



Audubon IMPORTANT BIRD AREAS

Back Bay

City of Virginia Beach

Total Size: 16, 079 ha (39,715 acres)

Elevation: 0 – 15.7 m (0 – 51.9 ft)



IBA Criteria Met

<i>Criterion</i>	<i>Species</i>	<i>Data</i>	<i>Season</i>	<i>Source</i>
Species at Risk	American Bittern	1. 11 individuals in 1999 2. Available data and extent of habitat suggest threshold is being met	Winter	1. 1999-2000 Christmas Bird Counts 2. Technical Committee Consensus
Species at Risk	King Rail	60 pairs	Breeding	Watts - projection based on extent of habitat
Species at Risk	Yellow Rail	1. 1 individual in 1999 2. Observations and extent of habitat suggest a significant wintering population	Breeding	1. 1999-2000 Christmas Bird Counts 2. Watts - personal communication
Species at Risk	Brown-headed Nuthatch	1. 59 individuals in 2001 2. Extent of habitat suggests that population well exceeds threshold	Resident	1. 2001-2002 Christmas Bird Counts 2. Watts - personal communication
Species at Risk	Sedge Wren	37 individuals in 1999	Winter	1999-2000 Christmas Bird Counts
Species at Risk	Chuck-will's-widow	Common, population likely well exceeds threshold	Breeding	Watts - personal communication

Description

Back Bay is a coastal bay that forms the northern extent and headwaters of Currituck Sound. The salinity conditions have led to the formation of extensive big cordgrass marshes within the bay, many of which are isolated from the mainland. The active beach and dunes on the ocean fringe represent the upper end of the barrier network forming the Outer Banks. Landward of the dunes is a system of impoundments and a maritime forest dominated by loblolly pines and

wax myrtle. Much of the outer beach and marsh islands are owned by resource agencies. However, a considerable portion of the western edge of the system remains in private ownership.

Conservation and Management Units

Four large management units make up the majority of conservation lands in this IBA. Back Bay National Wildlife Refuge and False Cape State Park account for over 4,000 hectares of wildlife habitat. Back Bay NWR contains active beach, dunes, maritime forest, limited open uplands, and extensive areas of big cordgrass marsh. False Cape SP includes large tracts of maritime forest as well as beach and dune habitats. Princess Anne Wildlife Management Area and Mackey Island National Wildlife Refuge comprise an additional 746 hectares of big cord grass marsh.

Birds

Nearly 300 species of birds have been observed at this IBA. The extensive cord grass marshes provide significant breeding habitat for a suite of secretive marshbird species such as rails and bitterns. This area likely supports the largest population of breeding King Rails in Virginia and is one of only a few strongholds for the Least Bittern in the state. Due to its habitat and geographic position, it also represents the northern winter range limit of the Yellow Rail, American Bittern and Sedge Wren. A substantial population of wintering Northern Harriers is also supported here.

The maritime forest uplands support a large population of Brown-headed Nuthatches and Chuck-will's-widows and is likely a stronghold for both. During the fall and winter months, large flocks of waterfowl have historically used the Bay and freshwater impoundments. Up to 10,000 snow geese, numerous tundra swans, and several duck species have been counted during the peak of fall migration and into the winter months.

Although the site does not appear to be particularly important to Red Knots, it gets consistent use by this declining species

during both spring and fall migration. A Barn Owl nest box program has been initiated and at least three pairs of Barn Owls have used the boxes. Other at-risk species that are known to use the site but are not particularly common include the Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow, Bald Eagle, Short-eared Owl, Prairie Warbler and Eastern Meadowlark.



King Rail

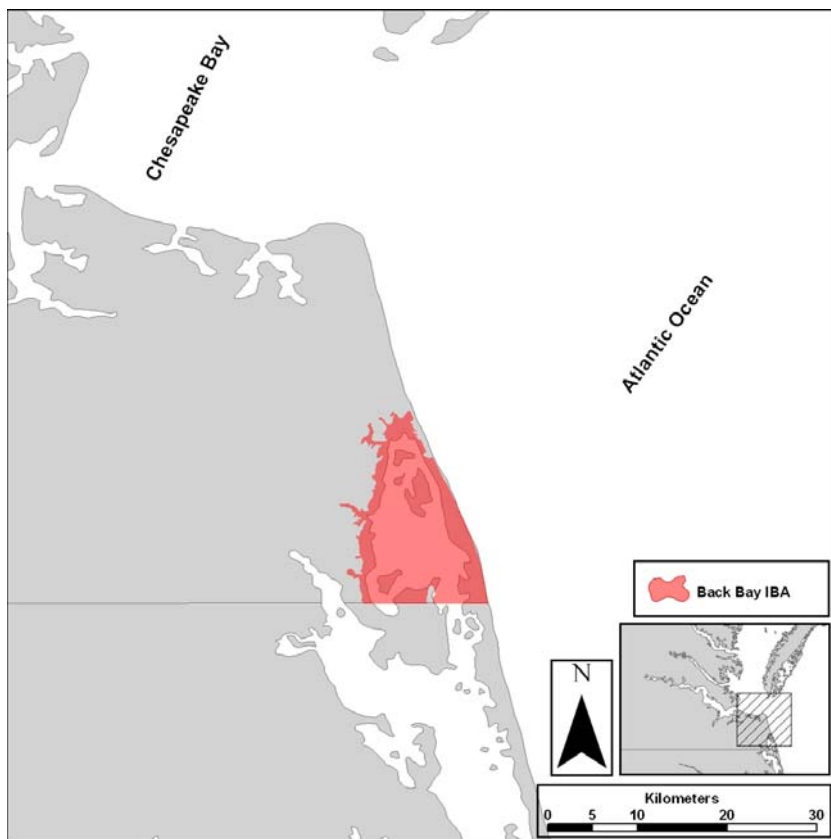
Photo by Bryan Watts

Conservation and Threats

Primary threats relevant to bird populations include the loss of habitat to the invasion by common reed, the loss of habitat to sea-level rise, and changes

within the system due to major storm events. The aggressive invasive plant, common reed, is spreading rapidly throughout this system, particularly along the western shoreline where it has invaded along artificial canals. Big cordgrass islands are particularly vulnerable to rising sea levels. Continued rises in sea level may lead to a shift in species composition or ultimately to the loss of some islands altogether. The Fish and Wildlife Service performs regular conservation activities including impoundment management and regular burning of big cordgrass marshes. Monitoring programs are ongoing for wintering waterfowl, migrant shorebirds, marsh birds, colonial waterbirds, Bald Eagles, and Osprey. More research is needed to formally evaluate the big cordgrass bird community in both summer and winter.

Back Bay IBA Map



For more information about this and other IBAs in Virginia please visit our website at:

<http://www.audubon.org/bird/iba/virginia/>

Or contact Mary Elfner, the Virginia IBA Coordinator, at:

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