

Elizabeth Hartwell Mason Neck, Occoquan Bay, and Featherstone National Wildlife Refuges are all managed under the Potomac River National Wildlife Refuge Complex.

Elizabeth Hartwell Mason Neck National Wildlife Refuge is located along High Point Road in Lorton, VA 22079.

For further information contact:

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U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

# Elizabeth Hartwell Mason Neck *National Wildlife Refuge*



**Bald eagle**

*Bill Wallen*

*Eighteen miles south of Washington D.C., on the banks of the Potomac River, lays a peninsula known as Mason Neck. Here the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service created the first national wildlife refuge established specifically for the protection of our nation's symbol, the bald eagle. Once on the brink of extinction, the bald eagle enjoys the safety of the refuge's forests and shoreline for nesting and foraging along the upper portions of the Potomac River and its tributaries.*

## Welcome



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

Elizabeth Hartwell Mason Neck National Wildlife Refuge is adjacent to a rapidly growing metropolitan area where habitat is constantly altered. The refuge provides wildlife a relatively remote 2,227 acre area of upland forests and freshwater marshes extending into the Potomac River. Refuge habitats host over 211 bird species, more than 200 plant species, 31 mammal species, and 40 species of reptiles and amphibians. The refuge is home to Great Marsh, a 207 acre tidal freshwater marsh, and one of Virginia's largest breeding great blue heron colonies. Common species observed include bald eagle, wood thrush, white-tailed deer, groundhog, and wood duck.

## History

As early as 1608, Captain John Smith documented the location of a uniquely boot-shaped peninsula located between the Potomac and Occoquan Rivers in what is now southern Fairfax County, Virginia. Smith wrote of the abundance of game and fish on this stretch of the Potomac which was dotted with villages and camps of the Dogue Indians. By the late 1600's, Native Americans were driven out and their way of life was displaced by the establishment of colonial farm holdings. The peninsula was named Mason's Neck to reflect ownership



*Northern flicker*

by its most prominent landholder, George Mason II and his three sons. George Mason II introduced plantation agriculture as the primary land use. In time, the crop fields were abandoned and the land reverted back to forest.

As a result of local resident Elizabeth Hartwell's dedicated advocacy, a planned community and airport on the Mason Neck peninsula instead became the nation's first national wildlife refuge for bald eagles on February 1, 1969. Her work brought attention to the land's value as habitat for nesting, feeding, and roosting bald eagles, which were then an endangered species. Today the refuge continues to provide a stable environment for bald eagles and other wildlife at the edge of a metropolitan area where habitat is very limited. It also offers opportunities for visitors to enjoy a peaceful experience immersed in this unique ecosystem.



Bill Wallen/USFWS

*Great Marsh Trail Platform*

### **Habitat and Wildlife Management**

The primary focus of Elizabeth Hartwell Mason Neck National Wildlife Refuge is to maintain a healthy, mature mixed-hardwood forest for breeding and wintering populations of bald eagles. At the time of refuge establishment in 1969, bald eagles were federally-endangered with less than 500 nesting pairs in the lower 48 states.

In 2007, bald eagles were officially removed from the endangered species list following a significant population recovery. Though no longer considered endangered, the bald eagle continues to be protected under federal law and remain a priority to the refuge. Protecting mature forest habitat for bald eagles benefits many other species including Northern flicker, barred owl, Eastern box turtle, and tree-roosting bats.

The extensive wetlands and marshes throughout the refuge allow waterbird species to thrive as well. Such is the case within the 207-acre freshwater tidal Great Marsh where stands of rice abound. Migrating ducks, raptors, and songbirds stop at the marsh to rest and feed on



Courtesy of the Hartwell family

*Elizabeth Hartwell*

their long journey. A highlight is the presence of wintering waterfowl, geese, and swans during the colder months.

Great blue herons breed undisturbed from humans in a colony that has grown to become one of the largest rookeries in Virginia. The colony currently supports 1,250 breeding pairs. In coordination with nesting season, refuge staff lowers water levels in the adjacent 50-acre impoundment to provide feeding areas for juvenile herons and eagles.

The refuge is part of the Mason Neck Management Area. The refuge, Mason Neck State Park, Gunston Hall, Pohick Bay Regional Park, and BLM's Meadowood Special Recreation Management Area protect more than 6000 acres of the Mason Neck peninsula. The agencies cooperate in the management activities on their combined lands. This cooperation provides the public with a wide variety of recreational activities while protecting the natural resources of the area.

**Visitor Opportunities**  
*Wildlife and Habitat Viewing*

Though exploring the refuge is restricted to established nature trails, you'll find that these winding forested corridors are rich in nature and history. Visitors to the refuge can enjoy hiking trails to view birds and other wildlife, or simply enjoy the solitude.

*High Point Trail*

The 3 mile ADA compliant paved trail parallels High Point Road and connects the refuge with Mason Neck State Park managed trails and facilities. This trail is open to hiking, biking and pets on leash up to 6 feet.

*Joseph V. Gartlan, Jr. Great Marsh Trail*

Courtesy of the Gartlan family



*Senator Joseph V. Gartlan, Jr.*

This 0.75 mile paved trail is ADA compliant and follows a forested peninsula, ending at an observation platform overlooking the Great Marsh. The trail honors Joseph V. Gartlan, Jr. who served in the Virginia State Senate for 28 years as an environmental protector and champion for disability rights. The trail is open to foot traffic only and pets on leash up to 6 feet.



