U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Eastern Shore of Virginia

National Wildlife Refuge

Coming to the Point

Situated at the tip of the Delmarva Peninsula, the Eastern Shore of Virginia National Wildlife Refuge serves as one of the country's most valuable stopovers for migratory birds. Nestled between the Atlantic Ocean and Chesapeake Bay, this 1,123-acre refuge was established in 1984 for migratory and endangered species management and for wildlife-dependent recreation including interpretation and education.

This goose, designed by J.N. "Ding" Darling, has become the symbol of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

This area is one of the most important avian migration funnels in North America. Each fall, the refuge is the scene of a colorful drama as millions of songbirds and monarch butterflies and thousands of raptors converge at the peninsula's tip. Weather patterns push migrating species through in waves. Clouds of tree swallows swirl over ponds and orange and black-winged monarch butterflies float aloft. On peak days, 100,000 monarchs have been seen on refuge roosts.

Protected habitats such as the Eastern Shore of Virginia and Fisherman Island National Wildlife Refuges provide critical stopover areas where birds can rest and feed before resuming their arduous journey.

A Haven for Wildlife

The varied habitats of the Eastern Shore of Virginia NWR support a diversity of wildlife throughout the year. Migrant birds of prey (hawks, falcons, eagles) and songbirds are common from late August to early November.

Woodcock

American woodcock zoom and twitter as they fly from woods to fields at dusk from late November to February. Also, the tiny northern saw-whet owl migrates down the lower Delmarva Peninsula to winter here.

View of saltmarsh from the nature trail overlook
USFWS

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Tree swallows perch on a branch

During winter days, northern harriers fly low over fields in search of rodents, while American kestrels perch in strategic locations searching for prey. Black ducks and other dabbling ducks feed in refuge marshes. After sunset, snow geese and swans are often heard overhead.

With the arrival of spring, migrating songbirds pass through the refuge on their way to nesting grounds. Marsh and shorebirds search for food in shallow waters while ospreys repair their nests.

In spring and summer, the endangered northeastern beach tiger beetle scurries along refuge beaches. The threatened loggerhead sea turtle feeds in the rich waters of the Chesapeake Bay. Other marine turtles in the bay include the endangered leatherback, Atlantic hawksbill, Kemp's Ridley and the threatened green turtle. In refuge grasslands, butterflies and skippers with vivid names such as painted lady and pearl crescent dart between flowers.

Refuge woodlands and fields provide year-round homes for Carolina chickadees, Carolina wrens and several species of owls and woodpeckers. Thirty-four species of mammals, including river otter, American mink, gray and southern flying squirrels, Virginia opossum, raccoon, white-tailed deer, red and gray fox, coyotes and nine species of bats make their home on the refuge.

Marian Urbi Watts

Loggerhead turtle

© S. Maslowski/USFWS

Yellow-rumped warbler on flowering dogwood

A Unique Past

The Eastern Shore of Virginia has long been a rural agricultural area. Prior to colonization, however, the Eastern Shore was almost entirely forested by deciduous mixed hardwood. Anthropologists believe the indigenous people were hunters and gatherers but, land use changed after the arrival of Europeans. Uplands were farmed and wetlands and waters were hunted and fished. Additionally, the strategic location at the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay encouraged military uses.

Aerial photo of Cape Charles Air Force Station

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Aerial photo of the Winslow bunker

At the beginning of World War II, much of the land that is now refuge was acquired by the federal government and named Fort John Custis, after a prominent eighteenth century resident of Northampton County. During the war, large bunkers housed 16-inch guns designed to protect naval bases and shipyards in Virginia Beach and Norfolk. In 1950, the Air Force acquired Fort John Custis, renaming it Cape Charles Air Force Station. Radar towers and additional facilities were built by the Air Force, which occupied the area until 1981. In 1984, the area was transferred to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Charles Philip/USFWS

Freshwater pond habitat

Protecting and Managing Habitats

The Eastern Shore of Virginia National Wildlife Refuge looks very different from when it was the Cape Charles Air Force Base. With the refuge's establishment, the removal of military buildings and structures to create habitat for wildlife began. Woodlands, shrublands, grasslands, saltmarsh, beach and fresh and brackish ponds now dominate the landscape.

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Workamper volunteers installing bluebird boxes on the refuge

Today, management focuses on protecting, restoring and enhancing habitat for forest and shrub-dependent migratory birds. By increasing hardwoods like oak, hickory, maple and sweet gum and increasing shrublands, these migratory species will have additional sources of high-quality food.

