

Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge

Update to Dorchester County Council

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1. Acquisitions

- Peter's Neck closed in November, 2019. We allowed the hunt clubs to continue through end of January, so will not be beginning any work or assessments until February/March. We plan to have a public meeting to discuss the initial ideas for uses, which include hunting, public waterways access, hiking trails, and a partnership with Tubman State Park and NPS for interpretation and archaeological research. We have moved quickly on the paperwork side to allow for hunting this coming year, and plan to begin boundary posting this spring.

2. Waterfowl and other Biology

- A new pump was installed along wildlife drive in the impoundments thanks to DU support. This will help us draw them down more efficiently.
- The 40th annual mid-winter eagle survey on Blackwater NWR was held in January with the help of 36 volunteers. A total of 176 eagles were counted during the 30 minute count period at 14 survey points on and around the refuge. Of these, 159 were bald eagles, with 108 adults and 51 immatures. Four golden eagles were spotted – 2 adults and 2 immatures. A total of 13 eagles were unidentified to species. The location with the highest count was the Rt. 335 bridge over the Blackwater River, with 27 bald eagles.
- The mid-winter waterfowl survey for Blackwater was flown on January 9, 2020. This survey covers most of Blackwater NWR, as well as some adjacent private land and parts of Fishing Bay WMA. The survey counted 10,332 Canada geese, down from the 13,632 counted last year, but close to the 5-year average of 10,901. The refuge's weekly ground-based counts have tallied up to 7,000 snow geese on the refuge, but none were present during the mid-winter aerial survey. Dabbling ducks (pintail, mallards, widgeon, etc.) totaled 7,718, way up from the 5-year average of 2,571. This includes 763 black duck, also up from the 5-year average of 546. Other highlights include 597 tundra swans, up from our 5-year average of 291 and always a showstopper for visitors to the refuge.
- US Army Corps of Engineers and MD Port Administration are in the planning and design phase of the proposed Mid-Chesapeake Bay Islands Ecosystem Restoration Project, which includes a 72-acre wetland restoration at Barren Island, which is part of the Refuge, and creation of over 2,072 acres of island habitat around James Island.

3. Forestry and Fire

- Working with MDA, we are continuing to prepare the ash swamps of the Nanticoke and Marshyhope for emerald ash borer invasion. Plans include expanding the number of ash

trees chemically treated to resist emerald ash borer.

- Since Oct 1, we have burned approximately 910 acres of marsh with the majority of the burning occurring along Shorters Wharf Road and to the south of Best Pitch Ferry Road. We have also completed burns along the Little Blackwater River next to the Maintenance Yard, and Observation Deck.
- We assisted MD Forest Service with burns for a total of 46 acres in Caroline County, and The Nature Conservancy in Wicomico County for 50 acres. We are currently discussing with MD Forest Service and Wildlife & Heritage Services about burns within the Fishing Bay WMA this spring, and how we can help them accomplish those burns.

4. Hunt

- Our first season for the new online permitting program has ended with nearly 5,000 permits purchased, with archery being the most popular. Harvest data will be available from MD DNR later this month. University of Delaware is analyzing our FLIR survey data from the fall.
- We are finishing the new online lottery season for spring turkey hunting.
- Seven new waterfowl blind sites were added to the waterfowl hunt program along the Nanticoke and Marshy Hope, and open for the first time.
- All National Wildlife Refuges including Blackwater and Eastern Neck are being evaluated to be more consistent with state regulations. Some changes may be forthcoming. A hunt public meeting to share latest survey results, answer questions, seek input, and share any changes will be held late spring.
- The fourth First Shot program was held in partnership with Maryland DNR, National Wild Turkey Federation, and Union Sportsmen's Alliance. Twenty-six mentees from the Eastern Shore and DC-Baltimore region participated in the workshop on October 20th before hunting for two days on the refuge and private lands with volunteer mentors. Thirteen deer were harvested but the experiences of being out on the marsh before sunrise, hearing the bugles of sika, and watching geese migrate were just as memorable.
- Planning is underway for the Spring First Shot Turkey Hunt now. Several First Shot partners are being recognized for the program at the NWTFF National Convention in Nashville this February.
- The refuge offered Hunter Education for the first time this past September with an instructor team from various wildlife agencies. A field day will be held March 29th for those taking the online course.

5. Visitor Services

- Judging for the Maryland Junior Duck Stamp Competition will be held at the Visitor Center on Saturday, February 15, 2020.
- The refuge will be at the National Outdoors Show February 28-29, 2020.
- Eagle Fest will occur on Saturday March 14th, with live raptor programs, crafts, special eagle prowls, and more.
- We began to offer Waterfowl ID workshops and they filled up immediately! Two will be held in February.
- No fee for Wildlife Drive on Monday, February 17, for Presidents' Day.
- Spring guided birding tours are being offered February 9 and 23, March 29, April 11 and 26, and May 9. All tours meet at the Visitor Center at 8:00 am.
- Throughout October, 350 fourth grade students from Dorchester County, Maryland, their teachers and chaperones, experienced the refuge through hands-on educational activities. We are now preparing for all 6th grade Dorchester County students in early April.
- We are working on our Visitor Services Plan, which is a step down plan from our CCP. This will help guide the visitor serves program into the future and assist in setting priorities.

6. County and Community

- We continue coordination with County Planning on the Comprehensive Plan, and reviewed and commented on the environmental chapter.
- We participated in the first Coastal Resiliency Action Committee with the County and appreciated being a partner in it.
- The Neighbors meeting was held on October 1st, 2019. Notes were sent to the email list.
- On New Year's Day, 158 people enjoyed a ranger-led walk and cheered the Year of the Woman at Harriet Tubman State Park and Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge. Guests hiked Blackwater and learned about the refuge and its mission and Harriet Tubman's connection to the landscape. Guests included members of GirlTrek, Senator Eckhardt, and Eastern Shore Network for Change. Everyone hiked 1.5 miles each for a total of 237 miles hiked at the State of Maryland's first event in celebration of the Year of the Woman.