

# Delmarva Bayside Marshes IBA

## Accomack County

Total Size: 9,174 ha (22,660 acres)

Elevation: 0 – 3.2 m (0 – 10.5 ft)



### IBA Criteria Met

<i>Criterion</i>	<i>Species</i>	<i>Data</i>	<i>Season</i>	<i>Source</i>
Species at Risk	Black Rail	5 pairs in 2001; likely closer to 50 pairs	Breeding	Watts and Paxton - personal observation
Species at Risk	Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrow	40 pairs in 2001; likely supports hundreds	Breeding	Watts and Paxton - personal observation
Species at Risk	Henslow's Sparrow	2 pairs in 2000	Breeding	Watts - personal observation
Species at Risk	American Black Duck	50 pairs in 2005	Breeding	DGIF Black Duck Surveys
Species at Risk	American Oystercatcher	29 pairs in 2003; 5% of VA breeding population	Breeding	Wilke et al., breeding season status assessment
Species at Risk	Forster's Tern	566 pairs in 2003; 23% of VA breeding population	Breeding	CCB Colonial Waterbird Survey
Species at Risk	Common Tern	158 pairs; 8% of VA breeding population	Breeding	Watts - personal communication
Species at Risk	Sedge Wren	1 pair in 1981	Breeding	Accomack County Breeding Bird Foray
Species at Risk	Seaside Sparrow	29,000 pairs	Breeding	Projection based on density estimate and extent of habitat
Species at Risk	Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow	Estimated to occur in the thousands	Winter	Watts - personal communication
Species at Risk	Barn Owl	3 pairs in 2002; likely up to 30	Breeding	Watts - personal observation

Responsibility Species Assemblage - Coastal Marsh	American Black Duck, Black Rail, Henslow's Sparrow, Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrow, Seaside Sparrow, Sedge Wren	Supports significant assemblage of sensitive high-marsh birds	Breeding	References above
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**Description**

The lower Delmarva Peninsula rises in elevation from south to north such that extensive marshes have formed along the bayside north of the Accomack-Northampton County border. These marshes are the best examples of high-marsh habitat in Virginia. 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. Although there is considerable agency and NGO ownership within this area, much of the habitat remains in private ownership. Much of the habitat is remote due to the limited number of access points from land and the shallow depth of surrounding waters.



*Aerial view of marsh habitat*

Photo by Bryan Watts

**Conservation and Management Units**

Saxis Wildlife Management Area is the largest agency-owned marsh complex within the system and is managed by the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries. Additional large tracts found south of Saxis are owned by the Nature Conservancy (Mark's and Jack's Island Natural Area Preserve) and the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation, Division of Natural Heritage (Parker's Marsh Natural Area Preserve); these tracts can contribute heavily to conservation. Scattered holdings are also controlled by the Virginia Marine Resources Commission and the Virginia Outdoors Foundation.

**Birds**

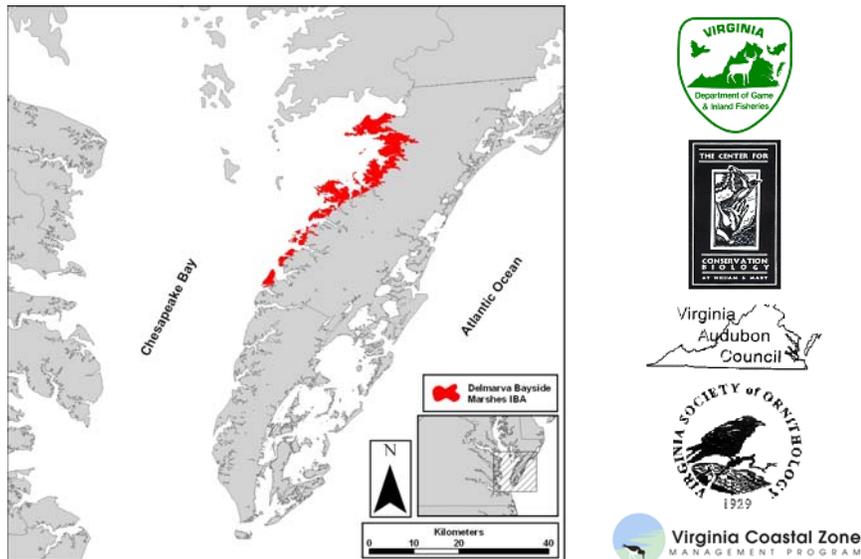
Since access into this system is limited and difficult, the avifauna is not well documented. Until recently, the system was known to support the entire Responsibility Species suite of sensitive high-marsh species including Black Rail, Henslow's Sparrow, Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrow, and Sedge Wren. The known population of Henslow's Sparrow has been lost in recent years, likely due to the degradation of habitat by common reed. The area supports what may be the last remaining breeding population of Black Rails and the largest population of Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrows in Virginia. The sizes of these breeding populations have not been assessed. Marshes also support a significant breeding population of Seaside Sparrows. The fringing berms along extensive marshes support a significant but poorly documented population of American Oystercatcher. Small

marsh islands support populations of American Black Duck, Forster's Terns, and Common Terns. The system likely supports a significant population of Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrows in the winter months. At least 3, but possibly up to 30, breeding pairs of Barn Owls are also likely on the site. Other species of concern found here include a Peregrine Falcon pair, a small number of Bald Eagles, and populations of Chuck-will's Widow, Prairie Warbler, and Eastern Meadowlark within suitable habitat. Very little is known about the use of this system by shorebirds and marsh birds during the migration periods.

### Conservation and Threats

The primary threats to bird populations at this IBA include the loss of habitat to the invasion by common reed, loss of habitat to sea-level rise, and increases in mammal populations and associated predation. The aggressive invasive plant, common reed, is spreading rapidly throughout this system from a substantial source population that has formed at Saxis Wildlife Management Area. This species invades along the marsh-upland ecotone and eliminates habitat required by the Henslow's Sparrow. This is likely the primary cause of the loss of this species from this habitat along the Atlantic Coast. Habitat continues to be at risk in the long term to rising sea levels. The increase in mammal predators (raccoon and both fox species) over the past 30 years on the Delmarva mainland has almost certainly had a detrimental effect on reproductive rates of marsh-bird populations. Although monitoring of some priority species such as the American Black Duck and American Oystercatcher has been initiated or is ongoing, much work is needed to clarify population status and distribution of marsh-nesting species and the use of the area by migrant shorebirds. To date, this area has received very little attention from the conservation community.

### Delmarva Bayside Marshes Detail 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](mailto:melfner@audubon.org) or 804-788-7660