



Stewart B. McKinney National Wildlife Refuge

Planning Update Newsletter #3



Black Skimmers - USFWS

Greetings from the refuge!

We continue to work on the draft comprehensive conservation plan (CCP) and environmental assessment (EA) for Stewart B. McKinney National Wildlife Refuge (NWR). The CCP and EA is a 15-year strategic plan that will guide management for all refuge programs, including habitat management and outdoor recreation.

The planning process began in 2011 when we first held scoping meetings to gather public input and identify key issues and concerns. Developing the CCP for Stewart B. McKinney NWR is a collaborative effort to develop goals and strategies that best protect natural resources and provide appropriate wildlife-dependent recreational activities.

We appreciate your patience as we continue to develop the best possible plan for the refuge.



Stewart B. McKinney Refuge

Our timeline

We intend to complete our draft CCP and EA for the refuge by the spring of 2016. When it is released, we will provide opportunities for public review and comment for 30 days. Information about public meeting dates, times, and locations will be distributed at that time.

We will address comments that we receive during the public comment period in the final plan. With your involvement, we will develop a CCP that will ensure that the refuge remains a special place for wildlife and people.

Why has the CCP schedule changed?

Our interagency planning team has been working to further refine the goals and objectives for wildlife and public uses at the refuge. Additionally, our planning team staff has changed. Our former refuge planner, Bill Perry, has recently accepted temporary assignments in our Regional Office's Realty and Migratory Birds Programs. Our new refuge planner is Meghan Powell. Over the past four years, she has been working to develop three CCPs for four refuges in Virginia. Meghan looks forward to working with you as we continue to develop this plan.

Considering these and various other factors, additional time has been needed in our planning process.

What will be in the draft plan?

The draft CCP and EA will describe and evaluate alternative ways of managing the refuge, including the environmental impacts of each of alternative. The alternatives all meet the refuge's purposes. One of the alternatives represents our current management approach and will serve as a baseline for comparison.

Next Steps

We look forward to discussing the draft CCP and EA with you. Public input on the draft CCP and EA is invaluable and will help us to refine our management proposal to best achieve our shared vision for the refuge. Once the draft CCP is complete, it will be available for review on our website. A limited number of hard-copies and CD-ROM versions will be available upon request from refuge staff.

Contact information

For additional information about this planning process, please visit our refuge website at: http://www.fws.gov/refuge/stewart_b_mckinney.

Or contact:

Meghan Powell
Natural Resource Planner
Phone: (804) 313-7729
Email: northeastplanning@fws.gov

Please put "Stewart B. McKinney CCP" in the subject line.

Latest News from the Refuge

Here are some highlights from ongoing projects at the refuge.

Monitoring and Research News

The refuge collaborates with partners to conduct research and monitoring to address local conservation needs. Here are three research and monitoring projects that are currently underway.

Collaborative Pollinator Research

In partnership with the Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station (CAES), we are entering the fourth year of a long-term monitoring study to establish a baseline population of bee species in the state of Connecticut.

Dr. Kim Stoner and Tracy Zarrillo from CAES collect bees from sites throughout the state, including the refuge, from April to October annually following the U.S. Geological Survey national sampling protocol.

At the refuge, samples are collected from “Bee Plots” in a shrubby meadow area at the Salt Meadow Unit in Westbrook. The plant species in this area are great for pollinators and include:

- Milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca*).
- Butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*).
- Goldenrod (*Solidago* spp.).
- Several species of aster.

The CAES identified 47 species of bees from the refuge in 2012, including two rare sweat bee species (*Lasioglossum subviridatum* and *L. abanci*). One of these species is uncommon and has not been recorded in the State since 1915, and the other is a new State record.



Bee on goldenrod

Stewart B. McKinney NWR



Swallowtail butterfly on the refuge

Collaborative Pollinator Habitat Enhancement

With help from the Branford and Guilford Garden Clubs, we have started planning for a “Native Plant Pollinator Garden” on the Outer Island Unit, located in the Thimble Island chain off the coast of Branford. Despite being a small island, Outer Island is a great place to see pollinators such as butterflies, bees, other insects, and hummingbirds. Over 1,200 people, mostly children, visit Outer Island every summer season.

