



# Audubon IMPORTANT BIRD AREAS

## Great Dismal Swamp Suffolk and the City of Chesapeake

Total Size: 45,834 ha (113,259 acres)

Elevation: 170 – 250 m



### IBA Criteria Met

<i>Criterion</i>	<i>Species</i>	<i>Data</i>	<i>Season</i>	<i>Source</i>
Species at Risk	Wayne's Black-throated Green Warbler	At least 10 males 2000 - 2003	Breeding	DGIF MAPS data 2000-2003
Species at Risk	Prothonotary Warbler	Population almost certainly exceeds threshold	Breeding	DGIF MAPS data 2000-2003
Species at Risk	Swainson's Warbler	Population is likely in the hundreds	Breeding	DGIF MAPS data 2000-2003
Species at Risk	Worm-eating Warbler	Population easily exceeds threshold	Breeding	DGIF MAPS data 2000-2003
Species at Risk	Wood Thrush	Population easily exceeds threshold	Breeding	DGIF MAPS data 2000-2003
Species at Risk	Rusty Blackbird	Estimated in the thousands	Wintering	Christmas Bird Counts 2000-2003
Congregations - Migrant Landbirds	Mixed species	The area is a significant hotspot for passerine migration	Migration	D. Schwab, IBA nomination
Responsibility Species Assemblage - Forested Wetland	Red-shouldered Hawk, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Chuck-will's Widow, Chimney Swift, Red-headed Woodpecker, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Northern Flicker, Eastern Wood-pewee, Acadian Flycatcher, White-eyed Vireo, Yellow-throated Vireo, Carolina Chickadee, Wood Thrush, Prothonotary Warbler, Northern Parula, Wayne's Warbler, Kentucky Warbler, Swainson's Warbler, Hooded Warbler, Orchard Oriole, Summer Tanager	Breeds	Breeding	1. DGIF MAPS data 2000-2003 2. USGS Breeding Bird Survey Data

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## Description

The Great Dismal Swamp IBA is located in extreme southeastern Virginia on the border of North Carolina. It includes the core of the Great Dismal Swamp NWR and surrounding lands as well as the forested wetland corridor of cypress-tupelo habitat extending east along the Northwest River. This IBA represents the largest remaining block of what was once an extensive ecosystem that spanned over a million acres in the region. The IBA is characterized by saturated peatlands, deep organic soils, and fire-adapted woody vegetation. Areas with low-frequency fires are dominated by red maple, sweetbay, black gum, and red bay. Where standing water is common, forests are dominated by cypress-gum communities and in other wet areas where fires are infrequent but catastrophic, Atlantic white-cedar forests dominate. Both communities are considered globally uncommon to rare. Some of the largest stands of white cedar to be found anywhere exist within this IBA, accounting for just under 20% of the forest cover type. With the long-term suppression of fire in the area in the past 60 years, red maple-gum communities have been expanding and are now the dominant forest type.

## Conservation and Management Units

The majority (75%) of the Great Dismal Swamp IBA is owned and protected by the US Fish and Wildlife Service in the Great Dismal Swamp NWR. Other large landowners include The Nature Conservancy (Northwest River Preserve), the Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (Cavalier Wildlife Management Area), the Department of Conservation and Recreation (Northwest River State Natural Area Preserve), and the City of Chesapeake (South Chesapeake Park and other local parks). The area is a focal point for land acquisition and restoration efforts.

## Birds

This IBA is truly an exceptional site for abundance and diversity of breeding and wintering birds. Over 200 species of bird are known to use the area at some point in their annual cycle, while 96 have been reported nesting on or near the refuge. The Great Dismal Swamp is one of the only known places in Virginia to support the Wayne's Warbler, a coastal subspecies of the Black-throated Green Warbler. It also supports the only known population of Swainson's Warblers on the coastal plain. High priority Neotropical migrant species such as the Prothonotary Warbler, Worm-eating Warbler, Prairie Warbler, and Wood Thrush occur on the IBA in large numbers during the breeding season. With the exception of the Cerulean Warbler, this IBA supports all of the species indicated by



