanish in 1521. They became the progenitors of the millions of longhorn cattle that spread rapidly, fanwise, from Vera Cruz over the coastal plains of Texas and the Great Plains regions to the far west. It is believed that the longhorn, which was more a type than a distinct breed, was the product largely of natural selection and environment. He was particularly well suited to the arid conditions of the Southwest because he was hardy and active. Probably about 1850 the Texas longhorn was at the peak of its reign.

Short-horned bulls were introduced, followed by Herefords to improve the cattle for beef purposes, and the "pure" strain of longhorns became almost extinct. Will C. Barns and J. H. Hatton of the U. S. Forest Service, with the aid of Senator John B. Kindrick of Wyoming, finally succeeded in securing a Congressional appropriation to establish the nucleus of the Wichita longhorn cattle herd.

Although the longhorn cannot be classed as a game animal, its preservation is of great interest, because this breed of cattle, now rapidly becoming extinct, was so prominently identified with the early history of the West.

Some of the big Wichita steers have grown to amazing proportions, despite the fact that longhorns are generally thought to be "long on the horn, short on the beef, lean and hungry-looking". The largest attained a weight of 2,045 pounds in 1934. The horns of these cattle grow horizontally with a slight twist and many measure in excess of six feet from tip to tip. Horns over seven feet are rare; over eight feet, extremely scarce.

One of the intriguing characteristics of the longhorns are their varied and unpredictable colorings. They may be of any color—speckled, roans, "pied", brindle, with fawn colors or yellows and light reds in conspicuous proportions.

Elk, Antelope, Deer

First of the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge elk came from Jackson Hole, Wyoming in 1911. Others were added from there and Yellowstone National Park in 1912
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There's much to be seen and enjoyed on the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge. (1) Gateway at the east entrance; (2) Buffalo in the exhibition pasture. Note the strong steel-wire fence. There are 80 miles of this dividing the inaccessible parts of the Refuge from areas open for recreation; (3) Quint old rail fence constructed about 10 years ago by CCC labor within the inner reaches of the Refuge, providing excellent nesting spots for quail and other ground-dwellers; (4) Typical of the jewel-like lakes which stud the Wichita Mountains throughout the refuge is 87-acre Lake Rush.

