

# A way station for Red River ducks

Lake Millwood provides some of the only guaranteed water in SW Arkansas

In the 1940s the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission attempted to buy a large section of bottomland along Little River, Saline River and Pond Creek.

At the time, the AGFC was buying every acre of valuable duck hunting land that it could get its hands on. In this case, the bottoms were renowned for exceptional flooded timber duck hunting.

"Old-timers used to say you could walk across it on the backs of ducks," said Greg Mathis, AGFC wildlife biologist. "It was phenomenal."

The AGFC failed in its purchase attempts. The lumber company that owned it refused to sell.

It was just as well. The lumber company's decision was unfortunate only for itself. As it turned out, most of the timber in the bottoms was destroyed by the impoundment of Lake Millwood.

Although hunters in southwest Arkansas lost thousands of acres of overflow bottoms, they gained more than 30,000 acres of guaranteed surface water.

"Lake Millwood has since become vital, if not critical, to the average duck hunter," Mathis said.

It is a way station for every duck flying down the Red River. Local hunters say that when Lake Millwood has ducks, everyone around it has ducks. If Lake Millwood doesn't have ducks, no one has ducks.

The lake is totally public. And it provides the biggest part of the public hunting opportunity in southwest Arkansas. It's an opportunity a lot of people take advantage of.

"It is heavily hunted," Mathis said.

Hunting on the lake takes place in two forms. The most common is open water or lake hunting. Lake Millwood impounded several shallow fields, timber, buckbrush flats and winding sloughs. As a result, much of the lake is shallow.

That, combined with a healthy dose of aquatic vegetation, makes it a favorite stopping place for early migrants like teal.



Hunting on Lake Millwood is usually in open water, where big spreads of decoys work best,

Whether early in the season or late, hunters launch at many places on the lake and make their way to the shallow areas where they set out big spreads of decoys and stand in buckbrush or dead timber. Others make use of blinds attached to their boats.

"Years ago the Corps would allow you to build your own blind," Mathis said. "But it got out of hand, and they had to do away with that."

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The second hunting method is similar. It occurs when the lake rises in the fall and spreads out. Most of the hunting continues to take place in shallow areas; there's just much more of it. Along with the extra flooded ground, there is also a return to the days of old in the form of flooded timber shooting.

"The majority of the ducks killed on Millwood are mallards, probably 60 percent of the kill," Mathis said. "But the gadwall hunting is really good at times."

Other species include redheads, canvasbacks, mergansers and scaup.

Construction began on Millwood Lake in 1961 and was completed in 1966. It is considered a key player in flood reduction along the Red River.

More importantly for area sportsmen, the lake is a vital link in holding ducks for surrounding clubs. Long-time clubs like Grassy Lake, Yellow Creek, Cypress Bayou and Po-Boy manage a large portion of hardwood bottoms near the lake. Along with Millwood, these clubs constitute the largest area of wintering habitat for waterfowl in that part of the Red River valley.

The area received a major addition with the purchase of Pond Creek bottoms, north of Millwood. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service bought approximately 26,000 acres in the area. The Pond Creek National Wildlife Refuge is expected to be managed to produce some flooded timber hunting. When it all comes together, this will create a wintering area rivaled only by the White River NWR.



## Mouth calling, pirogues, among traditions still alive in Sulphur River WMA

Duck hunting in Sulphur River Wildlife Management Area is a return to the past in many ways.

The overflow bottomlands along Mercer Bayou in the Red River valley are like the Black River WMA in northeast Arkansas. Sulphur River WMA represents the remnants of the deep Red River bottomlands that were common 100 years ago.

Unlike most hardwood bottomlands, this area gets too deep to wade. Rather than the traditional way of hugging a tree and kicking water, hunters shoot from johnboats or pirogues. Homemade blinds are common fixtures on boats, and big spreads of decoys in likely areas attract ducks coming down the Central Flyway.

"Most of the hunters filter out into the wooded holes or small lakes," said Greg Mathis, an Arkansas Game and Fish Commission wildlife biologist. "A lot of the hunters use pirogues. They paddle out, set their decoys, back their boats into the brush and call the ducks down to them."

"It's an old style of hunting that works really well in Sulphur River."

