



U. S. Fish & Wildlife Service

# Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge Complex Planning Update

## Winter 1999

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### National Wildlife Refuge System Mission Statement:

*“to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans”*

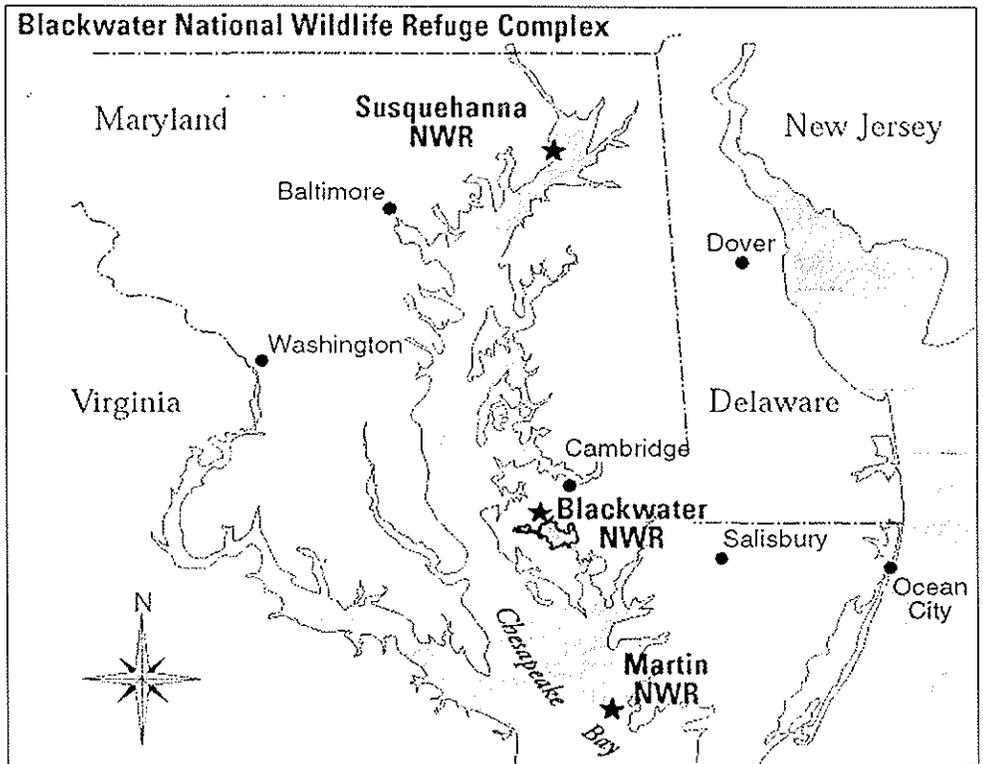


*Marsh areas such as this one provide valuable habitat for waterfowl. Each year thousands of geese and ducks winter here. Photo by Bill Zinni*

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service is in the process of developing a Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) and Environmental Assessment for the Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge Complex. This plan will outline the management direction for Blackwater, Martin, and Susquehanna National Wildlife Refuges (NWR) over the next 15 years. As part of the process, we've been gathering input from the public, conservation organizations, sporting groups, and local, state and federal government agencies. This newsletter is an update on the status of the planning process and what we have heard from people so far. We also

want to offer you the opportunity to comment on our vision and goals.

Over the last year we have focused on setting our vision, goals and objectives for the refuges. Open houses, held in the Spring of 1998, gathered information from local communities. Issues workbooks were created to encourage written comments on topics such as wildlife habitats, invasive species, land protection, and public access to refuge lands. We sent out over 3000 workbooks and also made them available at each of the 17 open houses and the Refuge Headquarters.



# Blackwater NWR Issues

## *The Process...*

*A large part of the planning process involves compiling information. We are assembling information on the history and current status of natural resources and public uses on the Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge Complex. From public scoping meetings, we identified a draft list of issues to be addressed in the CCP and its Environmental Assessment (EA).*

*With public comments in hand, we developed a draft vision of where we think Refuge management should be headed. Public comments received in the Issues Workbooks are summarized in the following pages.*



*Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge protects valuable habitat for the Endangered Delmarva fox squirrel. Forests such as this, are prime habitat for the squirrel. Photo by Bill Zinni*

## What have we heard?

We received comments at open house meetings and through letters and Issues Workbooks. 180 completed workbooks were returned to us. The information provided by the respondents is instrumental to the planning process. This update describes the significant issues brought to our attention.

Thank you for taking the time to complete and send in your responses! They will help us make some important decisions at the Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge Complex.

