

Back Bay National Wildlife Refuge

Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan

Vision for the Future

Back Bay National Wildlife Refuge will work closely with partners and communities to provide a biologically healthy natural environment that restores abundant fish, wildlife and plant populations. Special consideration will be given to those species whose survival is in jeopardy. In keeping with the Refuge System mission, we will provide a healthy haven of land and water to support Back Bay's diverse wildlife communities, with an emphasis on migratory waterbird and songbird management. We will strive to promote active stewardship of these natural resources for present and future generations, while also providing opportunities for compatible public uses. In doing this, we hope to ensure a sound coexistence between wildlife and people that will allow people to share our passion and appreciation of Back Bay's many natural resources, while also enhancing the quality of life in Back Bay.

Refuge Setting

Back Bay NWR, currently 9,035 acres, was established in 1938 "...as a Refuge and breeding ground for migratory birds and other wildlife." Another of the Refuge's primary purposes (for lands acquired under the Migratory Bird Conservation Act) is "... use as an inviolate sanctuary, or for any other management purpose, for migratory birds." In 1939, 4,600 acres of open bay waters within the Refuge boundary were closed to the taking of migratory birds by presidential proclamation.

The Refuge includes five miles of oceanfront beach, a 900-acre freshwater impoundment complex, numerous bay islands, bottomland mixed forests, farm fields, and freshwater wetlands adjacent to Back Bay and its tributary shorelines.

Although wildlife and habitat conservation come first on the refuge, we strive to provide excellent



The Back Bay refuge protects a variety of waterfowl in its wetland habitats including tundra swan.

opportunities for the public to observe and photograph wildlife, fish, hunt, or participate in environmental education and interpretation. Current visitor facilities are primarily located in the eastern, barrier island portion of the Refuge, where annual visitation is greater than 100,000. Back Bay provides scenic trails, a visitor contact station, and, with advance scheduling, group educational opportunities. Outdoor facilities are open daily dawn to dusk.

Status of our Conservation Plan

We have been developing a comprehensive conservation plan and environmental assessment for the Refuge since 2002. Once final, that plan will guide wildlife and habitat management, land conservation, and public use programs on the Refuge for the next 15 years. We are proud to announce that we now have available a draft plan for public review and comment.

Details of the Draft Plan

Our draft plan, developed by a team of specialists, presents three fully developed, distinct management alternatives. The team consists of

regional planners, biologists, Refuge staff, and resource specialists from the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries and staff from False Cape State Park and the City of Virginia Beach. We also carefully considered public input from scoping meetings and a citizen survey.

Description of the Alternatives

We based our three alternatives on the purposes for establishing the Refuge, its vision and goals, and the issues and concerns identified by the public, state agencies, and the Service during the planning process. The issues included prescribed burning and concerns for wildfire, invasive plant and pest management, and public access and uses on the Refuge.

Alternative A

Current Management

This alternative is the "No Action" alternative, as required by the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (42 U.S.C. 4321-4347, as amended). Alternative A defines our current management activities, and serves as the baseline against which to compare the other alternatives.

Under current management, we manage a series of wetland and moist-soil impoundments, forested and shrub-scrub habitats, and coastal beach and dune habitats. We would continue to conduct bird surveys and nesting and stranded sea turtle patrols, and continue current methods of nuisance and non-native species control. We would maintain existing opportunities for visitors to engage in wildlife observation, photography, and environmental education and interpretation, as well as maintain existing hunting and fishing opportunities on the Refuge. Existing infrastructure and buildings and staffing levels would remain the same.

Alternative B

Service-preferred Alternative

This alternative is the one we propose as the best way to manage this refuge over the next 15 years. It includes an array of management actions that, in our professional judgment, works best toward achieving the Refuge purposes, our vision and goals and the goals of other state and regional conservation plans. We also believe it most effectively addresses the key issues raised during the planning process.

This alternative focuses on enhancing the conservation of wildlife through habitat management, as well as providing additional visitor opportunities on the Refuge such as an expansion of the deer hunt and new hiking trails. Alternative B incorporates existing management activities and provides new initiatives or actions aimed at improving efficiency and progress towards Refuge goals and objectives. Some of the major strategies proposed include: opening up forest canopy by selectively removing loblolly pine, sweetgum and red maple; withdrawing the 1974 wilderness designation proposal for Long Island, Green Hills, and Landing Cove (2,165 acres); developing a canoe/kayak trail on the west side of Back Bay; and developing and designing a new headquarters/visitor contact station. We would expand opportunities for the six priority public uses of the Refuge System, and emphasize wildlife observation and photography, and interpretation.

The expansion of visitor facilities and services, as well as the projected increase in visitation, would require additional staffing support to meet public expectations, and provide for

public safety, convenience, and a high quality experience for Refuge visitors. Partnering, interagency agreements, service contracting, internships, and volunteer opportunities would increase in order to help provide this staffing support.

Alternative C

Improved Biological Integrity

Alternative C prominently features additional management that aims to restore natural ecosystem processes or function to achieve Refuge purposes.

This alternative focuses on using management techniques that would encourage forest growth and includes an increased focus toward the previously proposed wilderness areas. Some of the major strategies proposed include: developing an interagency agreement that would allow the 1974 proposed wilderness areas at Long Island, Green Hills, and Landing Cove to again meet minimum criteria, and then manage accordingly; and, creating conditions that allow us to shift more resources from intensive management of the Refuge impoundment system to the restoration of Back Bay-Currituck Sound. In addition, we propose to continue enhancing visitor services.

Public Review and Comment on the Plan

Public involvement is crucial in the planning process, and we encourage your participation. Your comments will help shape the final plan. We are releasing the draft plan for a period of public review and comment. We ask that you submit your comments by May 1, 2010, by regular mail or email.

Please send your comments to Thomas Bonetti, Planning Team Leader, at the address provided. You can also submit comments at our open houses and public hearings (see next column for dates and locations).



Jim Fenton

Piping Plover

How to Obtain a Copy of the CCP/EA

The draft plan is available online at <http://www.fws.gov/northeast/planning/backbay/ccphome.html>. To request the document in print or on CD, contact:

Thomas Bonetti
Natural Resource Planner
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
300 Westgate Center Dr.
Hadley, MA 01035
Phone: 413/253-8307
E-mail: northeastplanning@fws.gov
(Please put "Back Bay NWR CCP" in the subject line)

Open Houses and Public Hearings

April 13, 2010

4:00-6:00 pm Open House
7:00-9:00 pm Public Meeting

Three Oaks Elementary School
2201 Elson Green Avenue
Virginia Beach, VA 23456

April 14, 2010

6:00-8:00 pm
Ashville Bridge Creek
Environmental Education Center
3022 New Bridge Road
Virginia Beach, VA 23456

All locations are fully accessible.

For Further Information

Jared Brandwein, Refuge Manager
Back Bay National Wildlife Refuge
4005 Sandpiper Road
Virginia Beach, VA 23456-4325
Phone: 757/721-2412
Email: backbay@fws.gov

<http://www.fws.gov/backbay>

Federal Relay Service for the deaf and hard-of-hearing: 1 800/877 8339

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
<http://www.fws.gov>
February 2010