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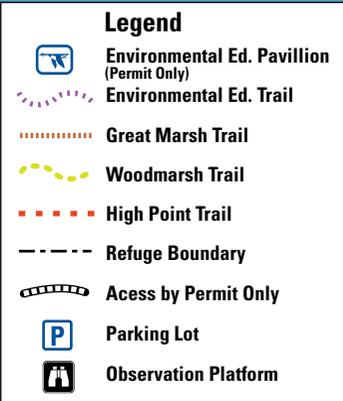
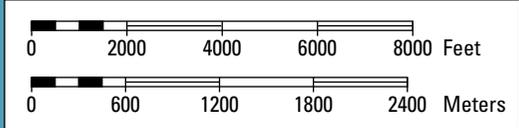
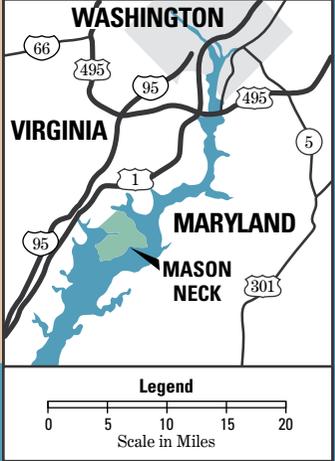
*Wood Marsh Trail*

*Woodmarsh Trail*

The 3 mile trail loops through a hardwood forest, over small streams, and along a marsh. The unpaved trail features an observation platform with a telescope overlooking marsh habitat. The trail is open to foot traffic only and pets on leash up to 6 feet.

**Interpretation**

The refuge has three interpretive kiosks with informative panels. Two are located at the trails heads of Great Marsh and Woodmarsh Trails. An additional kiosk is located further down Woodmarsh Trail toward Sycamore Road. Each kiosk contains a map panel to physically orient the visitor and additional panels covering topics such as viewable wildlife, bald eagles, invasive and exotic plants and animal species, and white-tailed deer.





Bill Supulski/USFWS

*Great blue heron*

### **Environmental Education**

The refuge features an environmental education loop trail off Sycamore Road. This area is not open to the general public and requires a Special Use Permit for access (refer to permit section). Environmental education activities are primarily self-guided field trips exploring topics prepared by the teacher. Educators may arrange appointments with staff to tour the refuge and prepare for a field trip. Field study equipment is available for loan including a small audio visual library. Interested educational groups or institutions are required to obtain a Special Use Permit to gain refuge access for their program. Fees may be waived for education programs.

### **Photography**

The digital photo age has made nature photography both fun and easy. Vistas and overlook platforms located along our hiking trails provide secluded viewing points to capture photographs of wildlife and colorful landscapes. Enjoy the search for woodland birds, animals, and plants

as you hike through the mature upland forests of oak and hickory to the expansive tidal marsh.

### **Hunting**

The refuge uses hunting as a tool to manage white-tailed deer populations at a healthy level compatible with planned habitat goals and objectives. Deer hunting is available by permit during designated periods and only in certain areas.

### **Hours of Operation**

Refuge trails and parking lots are open year-round, from 7am - 5pm October 1- March 31 and 7am-7pm from April 1 - September 30. The refuge is closed on hunt days in November and December. For more information contact refuge headquarters or visit the website.

### **Safety**

Visitors may encounter ticks, bees, biting insects, and poison ivy while on the refuge. To minimize contact with poisonous plants and insects, please stay on the trails and avoid walking through tall grasses. Summers are hot and humid, sunscreen and drinking fluids is recommended. Use insect repellent and dress appropriately for the weather.



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*Bullfrog*

### **Regulations**

Help staff ensure that wildlife has a place to grow and survive for future generations by respecting refuge rules and obeying posted signs.

### **Permitted Activities**

- Visitors must stay on posted trails.
- Vehicles are allowed on posted roads and parking areas.
- Bicycles are permitted on High Point Trail.
- Pets must be kept on a leash up to 6ft in length and under control at all times.
- Jogging, in-line skates, and skateboards are permitted on High Point Trail.



## Prohibited Activities

- Fishing
- Picnicking, camping, and fires
- Fireworks, kite flying or objects launched into the air
- Audio devices disturbing to wildlife and people including electronic lures of any kind
- Disturbing, introducing, or removing plants and animals, living or dead
- Feeding wildlife
- Entry into closed areas

## Permits

The Service encourages adult and youth groups to use the refuge for wildlife-dependent interpretive and educational programs but they must obtain a permit from the headquarters office. Group use of the refuge is regulated to minimize conflict with other visitors and avoid pressure on sensitive habitats. Permit applications must be mailed to the Potomac River National Wildlife Refuge Complex Headquarters Office at least three weeks in advance. Visit the following site to obtain permit applications: <http://www.fws.gov/refuges/visitors/permits.html>

## Volunteers

The refuge welcomes volunteers to help present programs, assist with biological projects, and perform maintenance duties in supporting the refuge. Some activities may have age and skill level requirements. Contact refuge headquarters for information.



Bill Wallen/USFWS

Woodmarsh Platform



Sunset on the Potomac River  
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