

## Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge

Neighbors Update  
September 20, 2021



### Waterfowl and Biological Projects

- This year we planted 49 acres of corn, 133 acres of clover, 26 acres of winter wheat and 33 acres of Japanese millet. We also planted 58 acres of milo through cooperative farming. Native moist soil plant production was great this year in the impoundments along Wildlife Drive. The plantings are looking good as we prepare for the waterfowl to return.
- In the next few weeks, we will be treating 400 acres of phragmites by aerial spraying plus 300 acres by marsh master. Priority areas include all the impoundments, Beaver Dam, and Units S and T. We also sprayed for stiltgrass, thistle and mile-a-minute during the spring and summer.
- Staff are almost finished with the annual deer density surveys using FLIR and the study design from University of Delaware. Results will be analyzed over the winter and shared online when final. This is the fourth year of the survey.
- Thanks to the Friends of Blackwater, nearly 15,000 shortleaf pine and oak seedlings were planted in the Taylors Trail unit along the Nanticoke River. This 28-acre planting took place on xeric sand ridges that parallel the eastern side of the Nanticoke River and is part of Maryland DNR's Taylors Trail Sand Ridges Ecologically Significant Area. The goal is to restore the shortleaf pine open woodland habitats that formerly occurred on these inland dunes, along with the suite of associated rare and threatened plants and animals.
- Refuge staff wrapped up annual survey efforts for spotted turtles on Blackwater NWR in late April. Following the Spotted Turtle Assessment Protocol, we trapped and marked spotted turtles at four locations. We captured 28 individuals. Blood was drawn from 10 individuals, contributing to the working group's genetics study. Working with Salisbury University, this project will develop population estimates and basic demographic information for spotted turtles on the refuge.

### Hunt and Fish

- The Environmental Assessment, Compatibility Determinations (CD), and Plans for hunting and fishing on both Blackwater and Eastern Neck have been prepared, to be released this winter for public comment with a national package of other refuges' plans. The Assessment and CDs were originally completed with the Comprehensive Conservation Plan in 2006, and are due for re-evaluation and renewal.

- The first ever First Cast event was held at the refuge in partnership with Blackwaters Edge and the Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad State Park. This was a mentored fishing weekend for adults who want to learn to fish. Thanks to our volunteer mentors!
- In partnership with the Friends of Blackwater and the Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad State Park, Blackwater also held its annual Youth Fishing Event on June 5-6. This family-friendly, non-competitive fishing event for children 15 and under targeted beginner and novice anglers. Several changes to the event format were enacted this year to help promote social distancing guidelines and keep participants, staff and volunteers safe. Fifty young anglers enjoyed a morning of fishing and left with a new t-shirt and gift courtesy of the Friends of Blackwater.
- Blackwater held its sixth First Shot with Maryland DNR and National Wild Turkey Federation this past spring. A Zoom workshop was held on April 7<sup>th</sup> due to COVID, and all participants followed safety protocols during the hunt. Seventeen mentees hunted for two days, with two toms harvested and many close encounters. Planning for this fall's First Shot deer hunt on Oct 29<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> is currently underway. Last fall, mentors volunteered over 530 hours for the deer hunt alone! The hunt will take place on areas of the refuge usually closed to deer hunting, as well as private lands thanks to volunteers.

### Visitors and Other Public Engagement

- The Visitor Center has been open for **new, regular hours open 10-4 Tuesday-Sundays since June, closed during Federal holidays**. During the spring it was open Friday-Sunday due to COVID.
- In 2021, Blackwater hosted over 272,000 visitors to the refuge. Even though visitor center hours were reduced due to COVID, over 20,000 visitors were still able to enjoy the center. Visitation was up for all outdoor pursuits including: 146,000 visits to the wildlife drive, 38,000 individuals hiked the refuge trails, over 8,000 watercraft were launched, 3,900 bicyclist enjoyed the wildlife drive, over 73,000 photography visits and over 20,000 big game hunt visits.
- On Thursday September 9<sup>th</sup>, we released the Compatibility Determination (CD) for Environmental Education, Interpretation, Wildlife Observation, and Photography on Blackwater and Eastern Neck National Wildlife Refuge for public comment. Prior to allowing a new, or continuing an existing, activity on a refuge (as in this case), the Service must determine if the use is compatible with the establishment purpose of the refuge. The draft Compatibility Determination evaluating these activities on the refuges was first approved in 2006 with the Comprehensive Conservation Plan and is now due for reevaluation. Comments can be sent to [ray\\_pattera@fws.gov](mailto:ray_pattera@fws.gov) until September 25.

