

# **Red Slough Wildlife Management Area Ouachita National Forest**

## **VISITOR SAFETY PLAN**

Red Slough is a premier birdwatching and a waterfowl hunting destination in southeast Oklahoma on the Ouachita National Forest. It is estimated that more than 1,000 visitor days occur each year at Red Slough for recreational activities, including birdwatching, hunting, nature photography, hiking, fishing, and other nature watching activities (snakes, dragonflies, and wildflowers). Birdwatching and waterfowl hunting account for nearly 90% of the visitor activities at Red Slough.

Visitors have the potential to come into contact with several species of wildlife that may be harmful. This plan discusses the various species and measures that the Red Slough management team will take to mitigate and inform visitors of potential negative interactions with these species.

### **American Alligator**

The American alligator is present in small numbers of up to 15 individuals in a given year. The alligators generally occupy Otter Lake, Pintail Lake, Lotus Lake, Bittern Lake, and the Unit 16 ditch, although isolated records do occur within other wetland units (Teal Lake and other drainage ditches within the area). Red Slough is the only documented breeding location within Oklahoma, with about one nest found each year from 2005-2010.

The American alligator can be active year round, although the prime season for activity is March through October. Breeding occurs May through June and movement of males into and out of the population is most likely to occur during this timeframe. Feeding generally occurs from March through September but shuts down as fall approaches and temperatures cool, with limited to no feeding occurring from October through February. Some level of hibernation occurs, especially during extreme cold weather, but alligators may be out of their dens during warmer winter days. Caution should be used while hiking within Red Slough and avoid all alligators encountered.

### **Africanized Honey Bees**

Africanized honey bees were first documented at Red Slough in 2005. The prime location for these bees to occur is within wood duck nesting boxes. Africanized honey bees can move into an unoccupied box overnight and individuals can number upwards of 1,000. These bees cannot be visually distinguished from the native honey bee other than they have a more aggressive nature than native honey bees. Any bee sightings on red slough should be assumed to be the Africanized variety. Bee stings may cause an allergic reaction that should be treated by a physician as soon as possible.

## **Venomous Snakes**

Three species of venomous snakes are known to occur at red slough. They are the copperhead, cottonmouth, and timber rattlesnake. Habitat exists for the pygmy rattlesnake although this species has not been documented. Copperheads and timber rattlesnakes are more likely to be found in the drier areas, including shrub/scrub and woodlands, but may be found within wetland areas. Cottonmouths, the most common of the three venomous snakes, are most likely to be found within the wetland areas and within water control structures. They are seldom found very far away from water. Any poisonous snake bite should be treated at a hospital as quickly as possible.

## **Fire Ants**

Fire ants are relatively common within red slough. These insects are most likely encountered on levees, though will occur within the woodlands and shrub/scrub areas. The fire ant bite and sting is painful and may cause an allergic reaction. Medical treatment should be obtained immediately if allergic reactions occur.

## **Information/Safety Plan**

The following mitigation measures shall be employed to reduce potential negative human interactions with the identified species of concern:

- Alligator awareness signs will be placed at the main entry points at Red Slough. This includes five parking areas and two additional main entry points. Each of these seven locations has a bulletin board and a warning sign will be placed on each bulletin board.
- Employees will check the sign conditions once a month and replace as needed.
- Locations of nesting alligators will not be given to the public in any printed format.
- The Red Slough brochure, Oklahoma Department of Wildlife webpage, and the Red Slough webpage will inform the public of the presence of alligators, Africanized honey bees, poisonous snakes, and fire ants and to take necessary avoidance precautions.
- Groups visiting red slough through a guided tour will be informed of the presence of potentially dangerous species and safety measures that need to be taken.
- Levees will be mowed on a regular basis throughout the growing season to increase the ability for visitor's to see alligators and snakes that may be crossing levees and to reduce the likelihood of a surprise encounter.
- Upon discovery of a bee colony in a wood duck nesting box, employees shall remove the bees as soon as practical.