



Audubon IMPORTANT BIRD AREAS

Lower Rappahannock River Essex, Richmond, Caroline, King George, and Westmoreland Counties

Total Size: 50,931 ha (125,800 acres)

Elevation: 0 – 66 m (0-217 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. 63 breeding pairs in 2006 - area accounts for nearly 10% of Virginia breeding population 2. 232 over-summering migrants in 2006 3. 383 over-wintering migrants in 2005	Year round	1. Surveys by M.A. Byrd and B.D. Watts 2. Surveys by W.S. Portlock and B.D. Watts 3. Surveys by J. Cooper, W.S. Portlock, S. Spencer, and B.D. Watts
Species at Risk	Coastal Swamp Sparrow	47 breeding pairs in 2005	Breeding	Surveys by B.J. Paxton, F.M. Smith, B.D. Watts, B. Williams, and M.D. Wilson
Species at Risk	Rusty Blackbird	1600 individuals in 2005	Wintering	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service surveys
Species at Risk	Barn Owl	6 breeding pairs in 1997	Year round	Surveys by S. Spencer, B.D. Watts, and D.M. Whalen
Species at Risk	American Black Duck	5 breeding pairs in 1995	Breeding	Surveys by B.D. Watts
Species at Risk	King Rail	Species found in marsh habitat in lower portion of IBA. Population likely exceeds threshold	Breeding	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service surveys
Species at Risk	Least Bittern	Species found in marsh habitat in lower portion of IBA. Population likely exceeds threshold	Breeding	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service surveys
Species at Risk	American Woodcock	Extensive habitat available. Area likely meets population threshold	Breeding	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service surveys

Species at Risk	Red-headed Woodpecker	Area likely meets population threshold	Breeding	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service surveys
Species at Risk	Northern Bobwhite	49 breeding pairs in 2004 on Rappahannock River Valley NWR. Area likely meets population threshold	Breeding	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service surveys
Species at Risk	Prairie Warbler	80 breeding pairs in 2005 on Rappahannock River Valley NWR. Area likely exceeds population threshold	Breeding	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service surveys
Species at Risk	Eastern Meadowlark	At least 21 breeding pairs and 128 wintering individuals between 2001-2006 on Rappahannock River Valley NWR. Area likely exceeds population threshold	Year round	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service surveys
Species at Risk	Grasshopper Sparrow	88 breeding pairs in 2001 on Rappahannock River Valley NWR. Habitat is extensive. Area likely exceeds population threshold	Breeding	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service surveys
Species at Risk	Field Sparrow	Species is common and habitat extensive. Area is very likely to exceed population thresholds	Breeding	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service surveys
Congregations – Waterfowl	Wintering Waterfowl	Average of over 30,500 ducks, geese, and swans between 2001-2005	Wintering	Department of Game and Inland Fisheries mid-winter waterfowl surveys
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, Worm-eating Warbler	Breeds	Breeding	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service surveys

Responsibility Species Assemblage - Shrub	Northern Bobwhite, Eastern Kingbird, Brown Thrasher, Prairie Warbler, Field Sparrow, Indigo Bunting, Eastern Towhee	Breeds	Breeding	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service surveys
Responsibility Species Assemblage – Marsh	American Black Duck, King Rail, Least Bittern, Coastal Swamp Sparrow, Seaside Sparrow	Breeds	Breeding	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service surveys

Site Description

Compared to all other major tributaries of the Chesapeake Bay, the reach of the Rappahannock River between Tappahannock and Port Royal remains the most pristine. The waterway supports extensive forested wetlands and pristine shorelines embedded within a predominantly rural landscape. Uplands have a wide range of topographic features that result in a high diversity of habitats within a relatively small area. These areas are used for agriculture, forestry, and a growing ornamental nursery industry. Several large farms and historic plantations remain intact. In recent years, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has made the area a focus for acquisition. Surrounding uplands are composed of rural farmlands that support some of the largest grassland bird populations in the Coastal Plain.

Conservation and Management Units

A growing and important portion of the IBA is owned and managed for conservation purposes. In recent years the area has become an acquisition target for both the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and The Nature Conservancy. The relatively new Rappahannock River Valley National Wildlife Refuge has been very successful in protecting strategically important tracts within the area. The Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries manages Lands End Wildlife Management Area for wintering waterfowl. In addition, many private landowners are progressive in managing their lands for conservation benefit.