Future conservation efforts lie in the refuge's commitment to protecting and enhancing the migration corridor through preserving, acquiring, and revegetating hardwood, shrub and grassland areas. Alliances with nearby landowners will increase available habitat, and research will focus on augmenting our knowledge to make biologically sound management decisions.

Visitor Activities

A great place to start your visit to the Eastern Shore of Virginia NWR is the visitor center, located just north of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel. The visitor center has exhibits and videos on habitats and wildlife management activities occurring on refuges. There is a wildlife viewing area that overlooks a freshwater pond and an auditorium for wildlife programs.

Visitor center and freshwater pond

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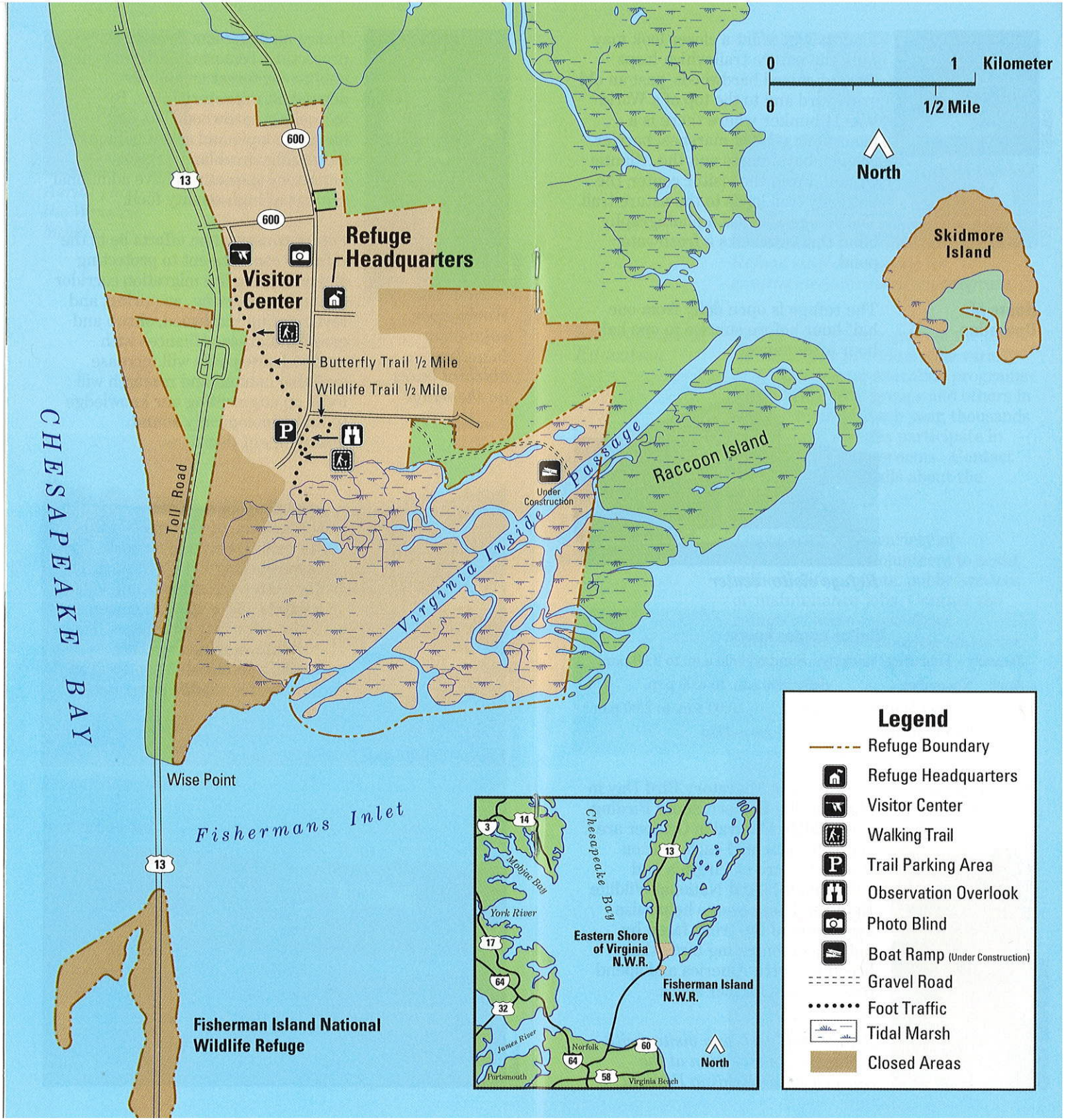
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1
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North
Skidmore Island
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13
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Refuge Headquarters
Visitor Center
Butterfly Trail ½ Mile
Wildlife Trail ½ Mile
Toll Road
CHESAPEAKE BAY
Under Construction
Virginia Inside Passage
Raccoon Island
Wise Point
Fishermans Inlet
13
Fisherman Island National Wildlife Refuge
Chesapeake Bay
Mobjac Bay
York River
James River
Eastern Shore of Virginia N.W.R.
Fisherman Island N.W.R.
Norfolk
Portsmouth
Virginia Beach
North
Legend
Refuge Boundary
Refuge Headquarters
Visitor Center
Walking Trail
Trail Parking Area
Observation Overlook
Photo Blind
Boat Ramp (Under Construction)
Gravel Road
Foot Traffic
Tidal Marsh
Closed Areas

