



## ***NEWS RELEASE***

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Date: 02/02/2005  
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### **NATION'S FIRST NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE OFFERS A NATURE-FILLED WAY TO BEAT THE WINTER BLUES IN SUNNY FLORIDA**

CARMEL, Ind.—Feb. 2, 2005 — Mention Florida in the wintertime, and many people start thinking of the human-size mice and ducks that populate a kingdom of magic. But birdwatchers and other nature enthusiasts know that Florida's real magic awaits them at Pelican Island, America's first National Wildlife Refuge.

Located in Sebastian, south of Sebastian Inlet and north of Vero Beach, Pelican Island's five mangrove-covered acres sit in the middle of shimmering Indian River Lagoon. Visitors hike across a boardwalk leading to an elevated platform that provides clear views across the lagoon.

From this elevated perch, visitors can spot Brown Pelicans, Reddish Egrets, and numerous songbirds in the mangroves below. Nearby freshwater wetlands teem with wading birds such as the White Ibis, Little Blue Heron, and the endangered Wood Stork. Otters frolic in the water, and bobcat tracks can often be spotted on the boardwalk. Overhead, Red-shouldered Hawks scold and Anhingas soar.

In all, thirty different bird species feed, loaf or roost on the island, with sixteen of them breeding there. The Bald Eagle and Piping Plover, both of which are recognized as threatened species, can be seen at Pelican Island. Several other endangered or threatened animals live in the refuge, among them the Florida manatee and four species of sea turtles.

The entire refuge spans more than 5,400 acres. In 1903, President Theodore Roosevelt responded to concerns from ornithologists and naturalists about plume hunters and egg collectors by setting the site aside as a breeding ground and preserve for native birds. The area was the first in a National Wildlife Refuge system that now includes more than 530 refuges and 95 million acres of America's most important wildlife habitats.

To celebrate the centennial of the National Wildlife Refuge system, the Wild Birds Unlimited Pathways To Nature Conservation Fund awarded Pelican Island a \$39,000 grant (matched by

National Fish and Wildlife Federation and Pelican Island) to create educational displays that share the site's rich history with visitors and teach them about its abundant wildlife. Complete information about Pelican Island may be found at [www.PelicanIsland.fws.gov](http://www.PelicanIsland.fws.gov).

The original and largest franchise system of backyard birdfeeding and nature specialty stores with over 300 locations throughout the North America, Wild Birds Unlimited established the Pathways To Nature conservation fund in 1999 as part of its mission to bring people and nature together. Funded by a contribution from every Wild Birds Unlimited store, Pathways To Nature has provided nearly \$740,000 in grants to 25 environmental education and wildlife viewing projects. The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation partners with the company in this effort, using federal funds and a challenge grant program to match the grants, thereby increasing their impact. Wild Birds Unlimited thanks its customers for helping them make a difference through this program, details of which are available at [www.pathwaystonature.com](http://www.pathwaystonature.com).

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