

Lower Potomac River

Fairfax, Stafford, King George, and Prince William Counties

Total Size: 23,599 ha (58,314 acres)

Elevation: 0-86 m (0-282 feet)



IBA Criteria Met

<i>Criterion</i>	<i>Species</i>	<i>Data</i>	<i>Season</i>	<i>Source</i>
Species at Risk	Bald Eagle	1. 42 breeding pairs in 2006 2. 169 over-summering migrants in 2006 3. 288 over-wintering migrants in 2006	Year round	1. Surveys by M.A. Byrd and B.D. Watts 2 & 3. Surveys by J. Cooper
Species at Risk	King Rail	Considerable habitat available. Area likely exceeds population threshold	Breeding	B.D. Watts - personal communication
Species at Risk	Least Bittern	Considerable habitat available. Area likely exceeds population threshold	Breeding	B.D. Watts - personal communication
Species at Risk	Red-headed Woodpecker	37 individuals in 2004. Considerable habitat available. Area almost certainly meets population threshold.	Wintering	Christmas Bird Counts
Species at Risk	Rusty Blackbird	287 individuals in 1999. Considerable habitat available. Area likely exceeds threshold	Wintering	Christmas Bird Counts
Species at Risk	Wood Thrush	Common breeder and extensive habitat available. Area almost certainly meets population threshold.	Breeding	B.D. Watts - personal communication

Species at Risk	Worm-eating Warbler	Common forest breeder. Extensive habitat available. Area almost certainly meets population threshold.	Breeding	B.D. Watts - personal communication
Species at Risk	Prairie Warbler	Common breeder. Considerable habitat available. Area almost certainly meets population threshold.	Breeding	B.D. Watts - personal communication
Species at Risk	Louisiana Waterthrush	Common forest breeder. Extensive habitat available. Area almost certainly meets population threshold.	Breeding	B.D. Watts - personal communication
Species at Risk	Eastern Meadowlark	39 individuals in 2004. Limited habitat in area but likely to meet population threshold.	Wintering	Christmas Bird Counts
Species at Risk	Grasshopper Sparrow	Habitat is limited but area likely meets population threshold	Breeding	B.D. Watts - personal communication
Species at Risk	Field Sparrow	Considerable habitat available. Area almost certainly exceeds population threshold.	Breeding	B.D. Watts - personal communication
Congregations - Colonial Waterbirds	Great Blue Heron, Great Egret	20-30 breeding pairs of Great Blue Herons (~20% of state population) and 20 breeding pairs of Great Egrets in 2003.	Breeding	Center for Conservation Biology Colonial Waterbird Surveys
Congregations – Waterfowl	Pied-billed Grebe, Tundra Swan, Wood Duck, Gadwall, American Wigeon, American Black Duck, Northern Shoveler, Northern Pintail, Green-winged Teal, Canvasback, Redhead, Ring-necked Duck, Greater Scaup,	Average of more than 20,000 wintering waterfowl	Wintering	Christmas Bird Counts

	Lesser Scaup, Bufflehead, Hooded Merganser, Common Merganser, Red-breasted Merganser, Ruddy Duck			
Responsibility Species Assemblage - Forest	Red-shouldered Hawk, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Whip-poor-will, Red-headed Woodpecker, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Northern Flicker, Eastern Wood-pewee, Wood Thrush, Prothonotary Warbler, Kentucky Warbler, Hooded Warbler, Worm-eating Warbler, Scarlet Tanager	Breeds	Breeding	References above
Responsibility Species Assemblage - Shrub	Northern Bobwhite, Eastern Kingbird, Brown Thrasher, Prairie Warbler, Field Sparrow, Indigo Bunting, Eastern Towhee	Breeds	Breeding	References above

Site Description

The tidal freshwater reach of the Potomac River included in this IBA extends along the south shoreline from Mathias Point to just above Fort Belvoir. The river is wide along this stretch with several large tributaries that contain considerable emergent and forested wetlands. Surrounding uplands support extensive tracts of hardwoods that are increasingly giving way to residential development. The area lies within the extreme inner coastal plain and has a great deal of topographic relief that has led to the development of a diversity of upland habitats. Due to its close proximity to the nation's capital, the area includes many historic properties and landmarks.

Conservation and Management Units

Due to its size, history, and proximity to Washington D.C., the tidal fresh reach of the Potomac contains many tracts of land dedicated to conservation, education, military training, and recreation. Both the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Department of Defense hold lands that are strategically important for conservation. Fish and Wildlife Service properties include Mason Neck, Occoquan, and Featherstone National Wildlife Refuges. The Department of Defense owns Quantico Marina Base, Fort Belvoir, Jackson Miles Abbott Wetland Refuge, and Accotink Bay Wildlife Refuge. The Commonwealth of Virginia also maintains several tracts of land that are state parks

or natural area preserves (Prince William Forest Park, Leesylvania and Mason Neck State Parks, and Caledon and Chotank Creek State Natural Areas). The regional park authority and individual counties own other lands for recreational access (Pohick Bay and Occoquan Regional Parks and Locust Shade and Barnsfield county parks).