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The nature trail

Visitors who want a closer look may walk the nature trail which loops through mixed hardwoods, past an old graveyard and to the top of a World War II bunker where there is a panoramic view of marshes, barrier islands, bays, inlets and the Atlantic Ocean. From the visitor center, the butterfly trail leads to the nature trail. The refuge also has a photography blind that overlooks a freshwater pond.

Hours of Operation

The refuge is open daily from one half-hour before sunrise to one half-hour after sunset.

R. Wilson/USFWS

Refuge visitor center

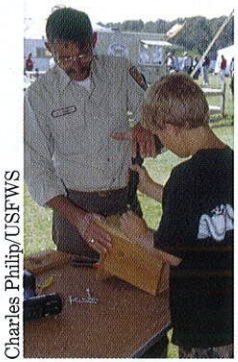
Visitor center hours:

January - February	Friday - Sunday	10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m.
April - November	daily	9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.
December and March	daily	10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m.

Closed Thanksgiving Day and Christmas Day

Special Events

International Migratory Bird Day in May and the Eastern Shore Birding and Wildlife Festival in October are special events held each year on Eastern Shore of Virginia and Fisherman Island National Wildlife Refuges. These events help raise awareness of the trials faced by millions of migrating birds that breed in North America and spend their winters further south.



Charles Philip/USFWS

Refuge staff assisting visitor with birdhouse construction at the Eastern Shore Birding Festival

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Refuge staff conducting an environmental education program

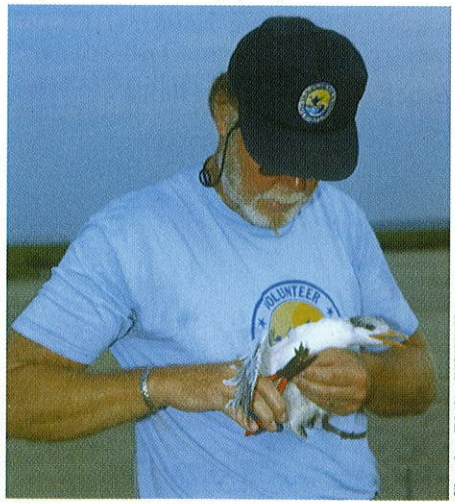
Environmental Education

One of the primary goals of the public use staff is to provide a wide variety of environmental education programs to students, civic groups and others in the community. Each year, thousands of people of all ages participate in these outdoor classrooms. Contact the refuge for details about the programs.

Volunteers

There are a wide variety of opportunities for volunteers to assist with wildlife projects, public services or maintenance jobs. Contact the refuge to learn more about internships, work camping and other volunteer information.

Refuge volunteer helping with royal tern banding project



Charles Philip/USFWS

Regulations

Permitted activities include wildlife observation, photography, nature study and hiking on the trails and along some roads. Please watch for signs that close some areas to visitors.

Pets must be kept on a leash.

Prohibited items and activities include use of metal detectors, firearms, picnicking and the collection of plants, animals or artifacts.

Fisherman Island National Wildlife Refuge

The Virginia barrier island chain, including Fisherman Island National Wildlife Refuge, is one of only 17 sites in the United States classified as a "Wetland of International Importance." The refuge is the southernmost barrier island, separated from the Eastern Shore of Virginia by about one-half mile. Currently estimated at 1,850 acres, the island continues to expand. The Department of the Navy transferred Fisherman Island to the Department of the Interior in 1973. It was managed as an un-staffed satellite of Back Bay National Wildlife Refuge until 1984, when management was turned over to the newly established Eastern Shore of Virginia National Wildlife Refuge.

Beach at Fisherman Island

S. Alvarez/USFWS

RPD/USFWS

Saltmarsh at Fisherman Island

An Historical View

The island's earliest documentation is from navigational charts of Chesapeake Bay in 1815. Old-timers claimed it was originally named Linen Island after a ship carrying a load of linen went aground there in the early nineteenth century.

