



Located near the base of majestic Mount Adams, Conboy Lake National Wildlife Refuge offers remote tranquility. “You tend to have the place to yourself,” says Lisa Wilson, manager of the refuge.

Photo by Linda Steider

Big, Wild and Rare

In the great wide open, Conboy Lake National Wildlife Refuge is a natural treasure

By Drew Myron

Consider, for a moment, frog eggs.

Submerged in shallow water, they grow in a grapefruit-size, jelly-like mass of black dots.

“I’d never seen frog eggs before,” says Linda Steider, an artist who lives in Snowden.

Last spring she joined dozens of volunteers outfitted in waders to search marshy waters for clusters of eggs belonging to the rare Oregon spotted frog. With 2,500 frogs, Conboy Lake National Wildlife Refuge is a rare habitat for this threatened amphibian.

“I joined the frog counting project because it sounded like an interesting, unusual adventure,” Linda says.

The thrill of discovery is common at Conboy Lake National Wildlife Refuge, and not just for frogs.

Where Rare is the Norm

Located in the the far reaches of western Klickitat County near Glenwood, the refuge spans 6,500 acres and is home to a host of rarities: sandhill cranes, elk — numbering 300 at times—and countless birds, deer, beaver, coyote, otter, rodents, reptiles and fish.

Even the landscape is rare, offering an unusual blend of prairie, marsh, meadow, wetland, aspen groves, conifer stands and ponderosa pine forest.

“Every couple years we discover a new rare plant that’s not left in many places,” says Lisa Wilson, manager of the refuge.

She has a list of examples, such as the rosy owl clover—a purple-pink bloom in abundance at Conby but rarely seen elsewhere in Washington.

The lake dramatically fluctuates with the season: full in spring, nearly nonexistent come fall.

Quietly Grand

The Conboy Lake Refuge headquarters is an understated, barely marked entrance 5 miles southwest of Glenwood.

The visitor center—a small room in a maintenance facility—is open by chance.

But there is no need for fancy digs. Located near the base of majestic Mount Adams, nature does the talking here—and usually in whispers.

“Conboy is really out there, out of the way,” says Lisa, who estimates the refuge has fewer than 7,000 visitors a year. “You tend to have the place to yourself. The solitude aspect is great.”

Part of a National History

Conboy is part of a national effort that began more than 100 years ago.

In 1903, President Theodore Roosevelt declared the first national wildlife refuge in Florida. Today, there are more than



The Conboy landscape is an unusual blend of prairie, marsh, meadow, wetland, aspen groves, conifer stands and ponderosa pine forest that displays dramatic seasonal changes.

Photo by Drew Myron

560 national wildlife refuges.

Established in 1964, Conboy is the only one in Klickitat County. It was named after Peter Conboy, one of the area's first Euro-American settlers.

For biologists and scientists, the refuge is a sanctuary for wild things to grow and thrive. For tourists, it is a reprieve from city clamor. For locals, Conboy is a backyard treasure.

"I almost always see wildlife," says Linda, who lives near the refuge.

Lisa recently spotted a pygmy owl, and an egret rare to the area.

"There's always something new," she says. "Biodiversity is important, and maintaining a fully functional wetland habitat. It makes a good home for ducks and cranes and more."

Setting aside land is not without controversy. While Conboy has had its detractors, most have come to recognize the value of public lands that foster nature.

"I liken it to a brick wall," says Lisa. "If you remove one brick, the wall may still stand, but if you continue to take away bricks, the wall crumbles."

Not Just for Bugs and Bunnies

The refuge is not just a sanctuary for birds, bugs and blooms. Conboy allows hunting and fishing, too. Nearly half of the refuge is open to waterfowl and deer hunting, and fishing is permitted along a portion of Outlet Creek. Common catches are rainbow trout, brook trout and bullheads.

Along with nature, the refuge preserves history. The Whitcomb-Cole log house—located steps from the refuge headquarters—is one of the few pioneer log homes still standing in the county.

Built in the 1890s, the home was originally located 2 miles across the lake. It was abandoned and deteriorated until 1987 when the entire structure was moved to its current location and restored. It is now on the National Register of Historic Places.

The home is along Willard Springs Trail—a 2-mile loop that edges along open marsh and meanders into pine forest. Inside the two-story cabin, visitors can peek into pioneer life: wood stove, small rooms and newspaper pages lining the walls as insulation.



Conboy Lake is habitat for the spotted Oregon frog, a threatened amphibian.

Photo by Linda Steider

Preserving the Wild Things

Years ago, Rachel Carson, scientist and editor for the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, noted the value of wild places.

"Wild creatures, like men, must have a place to live," she wrote in an essay for *Conservation in Action*. "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."

Linda, the artist-turned-egg-counter, agrees.

"Conboy is truly a magical place," she says, "Those who don't know about it yet should experience it." ■

To visit or volunteer at Conboy Lake National Wildlife Refuge, contact Lisa Wilson, refuge manager, at (509) 364-3667. Learn more at www.fws.gov/refuge/conboy_lake.