One of those pirogue hunters is Mike Harris. His father, James, has hunted the bottoms for years.

"The Harris family lives and breathes duck hunting," Mathis said.

Mathis means that literally. When James and Mike Harris call ducks they do it with their own breath — no duck calls, just what their hands and lungs provide.

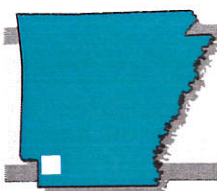
"Mouth calling is a lost art," Mathis said. "But they still do it."

Mathis said Harris doubles his thumb over and grips his fist around it tightly.

"His hand actually looks like he's holding a duck call," Mathis said. "But there's nothing there. He takes his fist and shakes it in the water and then blows through it."

"I don't know how it works. But it sounds real good."

The ducks like it, too. The hands-on process produces limits every season, just like duck hunters did it 100 years ago.



## SULPHUR RIVER WMA

**Acres:** 16,520

**First purchase:** 1957

**Location:** Near Texarkana in Miller County  
**Topo maps** (7.5 series, U.S. Geological Survey): Doddridge NW, Bloomburg, Domino, Fouke.

The Sulphur River Wildlife Management Area lies west off U.S. Highway 71, 15 miles south of Texarkana, near the Texas-Arkansas-Louisiana borders. Limited access is available off Arkansas Highways 237 and 160, as well as U.S. 71.

When flooded, Sulphur River WMA offers some of the best duck hunting in southwest Arkansas. Rainfall provides the bulk of the flooding; water control is aided by a series of dams and levees on Mercer Bayou. Most of the Sulphur River area is in the lowlands of Mercer Bayou, with a num-

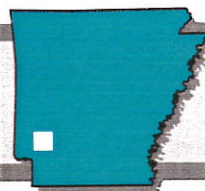
ber of feeder streams winding through the bottomlands. Most hunting is in small open pools.

Because the water gets too deep to wade, hunting takes place from boats and makeshift blinds. Local hunters often use pirogues to slip quietly through the woods.

Bottomland hardwoods, such as oak and hickory, are the primary habitat, and provide good hunting for deer, squirrel, and swamp rabbits.

Most travel on Sulphur River WMA is by boat or foot. Camping is allowed only in a few designated areas.

There is limited sportfishing on the many lakes, creeks and sloughs of the area. However, commercial fishing is heavy in Mercer Bayou and Sulphur River.



## POND CREEK NWR

**Acres:** 27,300

**First purchase:** 1994

**Topo maps** (7.5 series, U.S. Geological Survey): Falls Chapel, Winthrop, Horatio, Lockesburg.

Originally named the Cossatot National Wildlife Refuge, the Pond Creek bottoms consist of 2,300 acres. In 1996, the Arkansas Land Exchange Act added an additional 25,000 acres. The land was part of a trade agreement between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Weyerhaeuser Timber Co.

Pond Creek NWR is 95 percent forested land — mostly oaks — with small areas of open water, shrub swamps, beaver ponds, open marsh and roads. Duck hunting is excellent when Little River leaves its banks.

Ducks use the area from the Red River flyway. In dry years, waterfowl can rest on Lake Millwood, which adjoins the refuge.

Once water-control structures are in place, Pond Creek coupled with Lake

Millwood will hold untold numbers of ducks in southwest Arkansas, according to Arkansas Game and Fish Commission wildlife biologist Greg Mathis.

"It's a major plus for this part of the world," Mathis said.

Hunting in the NWR takes place in traditional form in the overflow bottoms. But there are also many small beaver ponds, and there is some open marsh hunting, reminiscent of Louisiana.

In the past, some individuals attempted to turn part of the area into a private duck club, Mathis said. But the efforts met little success.

The ability of the USFWS to manage the unit as a whole should improve duck hunting and end the individual efforts.

A series of roads throughout the refuge provides access. Hunters are required to carry a refuge permit, available at the Felsenthal NWR office.





# Arkansas' ultimate step back in time

## Primeval swamp of Grassy Lake preserved by a duck hunter in late 1800s

Primeval. It's the word you hear in almost every description of Grassy Lake. It's one thing to get deep in the White River Wildlife Refuge and imagine a 19th century steamboat rounding a bend in the river. It's quite another to look over an ancient swamp and think how natural a *Tyrannosaurus Rex* would appear here. That's primeval.