We have decided to initiate a planting study to determine which plant species would do best on the island and promote native pollinator populations. Some plants will enjoy full sun, while others will enjoy partial sun. We will begin planting at the end of May and document our progress on our Facebook page (<http://www.facebook.com/SBMcKinneyNWR>).

Piping Plover Nesting Surveys and Monitoring

Our monitoring of the federally threatened piping plover begins each year at the end of March, when plovers arrive along Connecticut’s coast, and continues until late August/early September, when the species migrates south to their wintering grounds. The refuge’s wildlife biologist and shorebird intern identify and monitor all piping plover nesting activity at Milford Point Unit, the refuge’s only breeding site for piping plovers. Super Storm Sandy improved the unit’s open, sparsely vegetated beach habitat by increasing the amount of sandy substrate in the form of overwash (see map below).

Following Super Storm Sandy in 2013, the refuge had its first piping plover pair in 5 years on Milford Point, but sadly the nest was destroyed by a predator. In 2014, another pair of plovers nested there and successfully raised two young. We are hopeful that the number of successful nesting plovers will continue to increase on the refuge.

Refuge staff also assist the State’s Department of Energy and Environmental Protection’s Wildlife Division (CTDEEP) with their efforts to protect the piping plover population in the State.

Improved piping plover habitat at the refuge’s Milford Point Unit

Pre-Sandy 3/2012

Post-Sandy 9/2013



 = Areas that were improved for plovers after Super Storm Sandy

Stewart B. McKinney NWR

With help from the CTDEEP and Audubon Connecticut, we train approximately 50 volunteers each March to survey the beaches throughout the breeding season for plovers, identify nests and chicks, and educate the public about the importance of sharing the beaches with shorebird species.

Environmental Education News
The refuge continues to conduct its successful Nature of Learning environmental education program in several shoreline communities.

Lesson one specifically focuses on the purposes of national wildlife refuges and the importance of Stewart B. McKinney NWR to many migratory bird species. During the lesson, students become wildlife biologists and work together to identify the characteristics of birds—such as the roseate tern and great egret—that nest at the refuge.

They also view a presentation on some common bird nest types, and then the students each try their hand at building their own nests with natural materials like grass and twigs. They usually learn that humans don't quite have the same nest-building instincts as birds, but the students certainly have fun. Lesson two teaches about animal adaptations, such as the physical attributes of webbed feet, long legs and sharp talons, and the behavioral characteristics of migration and hibernation. Students again assume the role of biologist and classify animals based on several of their physical attributes.

They also partake in a fun activity where they try to pass sports balls of various sizes (golf, tennis,



Don Freiday

Federally threatened piping plover



Kelly Fryer

Barnard School students on a field trip to Outer Island on the refuge

baseball, basketball) to each other without the use of their thumbs. This demonstrates a major physical adaptation of humans and some other primates—the opposable thumb.

One main outcome of lesson two is to teach that adaptations allow an animal to fit into a very particular habitat type. For instance, the great egret's long legs allow it to most easily feed in the intertidal zone and marsh. Because the refuge protects so much of these habitat types from development, the refuge provides an ideal home to these and similar migratory birds.

The final lesson is conducted on the refuge, where students see first-hand the habitat types of Long Island Sound and some of the wildlife that was discussed in the classroom. They learn about the food chain and search for organisms—such as fish, crabs and snails—that make up the diet of many of the refuge's birds. Using hydrometers, salinity meters, and other scientific tools, students also measure the conditions for life in the marshes, tide pools and open waters of the refuge.

The Nature of Learning program has grown from its origins in Norwalk, Connecticut and has now branched out to New Haven, Westbrook, and Greenwich, Connecticut. In just these few years, the environmental education

efforts in these communities have reached over 1,200 students.

The program owes a lot to several volunteers who assist in teaching the lessons, to the boat captains who transport the students from port to the refuge's islands, and to the teachers who see the program as a major benefit to the enrichment of their students.

If you'd like to be involved in this year's Nature of Learning program, get in touch with Shaun Roche via email at shaun_roche@fws.gov.



Stewart B. McKinney NWR

Great Marsh on the refuge

**U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
Federal Relay Service for the Deaf
or Hard of Hearing - 1 800/877 8339**

<http://www.fws.gov>



March 2015

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