U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
Chincoteague is one of more than 540 refuges and approximately 95 million acres in the National Wildlife Refuge System administered by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.
The National Wildlife Refuge System is a network of lands and waters managed specifically for the protection of wildlife and wildlife habitat and represents the most comprehensive wildlife resource management program in the world. Units of the system stretch across the United States from northern Alaska to the Florida Keys and include small islands in the Caribbean and South Pacific. The character of the refuges is as diverse as the nation itself.

The Service also manages National Fish Hatcheries, and provides Federal leadership in habitat protection, fish and wildlife research, technical assistance and the conservation and protection of migratory birds, certain marine mammals and threatened and endangered species.

The National Park Service, Assateague Island National Seashore assists Chincoteague Refuge with environmental education and recreational activities on a portion of the beach. The Toms Cove Visitor Center is located near the beach parking lots and offers a variety of programs and exhibits. For more information, please call the Toms Cove Visitor Center at 757/336 6577.

In 1965, Congress established the Assateague Island National Seashore, encompassing Chincoteague Refuge as well as the northern portion of Assateague Island. The legislation stated that the primary management of Chincoteague Refuge was for wildlife and the secondary use was for public recreation, including interpretation and education.

Equal opportunity to participate in, and benefit from, the programs and activities of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service is available to all individuals, regardless of age, race, religion, color, sex, national origin, or disability. Contact: U.S. Department of the Interior, Office of Equal Employment Opportunity, 1849 C Street N.W., Washington, DC 20240.

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U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Chincoteague

National Wildlife Refuge

Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge includes more than 14,000 acres of beach, dunes, marsh, and maritime forest. Within a workday's access to millions of people, Chincoteague Refuge is one of the most visited refuges in the United States, providing visitors with outstanding opportunities to learn about and enjoy wildlands and wildlife.

Introduction

Most of the refuge is located on the Virginia end of Assateague Island; however, 418 acres are on the Maryland side of the island, 427 acres are found on Morris Island, and 546 acres comprise Wildcat Marsh on the northern tip of Chincoteague Island. Additionally, Chincoteague Refuge's boundaries extend south and encompass all or part of the following barrier islands: Assawoman, Metompkin, and Cedar. The refuge's location along the Atlantic Flyway makes it a vital resting and feeding spot for a large number and diversity of birds.

The refuge provides opportunities for wildlife photography. Photo: Alexis Colopy

Chincoteague Refuge, originally established in 1943 to provide habitat for migratory birds (with an emphasis on conserving greater snow geese), today provides habitat for waterfowl, wading birds, shorebirds, and song birds, as well as other species of wildlife and plants. Refuge staff manage this barrier island habitat to allow many species of wildlife to co-exist, each establishing their own place in the environment. Refuge management programs restore threatened and endangered species and conserve local wildlife and plants. The refuge also provides wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities such as fishing, hunting, wildlife photography and observation, interpretation, and environmental education.

Photo: Michael Colopy

Cover photo: Michael Colopy

Island History

Remnants of Assateague Island's history can still be found on the refuge. For example, the famous "Chincoteague Ponies" are a present-day reminder of Assateague Island's past. Although no one is certain when or how the ponies first arrived on the island, a popular legend tells of ponies that escaped a shipwrecked Spanish galleon and swam ashore. However, most historians believe that settlers used the island for grazing livestock (including ponies and other farm animals) in the 17th Century to avoid fencing regulations and taxation. Regardless of their origin, the descendants of these ponies are still living here today. During the 1800s and early 1900s, a community of people also lived on Assateague Island. In addition to homes, the community included a school and a dry goods store.

A mare and her foal graze near the shoreline. Photo: Irene Hinke-Sacilotto

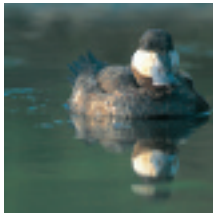
The endangered seabeach amaranth is well adapted to survive the harsh seashore conditions. USFWS photo

Habitat and Wildlife

Chincoteague Refuge provides food and shelter for a wide variety of wildlife and plants. In fact, more than 320 species of birds are known to occur on the refuge. The refuge also supports breeding populations of the endangered Delmarva Peninsula fox squirrel and the threatened piping plover. Bald eagles and peregrine falcons also nest and migrate through the refuge.

