

Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge

Neighbors Update

March 1, 2021



Response to COVID-19

- The 2021 Eagle Festival will be held virtually this year, March 12-14, as we encourage visitors on how to enjoy the refuge on their own. Join us as we show you where to view eagles on the refuge, have fun learning about raptors with live birds of prey from Nanjemoy Creek Environmental Education Center, and get a behind-the-scenes look in the Scales and Tales Aviary with Tuckahoe State Park staff. A story walk will be offered on the refuge, in addition to online activities. Wildlife Drive will be free the 13th-14th. Be sure to check out the full schedule of events for more fun activities for the whole family at www.fws.gov/refuge/blackwater.
- The Visitor Center was re-opened October-December with COVID restrictions in place, such as capacity limits, social distancing, sneezeguards, and more on Saturdays-Sundays 10-2. We closed during the Governor's holiday closure for two weeks, and then reopened with an alternative experience for visitors on January 8th. While the exhibits and indoor restrooms are closed, the breezeway is open to visitors Friday-Monday from 10am-2pm where they can access all brochures, maps, trail info, and request to buy passes. A TV is inside the atrium where visitors can view videos to answer the most frequently asked questions by visitors. A new "Text a Ranger" phone line is also available where visitors can text or call with questions, and an additional porta-potty is added for a total of 3 on the refuge. As always, the trails, paddling, wildlife drive, hunts and fishing remain open.
- There was an increase of over 27% in total visitation to the refuge between this and last year, to over 233,000 visitors, despite the Visitor Center being closed for the spring and summer. Trail users increased 43% and the Wildlife Drive visits were over 100,000, a 29% increase.

Waterfowl and Biological Projects

- The annual midwinter waterfowl survey was not held this year in any flyway across the country due to COVID. However, we do have our weekly waterfowl ground counts, which showed a high of 15,955 Canada geese and 21,831 total waterfowl in mid-December on Blackwater. The highest duck count was 6,209 in mid-January. Snow geese were loafing on the river much of the late winter with a high counted of 6,000 in late January. Twenty-five unique species were counted.
- The agricultural program was well received by the waterfowl this winter. Geese were able to access the 60 acres of corn in January, without having to cut it back this year, as well as the waste grain from 58 acres of milo. The clover and winter wheat was well used. Moist soil production was very strong this year, with robust stands of panicum,

bidens and walters millet.

- The 2021 planned agriculture plantings will consist of 46 acres of corn, 120 acres of clover, 30 acres of winter wheat, and 57 acres of milo. We anticipate planting 30 acres of Japanese millet in our newest moist soil unit if needed.
- We completed the 41st annual midwinter eagle survey, counting 156 eagles in and around the refuge! A big thanks goes out to the 20 volunteers and staff that conducted the survey. Due to COVID-19, participation this year was kept to a minimum to allow for social distancing.
- There have been no staff at Eastern Neck NWR for the past two years due to staffing and budget shortages, requiring staff from Blackwater to travel weekly to manage the refuge in Rock Hall. A four-year term biologist was hired and started in November. Please welcome Matt Weegman, who previously worked for the National Wild Turkey Federation, and is now full-time working and living on Eastern Neck. Staff continue to travel to help manage the refuge, but having a person on site has been a great addition to the team.
- Because of the Eastern Neck biologist now being in place, we were able to band to date 71 black ducks as part of a partnership with the MD DNR. This was by far the most successful year to date of the effort.
- Survey work to support the restoration of Barren Island continues. As part of this effort, USDA began wildlife surveys on the island last month. 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 Barren Island. The team hopes to have preliminary design out for public comment in December.
- Understanding subsidence, the sinking of the land surface, is essential to understanding relative sea level rise and impacts to the refuge. Scientists from federal, state, and local governments and academic institutions are collaborating in an effort to measure subsidence at over 50 locations across the Chesapeake Bay region, including Eastern Neck and Blackwater NWRs. High precision GPS receivers were deployed in October to measure millimeters of change in the Earth's surface. This information will be important in understanding rates of subsidence, variation across the region, and, most importantly, interactions with sea level rise and implications for resiliency and adaptation strategies.

Acquisitions

- Over the winter, the last four of five parcels from The Nature Conservancy were finally acquired at 386 acres. Acreage along the Nanticoke is now over 2,275 acres, including three easements.