Of the unaltered wonders remaining in Arkansas, Grassy Lake represents the biggest step back in time. And if not for a duck hunter, it wouldn't have aged nearly so well.

There must be 100 lakes named "Grassy" in Arkansas. But there is nothing like this 6,000-acre swamp located in the bottomlands below Millwood Lake, between Hope and Texarkana. Apparently, William Buchanan thought the same thing when he saw it in the late 1800s. The owner was going to harvest the impressive stand of cypress trees when Buchanan made him an offer that matched the value of the land, plus

the timber on it.

Buchanan had already become a wealthy man through the timber industry. By this time, he was more concerned with using that fortune to feed his love of the outdoors. The ducks that flocked to Grassy Lake made this one of Buchanan's favorite places.

In 1897, he formed the Hempstead County Hunting Club and built a lodge near the lake. Duck hunting was done in grand style. In the book, *Southern Timberman*, Archer H. Mayor recounts the daily routine during hunting season. Black servants began cooking breakfast at 2 a.m., woke up the hunters at 4 a.m. and pushed or paddled them to their blinds before dawn.

During this era before daily bag limits were set, the shooting was limited only by the strength of your desire.

Herbert Railey was born the same year the Hempstead County Hunting Club was founded. He lived on the ridge above Grassy Lake. Local residents

were allowed to hunt on the lake, but they couldn't use a boat. These "bank hunters," as they were called, helped keep the ducks stirred up for the members who hunted from blinds on the lake. Railey began frequenting Grassy Lake as a "bank hunter" in the 1930s.

"I was allowed to hunt, but I couldn't carry anybody with me," Railey said. "Grassy Lake was duck heaven. It was my favorite place. The mallards were thick. Every once in awhile you killed a wood duck."

Wading along the banks of Grassy Lake wasn't as inviting as it might sound. Alligators, big alligators, added to the primeval sights of Grassy Lake, both then and now.

"Those alligators wouldn't bother you," said Railey.

Federal regulations, including bag

The Hempstead County Hunting Club was founded in 1897. Duck hunters depart from these boat houses after drawing for blinds.