## What are the issues that affect the refuges?

**Will the refuge continue with wetland restoration projects?**

Some people expressed concern that the refuge's involvement in wetland restoration projects off-refuge is detracting from the refuge's ability to accomplish more important on-refuge wetland restoration projects. There was concern over whether the refuge's contribution to off-refuge projects, particularly in supplied labor, equipment

and expertise, adversely affects local contractors and consultants by eliminating opportunities for them to compete for this type of work.

**Should the refuge plant crops for waterfowl?**

Refuge staff voiced concerns over the lack of available funding for the force account farming program. Instead of maintaining funding as acreage increases, the dedicated funding base has been eliminated, forcing refuge and partners to rely on contributions, donations, and grants to maintain this activity. This food source is used by 90% of the refuge's wintering waterfowl for their nutrition needs. Alternatively, a few Service personnel have suggested that over the long-term providing crop foods for wintering waterfowl may not be the most effective use of effort when compared to restoring wetlands.



*The visitor center offers visitors unique opportunity to see wildlife up close and learn about the Chesapeake Bay ecosystem. Photo by M. Briggs*

# Blackwater NWR Complex Issues



*Blackwater NWR has an active environmental education program. These students are learning about marsh habitat. USFWS Photo*

## What's Next?

*... will identify the multiple ways deal with issues brought up during scoping. Because there are different ways to solve problems or create opportunities, we will develop alternative management strategies. After consideration of public input, budgets, staffing, and Service goals and policies, we will package together our "proposed action" for the three National Wildlife Refuges. All management strategies will be evaluated in the draft CCP/EA.*

*The draft CCP/EA will be made available for public review and comment, providing you with another opportunity to discuss issues and offer solutions. If you've received a copy of this newsletter in the mail then you are already scheduled to receive an "Executive Summary" of the draft CCP/EA.*

*All documents will be provided to all State and Federal agencies, and organizations on our mailing list. Full documents can be requested. Continued on Page 5*

## What is the refuge doing to stop marsh loss?

Many people are concerned about marsh loss on the refuge and in the Chesapeake Bay region generally. The loss of acreage is due to several factors, including sea level rise, land subsidence, and saltwater intrusion. The public expressed concern that marsh loss impacts the refuge's ability to provide habitat for anadromous fish, threatened and endangered species and waterfowl. Some suggested the refuge should actively manage for marsh loss by controlling the nutria population, conducting prescribed burns, constructing erosion control structures, protecting the shoreline, and using dredge spoil to raise marsh elevations. Again, the public is concerned that inadequate funding and staff inhibits marsh and wetland restoration efforts on the refuge.

## Does burning the marsh contribute to marsh loss and degradation?

The refuge currently uses prescribed burns to control marsh loss. The refuge burns under strict prescriptive criteria that ensure firefighter and public safety, and prevent adverse habitat effects. However, some people question whether burning reduces marsh loss or whether it actually exacerbates the problem. The public has suggested that the refuge further research the effects of prescribed burning on marsh and wetland ar-

eas. We addressed this concern with an environmental assessment for the refuge's Fire Management Plan, completed in 1999. A panel of experts analyzed alternatives for burning marsh to enhance productivity, and have already implemented formal research programs to address the public's concerns.

## How is Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge Complex protecting rare and endangered plants?

Both refuge staff and the public are concerned about the protection of rare plants. We identified a need for better documentation of these plants on the refuge. Some people have suggested a more comprehensive system of vegetation mapping and sampling. The public encouraged the refuge to continue to protect and restore unique plant communities, and encouraged working with State agencies and other organizations to protect these habitats.

## What kind of forest management should occur on the refuge?

A concern was raised over the lack of forest management on the refuge. Comments were received that forest management is needed to improve overall forest health. This also improves habitat for Delmarva fox squirrels and Bald Eagles, and decreases the risk of gypsy moth and Southern pine beetle infestations. Many people who consider selling their forested

# Blackwater NWR Issues Identified

## Vision Statement

The Blackwater NWR Complex protects, restores, and manages an internationally recognized complex of wetland and upland communities. The refuge continues to be nationally renowned for its wetland habitats that sustain healthy flocks of wintering waterfowl and its forest lands that support stable or increasing populations of endangered Delmarva fox squirrels, neotropical migrants, and forest-interior dwelling birds.

The refuge serves a pivotal role in the conservation of lands and wildlife in the Federal Trust within the Blackwater and Nanticoke River watersheds. Important habitats in these two watersheds are protected and actively managed for the benefit of wildlife. The refuge acquires high priority wetlands and uplands to ensure perpetuation of healthy and diverse habitat types and their dependent species.