*Great Dismal Swamp forest*

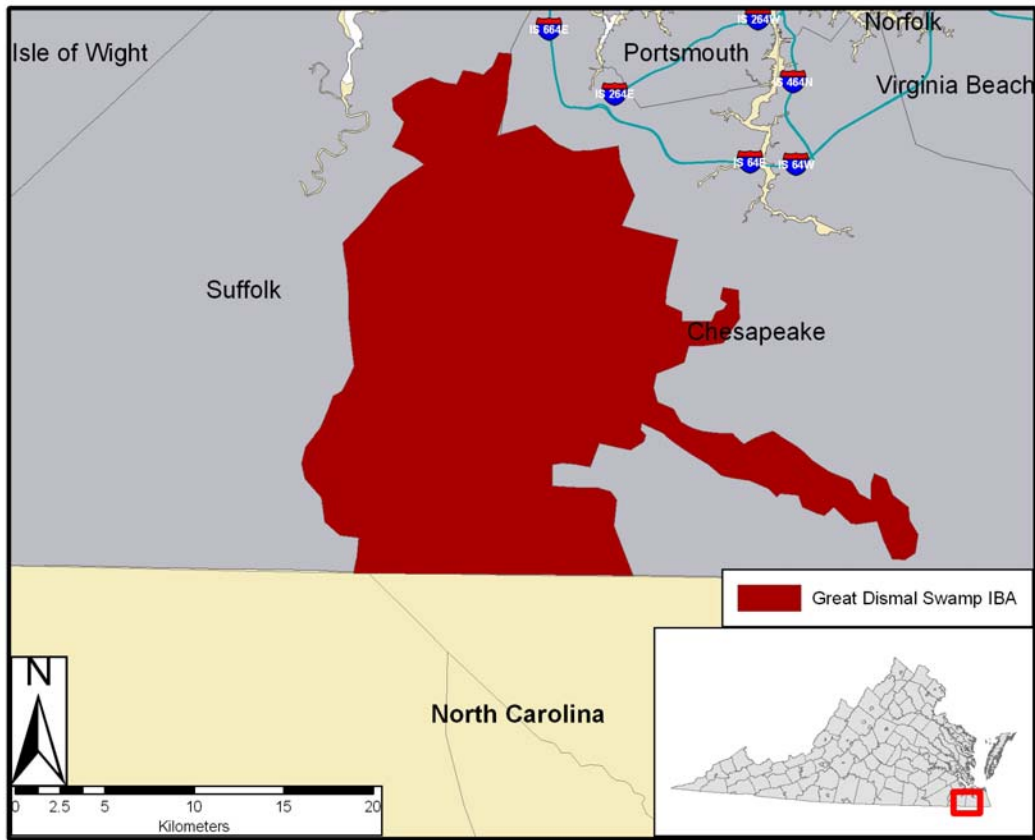
A. Weldon 2006

Partners in Flight as being the highest priority forested wetland species of concern including the Swainson's Warbler, Kentucky Warbler, Acadian Flycatcher, Yellow-throated Vireo, Prothonotary Warbler, Louisiana Waterthrush, Chimney Swift, Red-shouldered Hawk, Great Blue Heron, Barred Owl, and Wayne's Black-throated Green Warbler. During spring and fall migration, the swamp serves as an important stopover point for migrating passerines. Radar analyses indicate that the IBA is a significant migratory hotspot where hundreds of thousands of birds stop over each morning during the peak of migration. During the winter months, large flocks of Rusty Blackbirds, estimated to occur in the thousands, depend upon the wooded wetlands of the IBA and as many as 23,000 Snow Geese and over 5,200 Tundra Swans (25-30% of the statewide population) have been recorded on Christmas Bird Counts.

### **Conservation and Threats**

The Great Dismal Swamp is a large and complex ecosystem supporting several rare plant and animal communities that have developed through the delicate interplay of fire and water. Not surprisingly, primary threats to the IBA include long-term suppression of fire and artificially controlled water regimes that impact natural hydrology. A network of roads and ditches constructed for logging now canvas the IBA. These structures disrupt the natural sheet flow of water through the IBA by acting as dams or by siphoning off valuable surface and ground water from the swamp in hours rather than days. Since the diversity of forest habitats has been produced in large part due to varying hydrologic gradients, artificial alteration has greatly shifted the distribution, abundance, and diversity of rare habitats. The Fish and Wildlife Service has been addressing this threat through the use of over 30 water control structures to help slow the movement of water through the refuge portion of the IBA. Fire is also an important natural force that has helped to maintain the high diversity of habitats in the swamp. Fire has been aggressively suppressed since the 1940s, allowing the expansion of red maple communities into rare fire-dependent habitats such as Atlantic white-cedar and pocosin swamps. Tupelo-baldcypress and Atlantic white-cedar were historically the predominant forest community types but now make up less than 20 percent of the total cover in the swamp due to decades of forest cutting, drainage, and fire suppression. This threat is being addressed through restoration of the diversity of native plant communities through careful prescribed burns that simulate the effects of wildfires.

## Great Dismal Swamp 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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