Although the beach is a major attraction for visitors in the summer, this habitat, characterized by harsh temperatures, lack of vegetation, and changing tides, can be hard on wildlife and plants year-round. Where the sandy shoreline blends into the dunes, beach grasses grow and secure the sand. Despite these conditions, this is where you will discover the endangered seabeach amaranth growing.

Another type of habitat found on the refuge is wetlands, which consist of both salt and fresh water areas. The refuge staff manages both freshwater and brackish wetlands as moist-soil management units or "pools." These managed areas are important to all wildlife such as birds, waterfowl, and amphibians.



Ruddy duck
Irene Hinke-Sacilotto

The saltwater estuaries which lie to the west of the barrier islands are some of the most productive habitat found anywhere. A variety of mollusks and crustaceans live and feed in the refuge's salt marshes. This habitat is vital to black ducks and many other migratory birds for nesting and feeding.

Maritime forest
Irene Hinke-Sacilotto

Maritime forests are located on higher ground. This habitat is primarily loblolly pine, whose pine cones are the primary food source for the endangered Delmarva Peninsula fox squirrel. A variety of oaks are also scattered throughout this habitat. Several species of snakes (non-poisonous), as well as rabbit, raccoon, fox, white-tailed deer, and sika (an oriental elk) live in these woodlands. Birds of prey, known as raptors, also nest in the maritime forest and soar above the tree line in search of food.

Wildlife both great and small search for food.

Photo, Swamp rose:
Irene Hinke-Sacilotto

Photo, falcon:
Michael Colopy

The majestic egret and the endangered Delmarva Peninsula fox squirrel depend on Chincoteague Refuge.

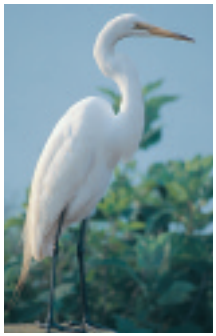


Photo: Irene Hinke-Sacilotto

Photo: Michael Colopy

Management

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service refuge managers and biologists manage habitats on national wildlife refuges to conserve, restore, and protect fish, wildlife, and plants. Habitat management ensures Americans that their natural resource heritage will be conserved for future generations to enjoy.

Perhaps the most noticeable management technique on the refuge is the careful manipulation of water levels in the moist-soil management units or "pools." Chincoteague Refuge has 14 such pools that total over 2,600 acres. Water control structures in these areas allow biologists to lower water levels in the spring to create a mudflat-type environment to attract shorebirds. Biologists also reduce water levels in the pools to concentrate fish for wading birds to feed upon, provide ideal feeding conditions for shorebirds, grow plants as a food source for waterfowl, and reduce the number of plants that are low in nutrition for wildlife.

In the fall, water control structures are closed to catch rainwater. The higher water levels provide habitat for waterfowl and other migratory birds. This careful manipulation of water levels is vital in attracting a wide variety of birds and other wildlife to the refuge.

The dunlin feeds along the refuge's barrier islands. Photo: Irene Hinke-Sacilotto

Refuge staff are also heavily involved with managing and protecting the threatened piping plover, a beach nesting shorebird that uses all of the refuge's barrier islands. Biologists place protective closures around nests, control predation, and intensively monitor these birds from March through August.

Protecting sensitive habitats by closing areas, also helps to protect threatened and endangered species such as the piping plover and Delmarva Peninsula fox squirrel. Setting aside certain habitat areas to reduce disturbance by people helps preserve the natural heritage that many Americans have come to love and treasure.

Ponies Photo: Steve Hillebrand/USFWS

Wildlife Calendar

January and February

These months are typically cold and blustery. The refuge's moist-soil management units usually host a wide variety of wintering waterfowl, including large numbers of snow geese.

March

The migratory waterfowl begin to depart for their northern breeding grounds. On March 15, the southern end of the island, known as the "Hook," is closed to all public use to protect habitat for the threatened piping plover and other beach nesting birds.

