

Back Bay Important Bird Area Fact Sheet

Location: Virginia Beach

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

Elevation: 0-15.7 m (0-51.9feet)

Site Description: Back Bay is a coastal bay that forms the northern extent and headwaters of Currituck Sound. The salinity conditions within this system have led to the formation of extensive big cordgrass marshes within the bay, many of which are island patches 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.

Protection: A considerable portion of this system is owned by government agencies and is operated under a specific mandate for wildlife management. Back Bay National Wildlife Refuge contains active beach, dunes, maritime forest, limited open uplands, and extensive areas of big cordgrass marsh. False Cape State Park includes large tracks of maritime forest, as well as, beach and dune habitats. Princess Anne Wildlife Management Area supports large tracks of big cordgrass marsh along the western boundary of the important bird area. The boundary of Mackay Island National Wildlife Refuge extends into the area and contains big cordgrass marsh and limited upland habitats.

Birds: Back Bay supports the full suite of bird species associated with big cordgrass habitat during both the summer and winter periods. The area likely supports the largest population of King Rails in Virginia. Due to its geographic position and habitat, the area represents the normal, northern range limit for Sedge Wren, American Bittern, and Yellow Rail during winter. The outer beaches support significant numbers of migrant shorebirds dominated by Sanderlings but including Red Knots. Historically, the area has been a focal area for waterfowl during winter. A systematic effort is needed to better quantify the use of the system by overwintering species such as the Yellow Rail and migrant species such as the Least Bittern.

King Rail



Conservation and Threats: Primary threats to bird population include 1) loss of habitat to the invasion by common reed, 2) loss of habitat to sea-level rise, and 3) system perturbations related 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. Monitoring programs have been ongoing for wintering waterfowl, migrant shorebirds, marsh birds, colonial waterbirds, Bald Eagles, and Osprey. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife

Service performs regular conservation activities including impoundment management and marsh burning.