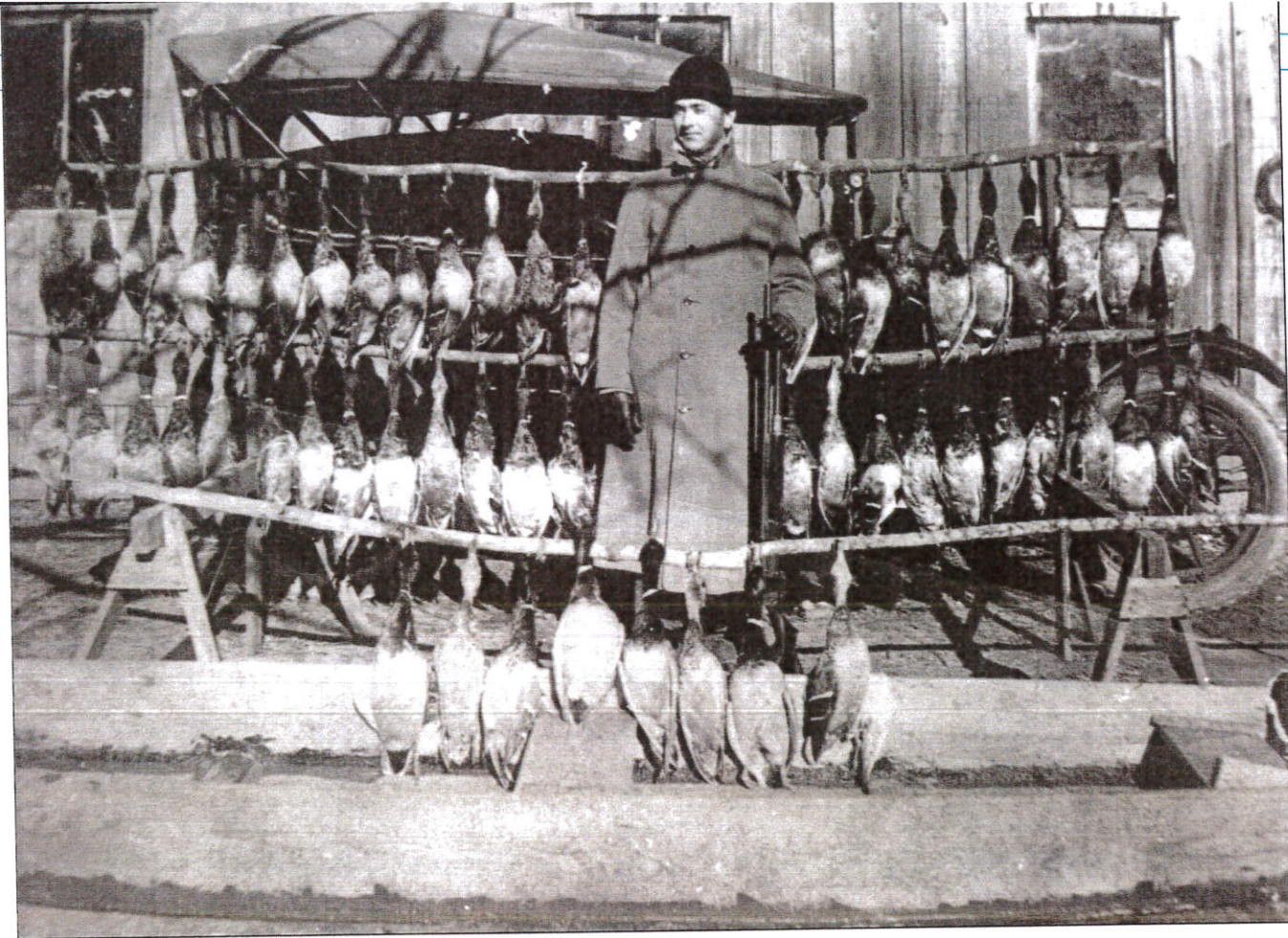


Photo courtesy Bill Routon

Ralph Routon of Hope displayed the bounty from a morning's hunt at Grassy Lake in this photo from 1914, before daily bag limits were set.

limits, were set in 1918, but it would be many years before enforcement would put any teeth in those laws.

"Legal was all you could carry," Bailey said. "I forget what the limit was. At the beginning, they didn't pay any attention to it, and neither did I."

Bill Routon of Hope has a picture (above) of his father, Ralph, with 50-plus ducks from a morning's hunt at Grassy Lake. In the photo, Routon is holding a 12-gauge Remington automatic shotgun with a nine-shot extension. A cypress "box" boat, which was commonly used in that day, appears in the foreground.

Bill Routon joined the Hempstead County Hunting Club shortly after he moved here from Alabama in 1910. Although his father died in 1934, when Bill was only 10 years old, he remembers several hunting trips with his father on Grassy Lake. And he remembers his father canning both duck and quail, so they could enjoy the meat year round. The results of successful hunts didn't go to waste.

All of the ducks identifiable in the

photograph are mallards, mostly drakes.

"We always thought anything but a mallard was a trash duck," Routon said.

Routon sold his membership in the Hempstead County Hunting Club after he returned from the service in World War II. He's now a member of the Yellow Creek Club, which borders Grassy Lake and is located in the same bottomland.

William Buchanan's family still owns controlling interest in the Hempstead County Hunting Club. The presence of old money, a 100-year-old hunting club, mallard ducks and rich bottomland gives the southwest corner of Arkansas a Delta atmosphere. Cotton was king here, too, at one time.

You just don't hear much about the duck hunting here.

"This part of the Red River valley is so similar to the Mississippi Delta, but it's just on a smaller scale," said Charlie Walker, a Hope attorney and member of the Yellow Creek Club. "The Red River valley in Louisiana is a popular hunting area, but in Arkansas it's a well-kept secret."

Before Millwood Dam was built, the Saline, Little and Red rivers flowed together within a few miles of Grassy Lake.