April and May

A diversity of migratory shorebirds and songbirds arrive on the refuge. Visitors are encouraged to celebrate Earth Day with refuge staff in mid-April and the refuge hosts an annual International Migratory Bird Celebration during Mother's Day Weekend.

June

This marks the beginning of the high tourist season as people migrate to the seashore for family vacations. Ticks and tick-borne diseases require visitors to check for unwanted "hitchhikers" after exploring the refuge's many hiking and biking trails. The first week of June is National Fishing Week.

July

Many visitors flock to the refuge on the last consecutive Wednesday and Thursday of July for the annual pony penning activities. Many species of wading birds, gulls, terns, and songbirds can be found throughout the refuge.

August

Mole crabs, ghost crabs and coquina clams frequent the seashore and herons and egrets line the ditches along Beach Road. Southward shorebird migration begins.

September and October

From mid-September to mid-October a number of hawks and falcons migrate through Assateague Island. The first migratory waterfowl arrive in September; however, the peak waterfowl migration usually occurs in November and December.

National Wildlife Refuge Week is celebrated Columbus Day weekend.

November and December

These are splendid months to observe a variety of waterfowl, including snow geese. Chincoteague Refuge boasts tens of thousands of snow geese who over-winter or use the area for feeding and resting as they migrate further south. Additionally, visitors can tour the northern portion of the refuge during Thanksgiving as part of the annual Waterfowl Week Celebration.

Each and every season at Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge has its own unique beauty and wildlife. Come and enjoy them all!

Beautiful Swan Cove provides visitors with unprecedented opportunities to view wildlife. USFWS photo.

Visitor Activities

Chincoteague Refuge is one of the most visited refuges in the nation, receiving approximately 1.5 million visits each year. A variety of wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities are available on the refuge. Opportunities include:

Herbert H. Bateman Educational and Administrative Center

A host of exhibits, displays, brochures, and wildlife-oriented programs and films are available to visitors. Refuge staff and volunteers are available to answer questions and help plan activities.

Trails

A variety of paved trails are open to hikers and/or bicyclists. These trails include the Freshwater Marsh, Woodland, Black Duck, Swan Cove, and Lighthouse Trails as well as the Wildlife Loop. The Wildlife Loop is also open to vehicles after 3:00 pm. The Lighthouse Trail offers visitors an up-close view of the historic Assateague Lighthouse.

Fishing and Crabbing

Surf fishing is a popular refuge activity: after-hours permits are available for those who wish to surf fish at night. Fishing and crabbing are also permitted in Swan Cove and other designated areas. Shellfishing is permitted in Toms Cove.

Boating

Boats are permitted to land on designated areas on Toms Cove Hook from September 1 through March 14.

Hunting

Big game, waterfowl, and rail hunting are available by permit during designated periods and only in certain areas.

Off-Road Vehicle Use

Off-road vehicling is permitted on a small section of the beach, which is subject to unexpected closures due to overwash or nesting species. Permits are required and are available at refuge headquarters, Toms Cove Visitor Center or by mail.

Educational Programs

School groups can arrange to visit the refuge and learn about wildlife, plants, and their habitats. Teacher workshops are also offered during the year.

Birds linger in the sunset at the refuge's Snow Goose Pool. USFWS photo: Robert Wilson

Regulations

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service encourages you to enjoy your visit, but remember, protecting wildlife, plants, and their habitats is the priority. Regulations exist for the welfare of wildlife, as well as for your safety. Please read and comply with the following list of regulations. Please note that the list is not all inclusive; therefore, remember that if an activity is not listed in a brochure or on a sign as being allowed, then it is not.

