



Audubon IMPORTANT BIRD AREAS

Western Shore Marshes York, Gloucester, and Mathews Counties, Poquoson and Hampton Cities

Total Size: 5,097 ha (12,590 acres)

Elevation: 0-8 m (0-26.2 feet)



IBA Criteria Met

<i>Criterion</i>	<i>Species</i>	<i>Data</i>	<i>Season</i>	<i>Source</i>
Species at Risk	Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow	62 individuals in 1992	Wintering	Surveys by B.D. Watts
Species at Risk	American Black Duck	10 breeding pairs in 1992	Breeding	Surveys and observations by B.D. Watts
Species at Risk	American Oystercatcher	21 breeding pairs in 2003	Breeding	Surveys by A.L. Wilke, B.D. Watts, B.R. Truitt, and R. Boettcher
Species at Risk	Least Tern	130 breeding pairs in 2003	Breeding	CCB Colonial Waterbird Survey
Species at Risk	Sedge Wren	10 breeding pairs in 1992	Breeding	Surveys by B.D. Watts
Species at Risk	Common Tern	760 breeding pairs	Breeding	Surveys by R. Beck
Species at Risk	Black Skimmer	101 breeding pairs	Breeding	Surveys by R. Beck
Species at Risk	Short-billed Dowitcher	128 individuals in 1992; Area likely to exceed IBA threshold in most years	Migration	Surveys by A.A. Beheeler and B.D. Watts
Species at Risk	Seaside Sparrow	14,000 estimated breeding pairs in 2006	Breeding	Projection based on density estimate and extent of habitat
Species at Risk	Brown-headed Nuthatch	42 individuals in 2003	Wintering	Christmas Bird Count data
Species at Risk	Chuck-will's Widow	Area clearly exceeds threshold	Breeding	B.D. Watts personal communication

Species at Risk	Eastern Meadowlark	Based on breeding density, species likely to exceed threshold	Breeding	B.D. Watts personal communication
Species at Risk	Field Sparrow	Based on breeding density, species likely to exceed threshold	Breeding	B.D. Watts personal communication
Responsibility Species Assemblage - Marsh	Clapper Rail, Virginia Rail, Marsh Wren, Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrow, Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow, Sedge Wren, Marsh Wren	Breeds or Winters	Breeding or Wintering	References above

Description

The arc of land from Grandview Beach north to New Point Comfort supports the largest concentration of salt marsh habitat within the lower Chesapeake Bay and the largest in Virginia outside of the Eastern Shore. The system includes high-marsh habitat, low-marsh habitat, an extensive network of sandy berms, and scattered pine hummocks. Marshes are bordered along the mainland by some of the most extensive maritime forests in Virginia. Historically, surrounding lands were rural but are under increasing pressure for residential development.



Plum Tree Island tidal marsh

Photo by B.D. Watts

Conservation and Management Units

An increasing portion of the area is owned and protected to meet conservation, management, and educational objectives. Significant conservation areas include Plum Tree Island and Messick Marsh owned by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Langley Marshes owned by the U.S. Department of Defense, Goodwin Island owned by the College of William and Mary, and Grandview Nature Preserve owned by the City of Hampton. Other conservation lands include Bethel Beach and Newpoint Comfort Natural Area Preserves owned by the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation and Guinea Marshes Preserve, owned by The Nature Conservancy.

Birds

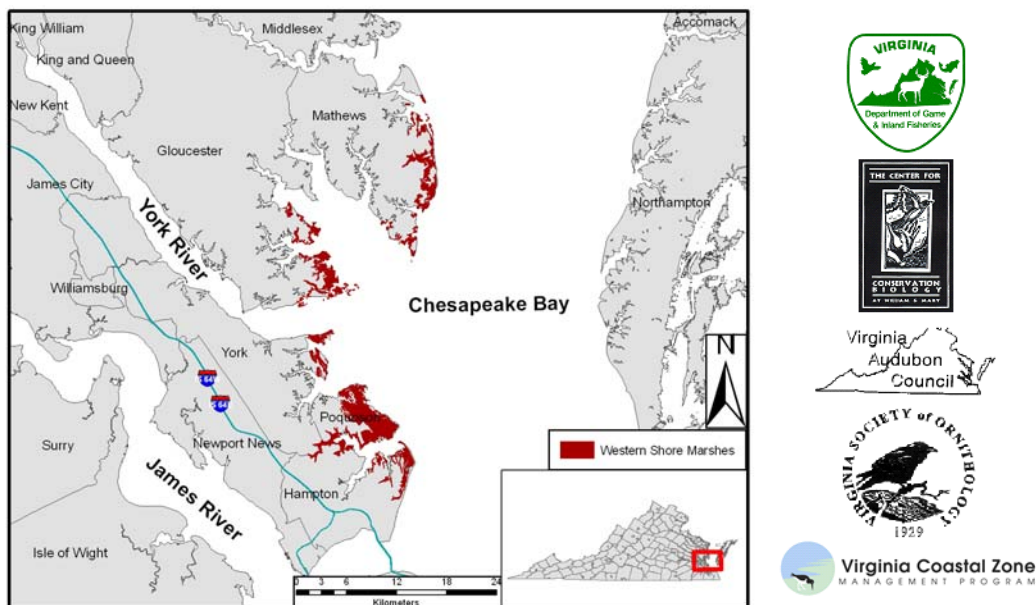
The avifauna within this area has received relatively little study, particularly during migration and in winter. Extensive low marsh areas support significant populations of

Clapper Rail, Seaside Sparrows, and Marsh Wrens, while tide pools support a large diversity of breeding species as well as migrant shorebirds. Large high marsh areas provide habitat for breeding populations of Sedge Wrens, Northern Harriers, Prairie Warblers, and Eastern Meadowlarks. Least Terns and American Oystercatchers are found on sandy berms and barriers while scattered pine hummocks and adjacent maritime forests support significant populations of Brown-headed Nuthatches and Chuck-will's-widows. Isolated marsh islands support breeding American Black Ducks and American Oystercatchers.

Conservation and Threats

There are several threats to the bird populations within the IBA. These include 1) loss of habitat to the invasion by common reed, 2) loss of habitat to sea-level rise, 3) increases in mammal populations and associated predation, and 4) human disturbance to colonial waterbirds. The aggressive invasive plant common reed is spreading rapidly throughout the IBA. Although high marshes within this system have not been degraded to the same extent as many areas within the upper Chesapeake Bay, many marshes within the system are highly threatened. Habitat continues to be at risk in the long term to rising sea levels. Isolated marsh islands are particularly vulnerable to this ongoing process. Over the past 30 years, mammalian predators such as raccoons and both fox species have increased and have likely had a detrimental effect on reproductive rates of marsh-bird populations. Human disturbance within the sensitive breeding area at Grandview Beach has become a chronic problem. Most of the remaining areas are more remote and less threatened by human visitation.

Western Shore Marshes 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: melfner@audubon.org or 804-788-7660