In 1886, the federal government purchased Fisherman Island for an immigrant quarantine station. The station consisted of barracks for up to 1,000 people and included a kitchen, mess hall, artesian well and keeper's residence. At the beginning of WWI, in 1914, two 5-inch guns and soldiers from the 4th Company of the Virginia Coastal Artillery National Guard were placed on Fisherman Island. In 1937, a coastal artillery station was reestablished. In early 1942, a battery of 155 mm guns was built to protect minefields across the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay throughout WWII.

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Military installation at Fisherman Island

Jerry Via/USFWS

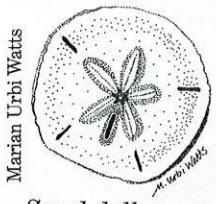
Baby brown pelicans in the nest on Fisherman Island

Habitats & Wildlife

Habitat succession has formed a mosaic of vegetative communities capable of withstanding the island's harsh conditions. Dunes, swales and shrub thickets combined with the geographic location of the island, the accessibility of food, protective shrub and thicket cover, and minimal human disturbance make this island an important stop over for migratory birds and an incredible nesting area. Thousands of brown pelicans and royal terns nest in the dunes while American oystercatchers use choice beach locations to raise their young.

In the upland thickets, forested stands of black cherry and sassafras historically supported a rookery of great blue herons and great egrets. In addition, annually shifting rookeries of snowy egret, cattle egret, little blue heron, tri-colored heron, black-crowned night-heron, yellow-crowned night-heron, white ibis and glossy ibis prefer the shrub thicket stands of predominantly wax myrtle and bayberry.

Visitor Activities



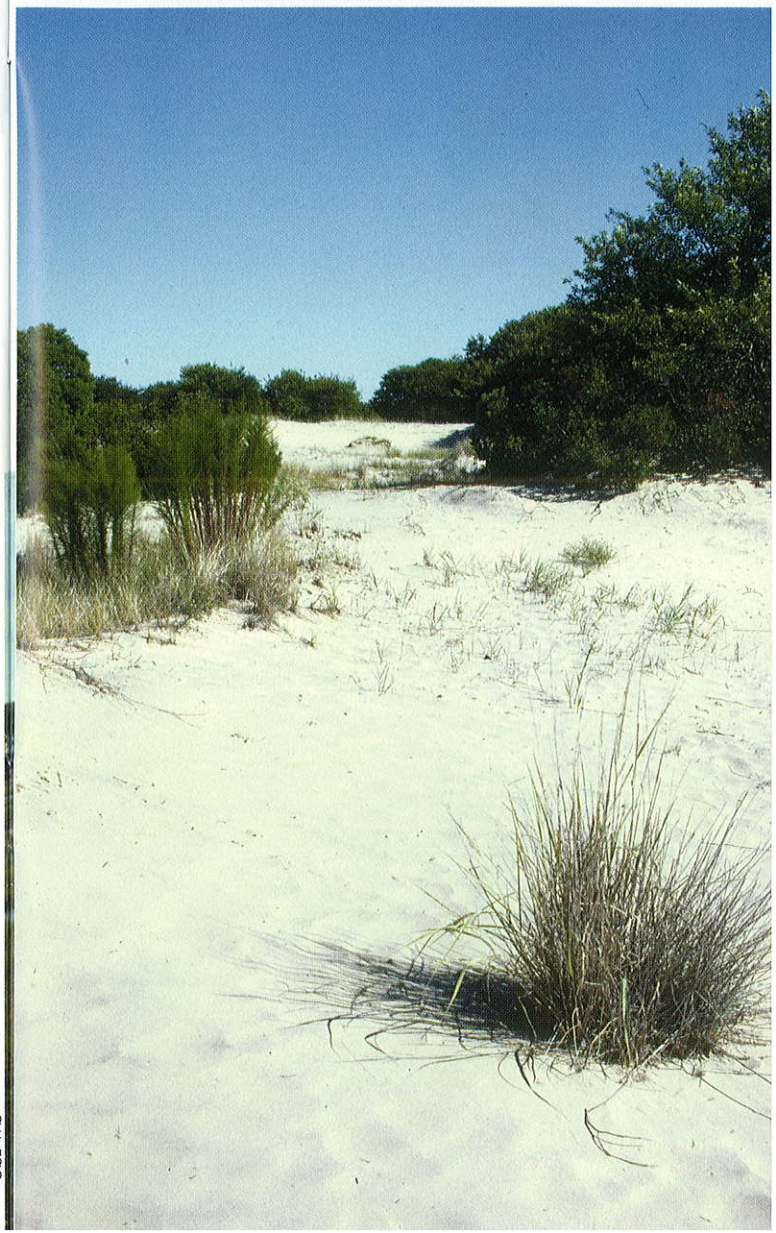
Marian Urbi Watts

Sand dollar

Because of the critical nature of its habitats for wildlife, Fisherman Island is closed to the public.