Birds

Due to its proximity to Washington D.C., the upper tidal reach of the Potomac River has been the focus of intensive ornithological observation for 200 years by prominent ornithologists stationed in the area. The landscape and bird community have changed dramatically over this time period. One of only 2 known breeding locations for the Bachman's Warbler in Virginia was located within the area. Currently, the area supports a significant community of piscivorous bird species. This includes one of the largest Great Blue Heron colonies within the mid-Atlantic region located on Mason neck, a dense breeding population of Bald Eagles, and both a summer and winter concentration area for migrant Bald Eagles. The rich hardwood forests are strategically important for local breeding populations of Neotropical migrants; they also act as stopover areas for northern populations moving through the region in the fall. Brackish and tidal-fresh marshes likely support important populations of King Rails, Least Bitterns, and Coastal Swamp Sparrows but have not been fully explored. The waterways support significant populations of waterfowl during migration and winter. An average of over 20,000 individuals of at least 25 species of wintering ducks, geese, grebes, swans, and loons, are counted each year in just one portion of the IBA. Notable 10-year averages include 1,445 American Black Ducks, 1,355 Canvasbacks, 8,640 Lesser Scaup, 1,400 Common Mergansers, and 4,490 Ruddy Ducks. Bufflehead, Ring-necked Ducks, American Wigeon, Green-winged Teal, Northern Pintail, Gadwall, and Tundra Swans occur in the hundreds.



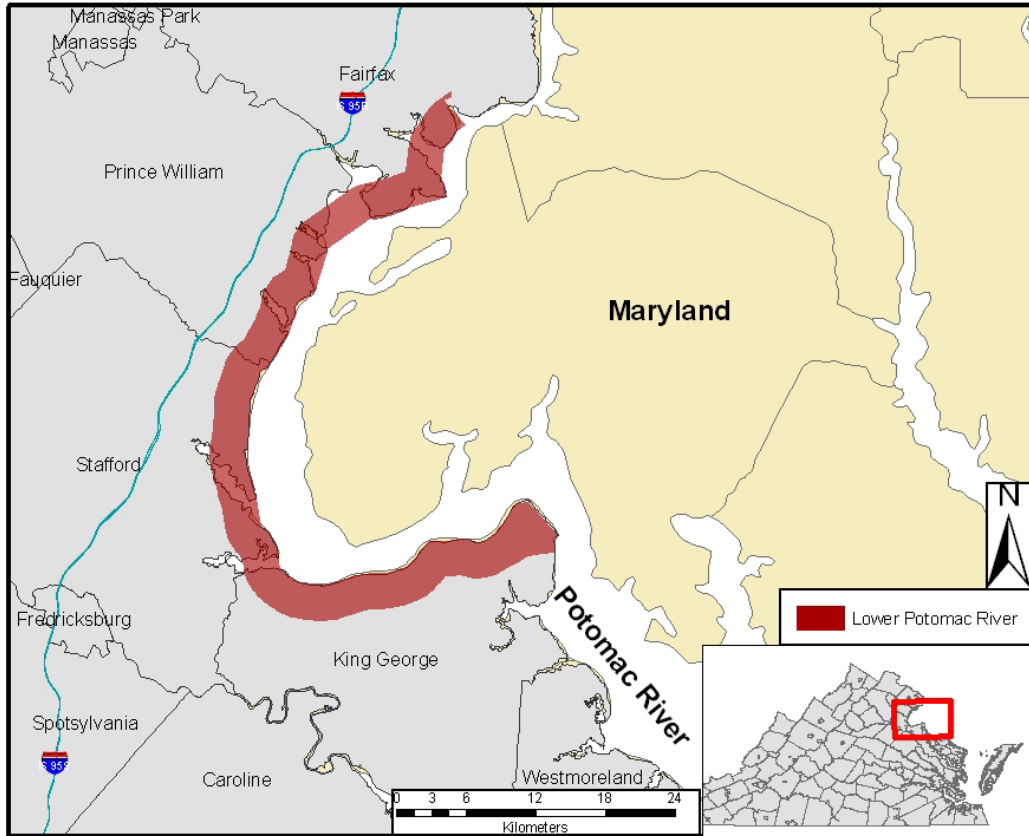
Bald Eagle Nestling

Conservation and Threats

The dominant threat to the avifauna within this area is the loss of habitat to urban expansion extending down the river from Washington D.C. Jurisdictions within the area are experiencing some of the fastest human growth rates in the nation. This growth is causing the rapid loss of habitat for many species. All of the upland habitats are in immediate danger from development. The increase in the human population has led to an increase in the demand for access to the waterway for recreational boating. Increase in boating activity and associated disturbance is the greatest threat to the Bald Eagle concentration area. In recent years, increases in disturbance along important shorelines appear to be limiting Bald Eagle use of the area during peak times of the year. In the future, rapid development of private lands will elevate the importance of government and conservation lands for the management of sensitive species.

Maintaining continuity in the mission of these lands as it pertains to population protection will be important.

Lower Potomac IBA Map



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

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