- Although the refuge was unable to host an in-person Volunteer Appreciation Dinner in the last two years, we did not want to let another month go by without recognizing the tremendous work and accomplishments our volunteers have contributed to Blackwater during 2019 and 2020. On June 2, refuge staff met virtually with volunteers for a fun evening of trivia, with updates on the latest happenings, and recognition of all the great work volunteers have been doing during the last two years. Those volunteers that reached milestones during 2019/2020 in the number of hours they have contributed to the refuge and the number of years they've volunteered at the refuge were highlighted during the evening. **During calendar year 2019, 160 volunteers donated 10,312 hours to the refuge. And even during a pandemic year, 2020 still had 117 volunteers donating 3,550 hours to the refuge.**
- On April 20<sup>th</sup>, the Lieutenant Governor of Maryland announced that a team of archaeologists with the Maryland Department of Transportation had officially discovered the home of Ben Ross, Harriet Tubman's father, on a parcel recently acquired by Blackwater last year. The team spent two weeks unsuccessfully last fall in excavations along the old road system but did find a clue that led them to the discovery this spring when they returned. The homestead is in a location threatened by sea level rise. The news generated over 400 articles including the New York Times, Washington Post, Associated Press, and CBS News. The latest TV feature was recently on GMA tying climate change, resource management, and cultural history together:  
<https://abcnews.go.com/US/maryland-wildlife-refuge-fights-protect-american-history-climate/story?id=78975939>
- Blackwater's Eagle Festival took place virtually March 12 – 14, 2021. The festival kicked off with a welcome by refuge staff and continued with live birds of prey programs and other engaging presentations. Programs on eagle identification and eagle viewing hotspots encouraged people to get out on the refuge. Families could take a StoryWalk<sup>®</sup> where the picture book *Over in the Forest* was installed along the Woods Trail. The eagle highlight reel from the Friends of Blackwater was a festival favorite. The virtual programs remain available online and continue to be well-received, having reached over 31,000 people by the end of March.
- Our Deputy Project Leader Annji Bagozzi has taken a promotion as the new PL for Long Island NWR Complex in NY. We wish her well in her endeavor and will miss her.

## Forestry

- We helped the Maryland Forests Association with their Faces of Forestry project, a forward-thinking effort to reach the public and communicate the diverse groups of people involved in forestry in Maryland. We also hosted MFA's regional meeting in September on the refuge.

- We completed an analysis of the refuge's Continuous Forest Inventory program earlier this year. Ninety-eight plots were sampled over a five-year period. This analysis provides the refuge with information on stand structure and composition. These data are useful in making decisions about forest management on the refuge.

### **Fire/Maintenance**

- On August 29, Eric Kronner joined the fire staff as a Prescribed Fire Specialist. He will be taking the day-to-day lead on the implementation of the burns at the refuges he supports in MD and DE.
- A job announcement is currently open for a dedicated fire equipment operator to be stationed at Blackwater. This position is very similar to a previous position at Blackwater that has been vacant, but will now have responsibilities to assist across refuges in the 5 states of the Fire Management Zone.
- There will be additional job announcements in the coming months as the Department of Interior looks to transform the wildland fire workforce from one that relies heavily on temporary seasonal employees to one that is prepared to manage wildland fire year-round across the country.
- The Great American Outdoors Act was passed last year to provide funds to reduce the maintenance backlog on the nation's parks, refuges and other public lands. As part of this, Blackwater will be the hub for the south maintenance zone, and is in the middle of hiring four full-time permanent maintenance positions. These will be based out of Blackwater, and will be responsible for assisting with maintenance projects across MD, DE, WV, and VA as well as on site. One has started and the others are in process.