The refuge complex demonstrates the importance of the natural world to the human quality of life; the value of, and need for, fish and wildlife management; and the human role in preserving and enhancing wildlife habitat. Local communities enthusiastically identify and promote the area as a destination for wildlife-oriented public use that may contribute substantially to the local economy. Clean, safe, accessible, wildlife-compatible, and high quality experiences and facilities for diverse audiences are provided. In collaboration with many partners, a wide range of innovative, stimulating, general public and environmental education programs and activities are provided.

property to the refuge may not want their land left unmanaged.

Some have suggested that an active forest management program would create opportunities for local contractors to bid on the timber or the silvicultural work to be performed.

### Will the refuge control injurious, invasive and overabundant species?

Many people voiced a concern about invasive species. Species such as nutria are adversely affecting the environment, causing marsh loss and out-competing other species for the same habitat. Some feel the current trapping efforts are not enough to decrease the population, and want eradication efforts enhanced. Public hunting for nutria was suggested as a control method on the refuge. Similarly, the overpopulation of mute swans is a contentious issue for the refuge. Some suggested public hunting of mute swans while others vehemently oppose the control of mute swan populations.

The public is concerned with the effects of gypsy moths in Service forest stands. Some supported the efforts to eliminate the exotic insect through spraying, but others voiced concern over the effects of the chemicals used. Similarly, the public voiced concern over the southern pine beetle and its impact on forest health.

Other nuisance species such as house sparrows, grackles, and starlings were identified. These species interfere with nesting efforts of other species such as bluebirds and wood ducks. The white-tailed deer was also mentioned as a nuisance species as the deer continue to feed on refuge and neighboring crops, thereby limiting the food supply available for wintering waterfowl. Some people suggest hunting as a management tool, while others oppose it altogether. Lesser snow geese and resident Canada geese have become problems for the same reason. Many people have suggested using population control methods, including hunting.

The refuge also has a problem with invasive, injurious, and overabundant plants. These include Phragmites, Purple loosestrife, Johnson grass, thistle and saltmarsh fleabane. Both support for and concerns about chemicals and burning to control these plants were raised. Others suggested that the refuge should expand its role in protecting native plants and that protected managed lands would be an ideal study area for a long-term, large-scale investigation on methods for non-native plant control and propagation of affected native plants.

## Blackwater NWR Issues Identified



Visitors are invited to use these spotting scopes in the visitor center to view the wildlife using the ponds. Photo by M. Briggs



Bird watching is popular at Blackwater NWR. Photo by M. Briggs

### What's Next? (continued from page 3)

There will be more opportunities to stay involved in the planning process. The proposed schedule for CCP/EA preparations is as follows:

- Draft CCP/EA available for public review in mid-2000
- Public Review will follow release of the draft CCP/EA
- Distribution of final CCP/EA in late 2000

We hope you will remain actively involved in the planning process. Look for our next "planning update" for further details.

### Will the refuge manage for resident species?

The public expressed an interest in managing habitats for resident species, including upland game and game birds, e.g., quail, pheasant, and turkey. People suggested that these animals could be better managed to provide hunting opportunities. The public also suggested that the refuge increase the number of animal surveys done.

### Will the refuge control predator species?

Some people feel that predators (such as the fox, raccoon, opossum, snapping turtle, skunk and coyote) which prey on the Delmarva fox squirrel, waterfowl and other migratory birds should be controlled. The public questioned whether anti-hunting and anti-trapping sentiment affects the willingness of the refuge to control overabundant predators.

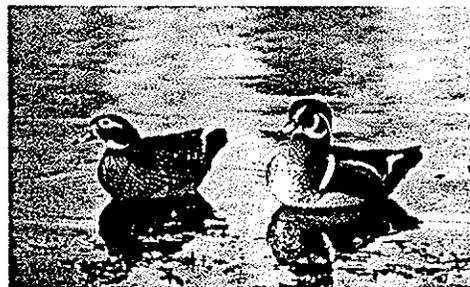
### Will the refuge protect threatened and endangered species?

Blackwater provides habitat for the endangered Delmarva fox squirrel, recently-delisted peregrine falcon and threatened bald eagle. Most people support refuge efforts to protect valuable habitat for these species and many suggest that habitat protection efforts be expanded. However, some people were concerned about how

threatened and endangered species on private lands would affect private landowners. Many respondents expressed concern for impacts to threatened and endangered species including: habitat loss and damage; wetland loss; nutria damage; gypsy moth infestation; lack of forest management and decline of forest health; lack of old growth forest and rapid development of the Eastern Shore.