Birds

This reach of the Rappahannock River supports the only known breeding population of Coastal Plain Swamp Sparrows in Virginia. The status and geographic extent of this population remains unknown. The area supports the densest breeding population of Bald Eagles in Virginia and one of the



Coastal Swamp Sparrow nest

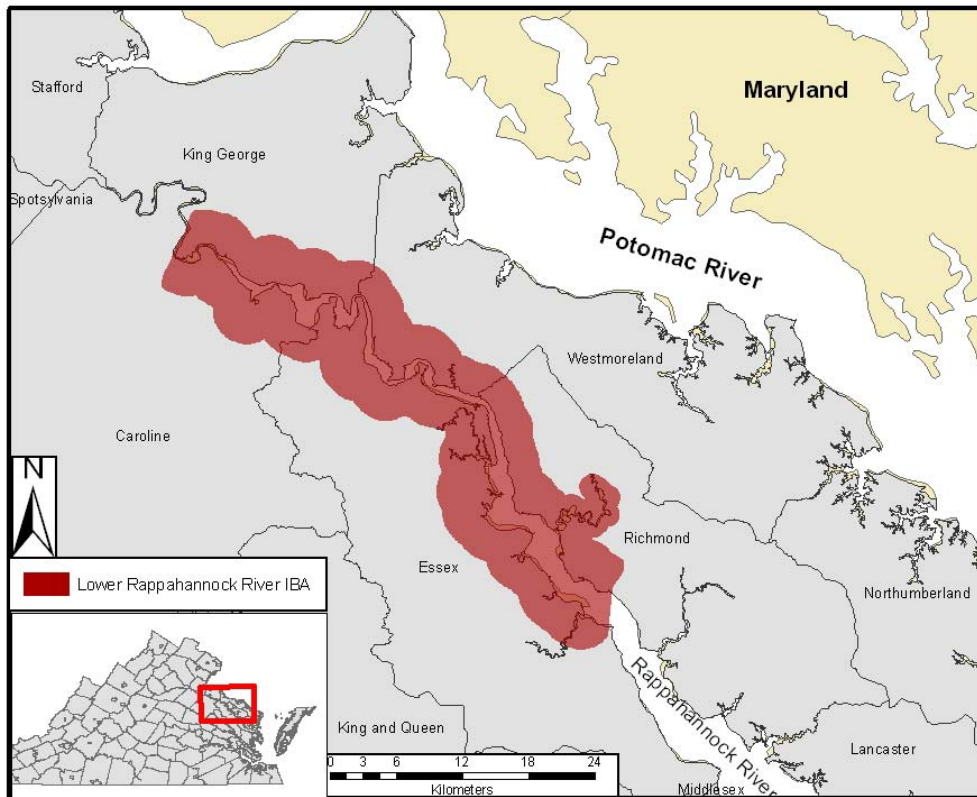
area supports the densest breeding population of Bald Eagles in Virginia and one of the

largest summer and winter eagle concentration areas in eastern North America with migrant eagle populations numbering in the hundreds. The waterway is a significant area for waterfowl during the winter months. Forested wetlands support breeding Neotropical migrants such as the Prothonotary Warbler and Yellow-throated Vireo and large winter roosts of blackbirds including the Rusty Blackbird. Surrounding fallow open lands support one of the largest grassland bird communities within coastal Virginia.

Conservation and Threats

Four primary threats are currently of concern including 1) conversion of open land to residential, 2) expansion of recreational boating access to sensitive portions of the river, 3) contaminants within the fishery used by piscivorous birds, and 4) continued expansion of phragmites into sensitive marsh habitats. The urban centers of Fredericksburg and Tappahannock are expanding and expected to place pressure on the rural lands within this area in the future. Waterfront property is particularly vulnerable to future development. Since many of the species that depend on this area are sensitive to development, further development remains a concern. The reach of the river between Tappahannock and Port Royal supports one of the largest winter and summer concentrations of migrant Bald Eagles in eastern North America. These birds have been shown to be very sensitive to boating activity. Increases in boating activity and the number of boat access points within this stretch of the river will negatively impact migrant eagles. In addition, because of their position at the top of the food web, eagles will always be vulnerable to new contaminants entering the system. Pristine marsh habitats and the sensitive species that depend upon it are being threatened by dispersal of the invasive plant phragmites from the large source population on Hoskins Creek. Expansion of this population could seriously impact the integrity of this system to support marsh bird communities.

Lower Rappahannock River IBA Map



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

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

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