



# Audubon IMPORTANT BIRD AREAS

## Chesapeake Bay Islands

### Accomack County

Total Size: 1,706 ha (4,214 acres)

Elevation: 0 – 2.6 m (0 - 8.5 ft)



#### IBA Criteria Met

Criterion	Species	Data	Season	Source
Species at Risk	Little Blue Heron	61 pairs in 2003; 20% of VA breeding population	Breeding	Center for Conservation Biology Colonial Waterbird Survey
Species at Risk	American Black Duck	50 pairs in 2005	Breeding	Department of Game and Inland Fisheries Black Duck Surveys
Species at Risk	American Oystercatcher	13 pairs in 2003; 2% of VA breeding population	Breeding	A. Wilke et al., breeding season status assessment
Species at Risk	Royal Tern	800 pairs in 2003; 28% of VA breeding population	Breeding	Center for Conservation Biology Colonial Waterbird Survey
Species at Risk	Glossy Ibis	149 pairs in 2003; 18% of VA breeding population	Breeding	Center for Conservation Biology Colonial Waterbird Survey
Species at Risk	Forster's Tern	390 pairs in 2003; 16% of VA population	Breeding	Center for Conservation Biology Colonial Waterbird Survey
Species at Risk	Seaside Sparrow	2,900 pairs	Breeding	Projection based on density estimate and extent of habitat
Species at Risk	Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow	Likely over 100 wintering individuals	Winter	Estimate based on extent of available habitat
Responsibility Species Assemblage - Coastal Marsh	American Black Duck, Black Rail, Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrow, Seaside Sparrow	Supports significant assemblage of sensitive high-marsh birds	Breeding	References above

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## Description

The upper Chesapeake Bay supports more than 30 islands that are vestiges of an earlier era in the geological history of the Bay. The Chesapeake Bay Islands IBA includes 4 major island complexes including Tangier, the southern end of Smith, Great Fox, and Watts. These islands are isolated from the mainland by substantial distances and have generally been predator free, making them attractive to nesting water birds. The dominant habitat type throughout the islands is tidal salt marsh with topographic highs or berms along the west-facing margins. Interspersed within these marshes are both natural and dredge-spoil hummocks colonized by shrubs and loblolly pines. Watts Island is primarily a high ridge of loblolly forest with some surrounding marsh. Great Fox Island is almost entirely marsh with a high sand berm along the margin. Tangier Island has extensive marsh habitat but also has considerable high ground where a town and harbor are located. The southern end of Smith Island is marsh with a long, narrow barrier island extending south. Fishing and crabbing are the basis of the island economies on Tangier and Smith Islands, which support historic communities that are dependent on the water and tourism for their livelihoods.

## Conservation and Management Units

A considerable portion of the area within the islands is privately owned. Watts Island has recently been acquired by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and annexed to the Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge. The Chesapeake Bay Foundation owns some smaller land parcels on both Tangier and Smith Islands and the Virginia Marine Resources Commission has control over a small area of state common land.

## Birds

The barrier beaches and hummocks on this IBA support significant colonies of colonial waterbirds including populations of species of conservation concern such as Royal Tern, Common Tern, Black Skimmer, Little Blue Heron, and Glossy Ibis. The extensive marshes support significant populations of Seaside Sparrows and Forster's Terns and potentially a small population of Black Rails and Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrows. American Black Ducks and American Oystercatchers nest on berms and other topographic highs. These islands likely represent important stopover areas for shorebirds and marsh birds during spring and fall migration. Surrounding waters support large numbers of wintering waterfowl. Other at-risk species that are known to use the site include up to four breeding pairs of the state-threatened Peregrine Falcon, a moderate population of breeding Yellow-crowned Night Herons, two to four pairs of Northern Harriers, and a historical record of a breeding Barn Owl pair.



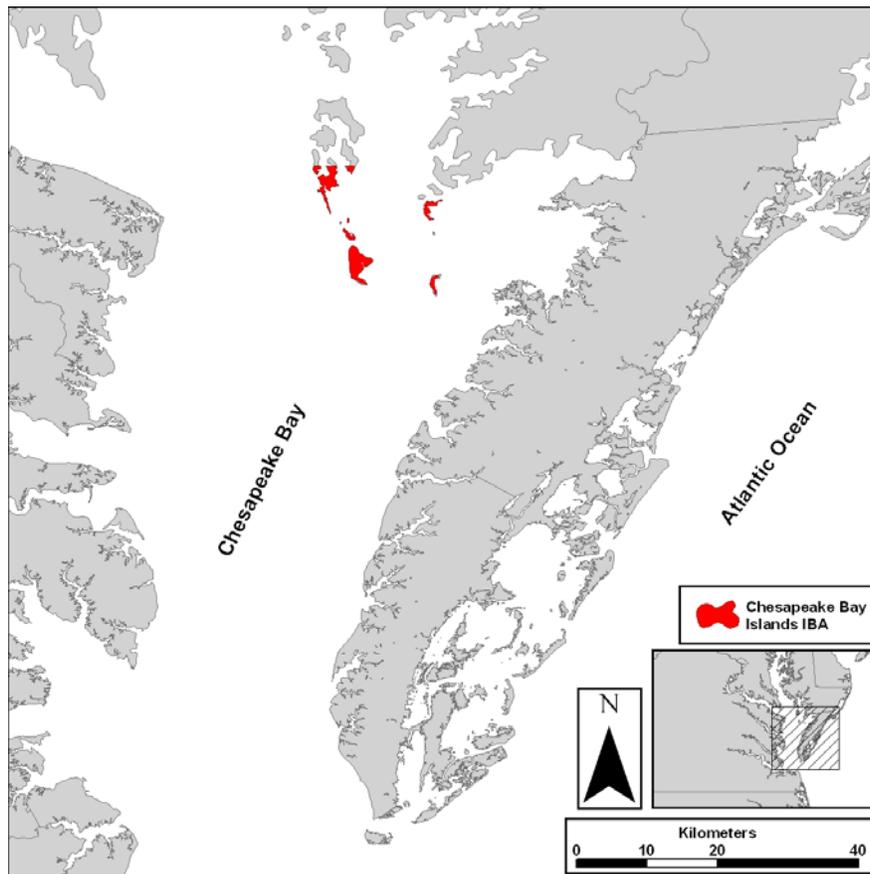
*Brown Pelicans*

Photo by Marian Watts

## Conservation and Threats

The primary threat to this system is the loss of habitat due to erosion caused by rising sea levels. All of the islands have lost considerable area in recent memory. Given the important role that these islands play for sensitive bird species, efforts should be made to protect them from further losses where possible. An additional threat is the colonization of the islands by predators. Ground predators such as raccoons, fox, feral cats, and Norway rats are capable of rendering these islands unusable by ground nesters. In addition, continued expansion of the Herring and Great Black-backed Gull populations on these islands may be displacing other species or reducing reproductive rates. Threats from human disturbance seem to be limited at this time. With the exception of periodic population monitoring, very little management is being performed on behalf of birds or the habitats on which they depend.

## Chesapeake Bay Islands 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