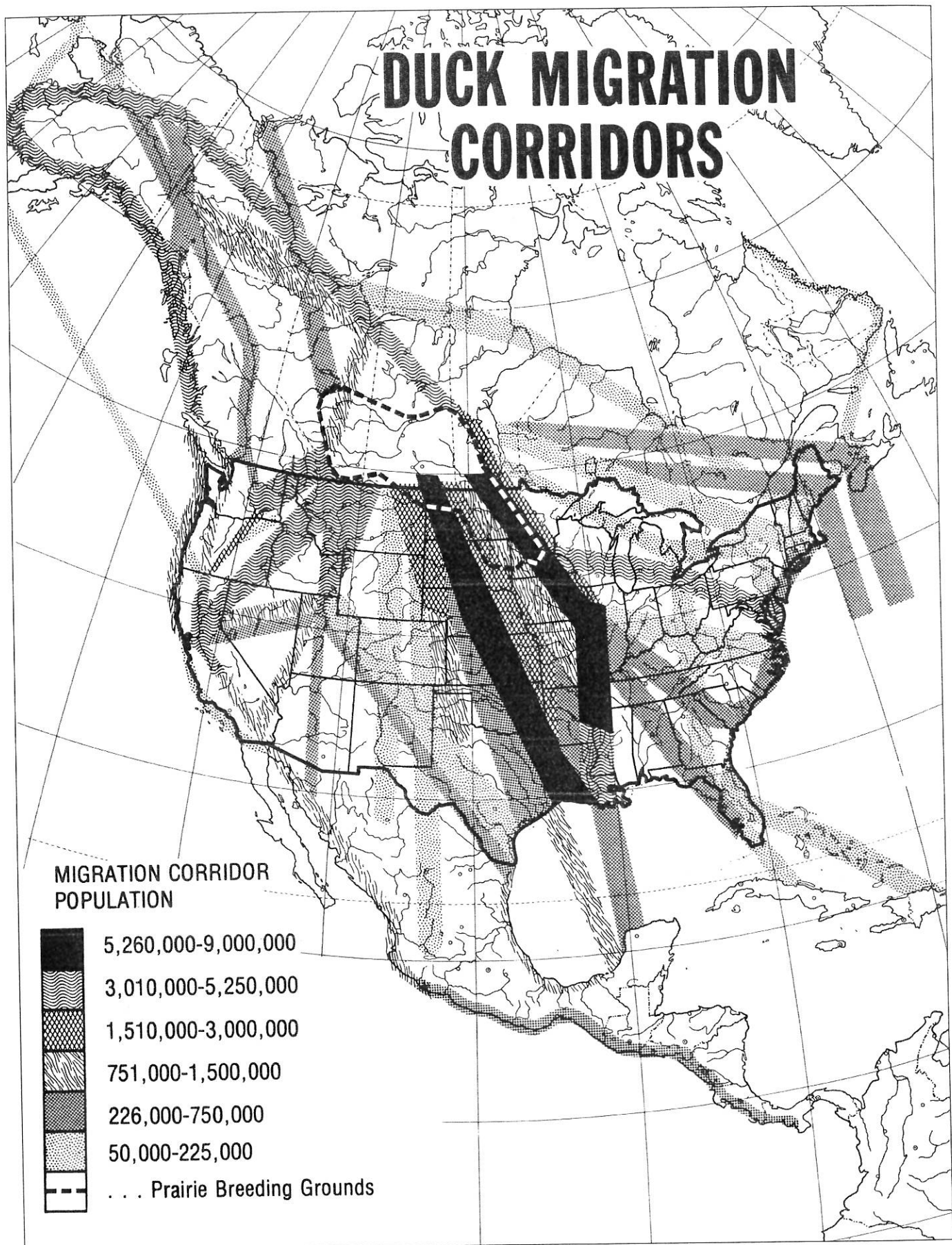
"The Red River used to flood all the time and back up all over this country," said Routon.

But that has begun to change. Millwood Dam controls the Saline and Little rivers. Lake Texoma absorbs some of the Red River's rage. In the absence of periodic floods, the swamp at Grassy Lake is changing, too. Gadwalls have increasingly taken the place of mallards in the daily bag. The thick vegetation that has always been part of this swamp has changed character, too, Routon has noticed.

But the cypress trees haven't changed. And Grassy Lake still offers the best primeval view in Arkansas.

This 1955 AGFC map shows the southwest corner of the state before Millwood Lake was impounded. Grassy Lake is just north of Little River's confluence with Red River.





Map courtesy Wildlife Management Institute