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Federal Eye

The Oregon refuge occupied by Bundy is one of the first wildlife sanctuaries in the U.S.

By **Lisa Rein** January 5 at 6:00 AM

The national wildlife sanctuary at the center of a standoff by armed protesters in a remote stretch of the West is widely known as a mecca for birders in the high desert of southeast Oregon, created by the federal government 107 years ago.

Malheur National Wildlife Refuge stands as a symbol of the federal land preservation policy under attack by a group of anti-government activists who object to federal control of the vast acres of land in the West. Malheur, managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, was created by President Theodore Roosevelt in his campaign of conservation and wildlife protection. It was expanded and nurtured by the government and now hosts more than 320 bird species, a vital migratory bird refuge and fragile habitat for thousands of waterfowl.

The refuge, whose main building is occupied by a group of self-proclaimed militiamen, has posted an incongruous message on its website under the headline “Experience Malheur,” a slot normally reserved for a visitor’s wilderness experience.

“The Fish and Wildlife Service is aware that an unknown number of armed individuals have broken into and occupied the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge facility near Burns, Oregon,” reads the text under the caption, “Why Is the Refuge Closed?” next to a yellow Western meadowlark.

[*\[FBI takes lead in investigation of armed takeover of federal building in Oregon\]*](#)

“While the situation is ongoing, the main concern is employee safety and we can confirm that no federal staff were in the building at the time of the initial incident,” the site says. “We will continue to monitor the situation for additional developments.”

Now in its third day, the takeover at Malheur stems from the arson convictions of two local ranchers, Dwight Hammond and his son Steven Hammond, who set fires that burned federal lands. The ranchers said they were fighting wildfires and invasive vegetation, but federal officials said they were covering up poaching on federal

land.

Supporters of the ranchers held a peaceful march and rally over the weekend. But then a group of armed activists led by a rancher named Ammon Bundy who is sympathetic to their cause showed up at the Malheur refuge late Saturday and announced plans to stay indefinitely.

[*\[The Oregon occupiers' land dispute, explained in 9 maps\]*](#)

On Monday Bundy said his group had taken on a name, Citizens for Constitutional Freedom, and wants to help residents of the remote corner of Oregon “in claiming their rights, using their rights as a free people.” The refuge, 23 miles south of Burns, Ore., is one of the few federal installations in the area.

Malheur was the site of another dust-up with the Hammonds in 1994, according to local news reports. Federal agents arrested them for allowing their cattle to trespass on the refuge and obstructing federal workers who were building a fence to keep the cattle away, according to the *High Country News*. They were taken into custody by armed federal agents and charged with two counts each of felony “disturbing and interfering with” federal officials or federal contractors. Eventually they were released without bail.

Malheur, which means misfortune in French, was named by a French-Canadian fur trapper who led a large expedition to the area in 1826. They found little food and few fur-bearing animals. It was one of the nation’s first sanctuaries designated in what would become a federal system of 563 refuges.

In the late 1880s, the land captured the attention of two photographers who became alarmed that plume hunters had decimated many North American bird species in pursuit of feathers for the hat industry. They approached the Oregon Audubon Society and pressed for a reservation to protect the remaining birds and other wildlife.

Roosevelt agreed to set aside what at the time were unclaimed government lands in the area “as a preserve and breeding ground for native birds.” Malheur was one of 51 refuges created by the 26th president.

Gradually the area under federal control expanded. The government bought a 65,000-acre parcel under private ownership in 1935. The Civilian Conservation Corps built many of the 13 historic buildings in the 1930s and early 1940s, including the one occupied by the protesters. The buildings include a museum staffed by volunteers and a bunkhouse for firefighters. Another 14,000 acres was sold in 1942 by a livestock company, adding to the refuge’s shorebird habitat and waterfowl nesting areas.

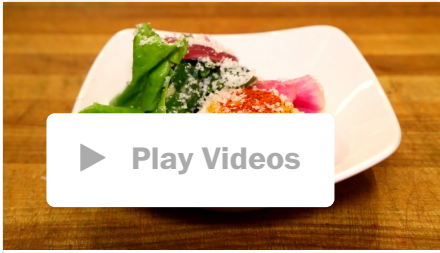
Today the refuge is more than 187,700 acres of wildlife habitat, including 120,000 acres of wetlands that provide a crucial stop for waterfowl along the Pacific Flyway. Colonial waterbirds, sandhill cranes, redband trout are represented. Staffed by 18 federal employees and many volunteers, Malheur has an active [friends group](#), which has expressed concern about how respectful the occupiers are being of the property.

In 2014, there were 23,967 visitors to Malheur, according to the Fish and Wildlife Service. They included birders, hunters and outdoor recreationists.

Lisa Rein covers the federal workforce and issues that concern the management of government.

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