Guided tours are offered on Saturdays from October through mid-March and during special events. To schedule a tour, contact the refuge.

Fisherman Island beach and dunes



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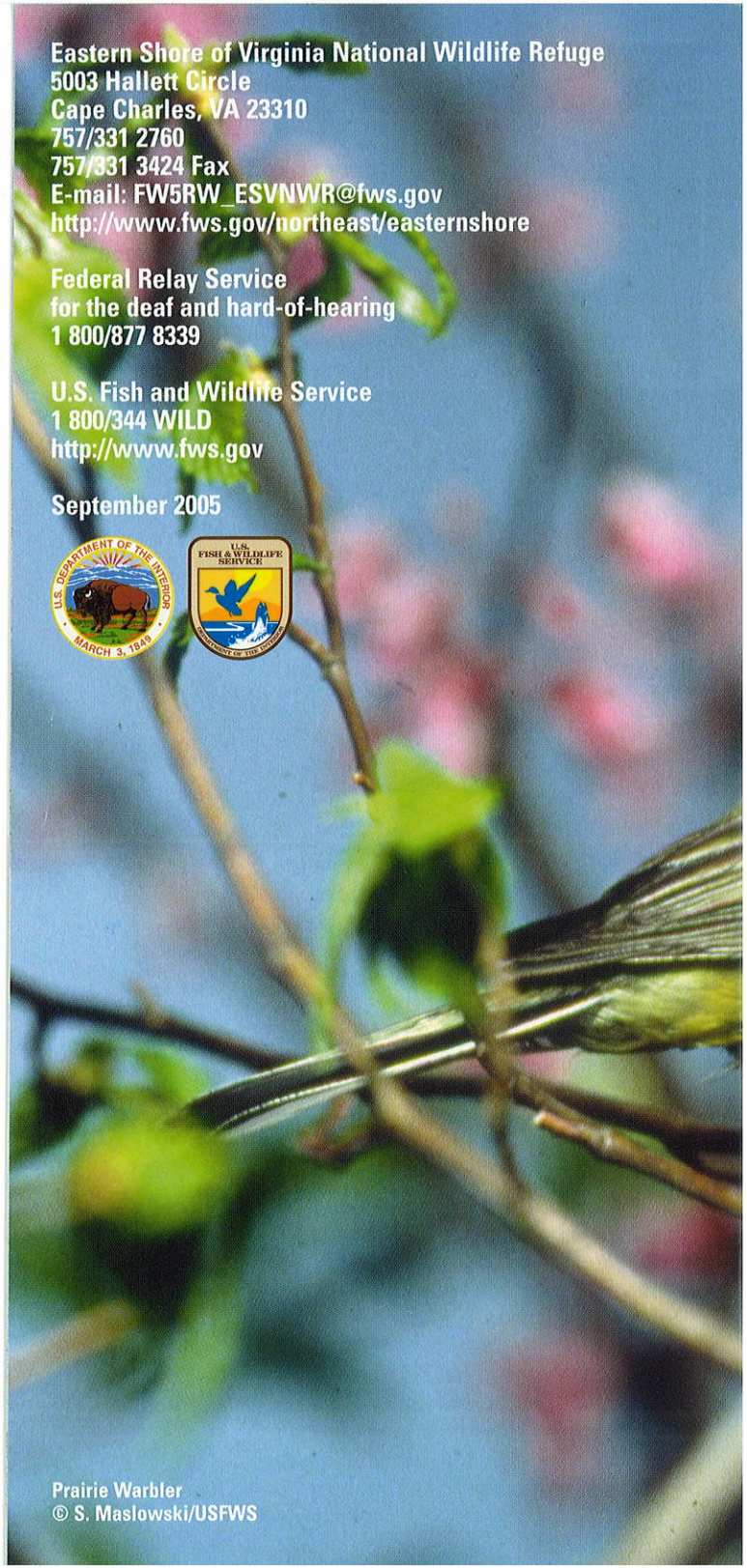
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
1 800/344 WILD
http://www.fws.gov

September 2005



Prairie Warbler
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