### Will the refuge provide more wildlife observation and photography opportunities?

The public expressed a desire to replace the observation tower to improve wildlife viewing opportunities. Wildlife blinds, telescope observation sites and observation blinds were also requested. Many people also suggested that more areas be open for hiking, biking and canoeing. Some people suggested boardwalks over the marsh and canoe trails with maps. Inadequate funding has not allowed for construction of many of the requested facilities.



Wood ducks are common on ponds at Blackwater NWR. Photo by Dane Minke

## Blackwater NWR Issues Identified



*Both resident and non-resident Canada geese are found on the refuge. USFWS Photo*



*Volunteers are an important part of the program at Blackwater. These volunteers are learning about waterfowl on the refuge. Photo by M. Briggs*

### ***How to Contact Us***

You can contact us several ways with your comments.

Pam Rooney, Refuge Planner  
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
Refuges and Wildlife  
300 Westgate Center Drive  
Hadley, MA 01035-9589  
Email: Pam\_Rooney@fws.gov

You can also contact Blackwater NWR  
Phone: (410) 228-2692  
Email: FW5RW\_BWNWR@fws.gov

### **Will the refuge provide more environmental education and interpretative opportunities?**

The refuge and local schools continue to work together to create an environmental education manual for educators. More environmental education programs and teacher workshops were high on the list. Many requested that the refuge expand the three special environmental education events the refuge hosts every year. An increase in staffing and funding for these programs was also requested.

Similarly, the public strongly supported expanding interpretive programs on the refuge. Many people have requested, in particular, more programs and special events for children. New interpretive signs, plaques, trail markers, maps, informational leaflets, interpretive exhibits and a new visitor center were also requested.

### **Will the refuges provide more hunting and fishing opportunities?**

There were many different opinions regarding hunting on the refuge. Some people requested expanding hunting opportunities to include turkey, quail, resident geese, waterfowl, mute swans, rabbit and nutria. Others requested that the number of deer hunting days be expanded. Others, however, did not want hunting on the refuge.

The public has also requested more fishing opportunities. Some people want the refuge to provide a boat launch, updated maps of the waterways, and signage.

### **Will the refuge continue to protect new habitats?**

There was a great deal of interest in habitat protection. Many people supported a refuge role in protecting additional habitat within the Nanticoke River corridor, an area with both Federally- and State-listed Rare, Threatened or Endangered plant and animal species, and unique ecological communities which support a variety of wildlife.

### **What is the effect of land acquisition on the local community?**

Some people voiced concerns over how the refuge acquires land and the effects of these purchases on the community. Some issues raised were the use of condemnation, economic impacts such as lost tax revenues, additional regulation and restriction as a result of Refuge expansion, endangered species population expansion, and private landowners rights.

# Blackwater NWR Goals



*The refuge supports one of the largest nesting and wintering concentrations of bald eagles on the Atlantic coast. Photo by Craig Coppie*



*Nutria are a major problem on the refuge. Their voracious foraging is credited for destroying marsh areas and out-competing other species for valuable food sources. The refuge currently tries to manage the population by trapping and hunting, but the population continues to increase. USFWS Photo*

## Blackwater NWR Complex Goals

- 1) Promote stable or increasing populations of endangered species and protection of their habitats to support recovery goals.
- 2) Maintain healthy populations of waterfowl in sufficient numbers to meet the objectives of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan, the Management Plan for Canada Geese in Maryland, and the Chesapeake Bay Waterfowl Policy and Management Plan.
- 3) Maintain and restore healthy populations of migratory birds other than waterfowl.
- 4) Maintain a healthy and diverse ecosystem with a full range of natural processes, natural community types, and the full spectrum of native plants and animals to pass on to future generations of Americans.
- 5) Promote healthy and sustainable populations of interjurisdictional and anadromous fish.
- 6) Assure that the best examples of unique wild lands (i.e. RAMSAR sites, Natural Heritage Areas, and International Birding Areas) are identified, protected, and managed to assure their unique natural character.
- 7) Maintain healthy and sustainable populations of resident fish and wildlife at levels that do not negatively impact refuge habitats, trust resources, or the public, and encourage research that will provide needed data for improved management of Blackwater and other units of the National Wildlife Refuge System.
- 8) Foster public understanding and appreciation of the value of, and need for, fish and wildlife management through wildlife interpretation and environmental education.
- 9) Provide compatible wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities.
- 10) Foster cooperative actions and partnerships with local communities, agencies, and organizations to promote and further refuge goals, and the goals and mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System.



*Osprey are also common on Blackwater NWR. USFWS Photo*

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