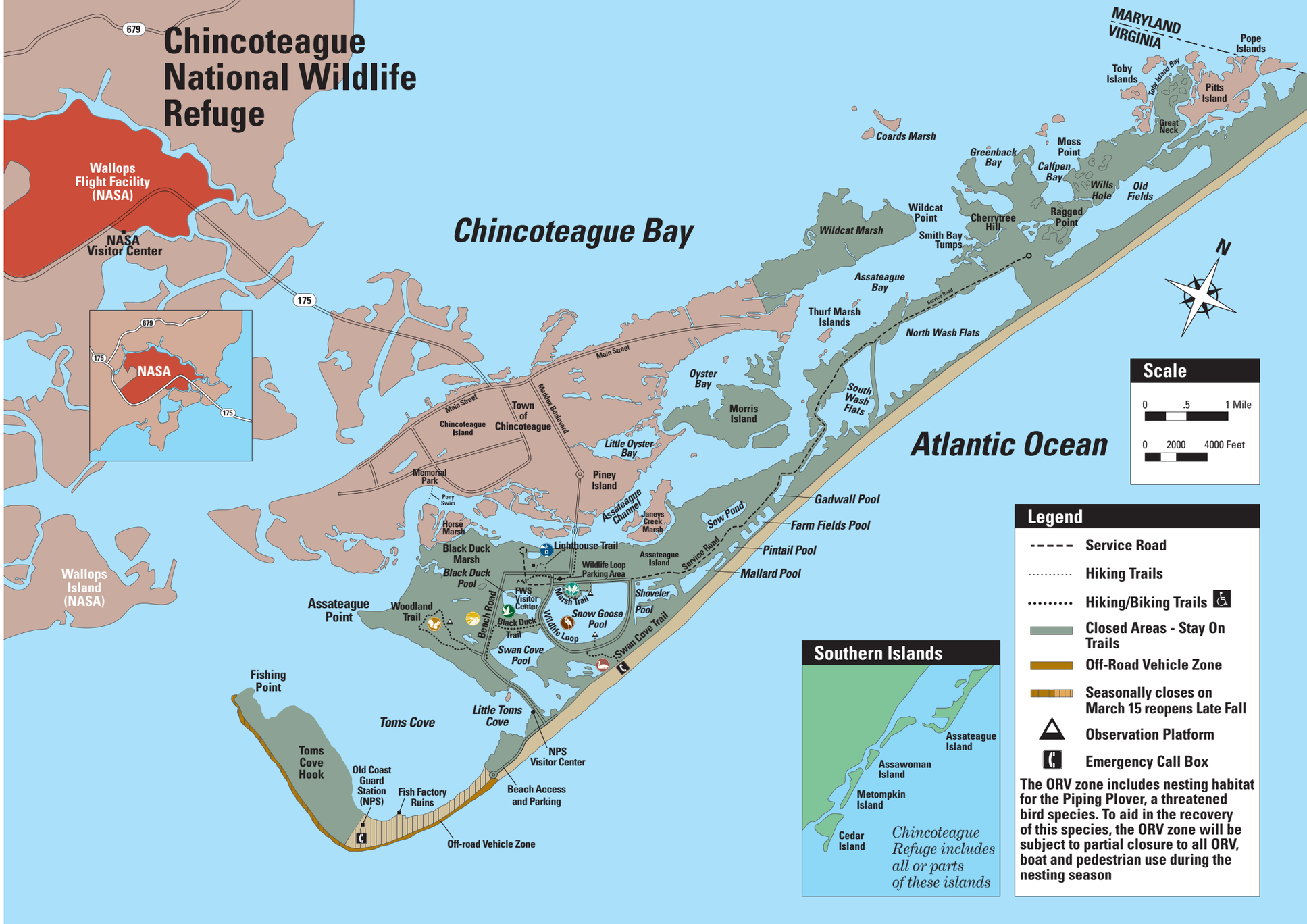
Please remember to:

- obey posted speed limits, wildlife is often seen near roads;
- protect habitat by parking only in designated areas, not on road shoulders;

USFWS photo

- keep the wild in wildlife (feeding wildlife, including ponies, is illegal and dangerous, as well as unhealthy for the wildlife);
- protect the delicate ecosystem.

The following items and /or activities are prohibited:

- firearms and other weapons (unless participating in the refuge hunt);
- pets (even in vehicles);
- collecting, removing, or damaging plants or animals;
- climbing onto or digging into fragile sand dunes;
- boats and flotation devices (in the refuge's moist-soil management units);
- camping;
- open fires;
- in-line-skating, skate-boarding, roller-skating, scooters;
- consuming alcoholic beverages;
- mopeds on all refuge trails.

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