Hunt and Fish

- The turkey hunt lottery at Blackwater opened February 23rd and closes on March 9th. Any hunts that are not claimed, as well as all youth and disabled hunts, open on March 26th at 10am E.T. For more information on the hunt, please visit Recreation.gov at <https://www.recreation.gov/permits/5141414>.
- Blackwater's deer season that spans September-January concluded with a harvest of 483 total (440 sika and 43 white-tailed deer), with a 54.5% antlerless ratio for sika. The 1,500 available archery permits sold out by mid-October, thanks to the rise in popularity of hunting the sika rut at that time and online permitting. A total of 4,732 individual permits were sold for archery, muzzleloader, and shotgun.
- The refuge held its fifth First Shot program with Maryland DNR and National Wild Turkey Federation. A Zoom workshop was held on October 26th due to COVID, and all participants followed safety protocols during the hunt. Twenty-four mentees from DC-MD region hunted for two days on both refuge and private lands. Twelve deer were harvested and many hunted after as well. The First Shot community continues to connect via a closed Facebook group, additional hunts, and discussions. To date, over 107 individual hunts have been offered! Mentees are encouraged to apply for and participate in both turkey and deer and to have a relationship with their mentor and other mentees to assist in continuing after the program.
- The Chesapeake Marshlands NWR Complex has completed transitioning its hunt program from a mail-in application system to an online process through Recreation.Gov. Blackwater began this in 2019 for deer, which impacts over 2,000 hunters, followed by a spring turkey lottery in 2020, and lastly in October, waterfowl season, a blind site reservation. Eastern Neck deer permits are now also online. This is a more efficient, less labor-intensive system, that also makes the permits more accessible to hunters.

Visitors and Other Public Engagement

- The newly acquired Peter's Neck parcel at Blackwater NWR is now the site of an exciting excavation, thanks to a partnership with the Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad State Park. Historians believe the area may have been the home of Tubman's father, Ben Ross. Archaeologists with the Maryland Department of Transportation State Highway Administration conducted field studies for two weeks in November with the hopes of learning more about the life of Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad. An 1808 coin and a few other compelling artifacts were discovered; the team will return in spring. <https://usfws.medium.com/protecting-our-roots-1eabd4d812f>
<https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/harriet-tubman-cabin>

- The refuge came into the possession of gravestones that were washing into the Honga in the early 2000's during the acquisition of Bishops Head. These gravestones are from Bishops Head and neighboring landowners. A 30-day public notice is currently out for anyone who believes they have a family connection that wishes to claim their family's stone(s). Arrangements are in discussion with the Nause-Waiwash Band of Indians for a permanent, public location for all the unclaimed stones in a nearby location.
- Refuge staff and volunteers partnered with the Friends of Blackwater to host a virtual waterfowl identification workshop on February 17, 2021. Waterfowl are a great gateway to a wider world of birding and nature study. The workshop therefore is also a Welcome to Wild branding pilot event. Over 60 people participated to learn the basics of waterfowl ecology and identification challenges. The workshop continues to be a very popular event and we hope to offer again next winter, though hopefully in-person!
- The draft Compatibility Determination for non-consumptive commercial guiding was released for public comment and finalized. A Compatibility Determination is a written evaluation of a 'use' that takes place on a refuge to ensure it is compatible with the purpose of the refuge. This allows the use of commercial guides for priority public uses that were allowed for non-guided visitors, such as biking, kayaking and tours, and can be found on our website at <https://www.fws.gov/refuge/blackwater/>.
- The judging of the Maryland entries in the Federal Junior Duck Stamp Design Contest took place on February 20 at Blackwater NWR. There were 38 entries this year, far fewer than normal because of the limitations of the pandemic. The three volunteer judges consisted of representatives of the waterfowl carving, art instruction, and birdwatching communities. This year's Best of Show was an acrylic rendering of a pair of cinnamon teal by Lilian Xiao of Boyds, MD. A full listing of this year's placements can be found at: <https://www.fws.gov/nwrs/threecolumn.aspx?id=2147581062>
- The Friends of Blackwater installed another osprey camera this year. The camera will focus on a platform that is located on the Blackwater River, immediately adjacent to the wildlife drive. The purpose for an additional camera is due to the lack of nesting activity on the current osprey platform. The Friends now maintain two osprey cameras, one eagle camera and one waterfowl camera. These cameras provide the public from around the world with year-round wildlife viewing opportunities.

Forestry

- Last summer's commercial thinning project on Blackwater Road was cut a bit short by Tropical Storm Isaias. The harvest began in early July but ended in August when the storm dropped over five inches of rain. We were still able to thin about 30 of the intended 48 acres. Many thanks to Eastern Shore Forest Products for helping get the project done.

Fire

- The fire crew began assisting with burns on Maryland state lands on Oct 8, 2020, and our first burn on USFWS property on January 7, 2021. The increased precipitation that occurred from late January through late February slowed down the prescribed fire progress at the refuge. So far for Fiscal Year 2021, we accomplished 1,076.1 acres on Blackwater, and 43.8 acres on The Nature Conservancy.
- As for wildfires, since the last update in August of 2020, firefighters from the refuge assisted with fires in California towards the end of summer into the early fall. There have been no local wildfires to report on the refuge.