

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

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April 2004



Mason Neck

*National
Wildlife
Refuge*

Bald eagle in water
R. Twon

Eighteen miles south of Washington, D.C., on the banks of the Potomac, lies an 8,000-acre peninsula known as Mason Neck. Here on February 1, 1969, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service created the first national wildlife refuge specifically established for the endangered bald eagle.



This blue goose, designed by J.N. "Ding" Darling, has become the symbol of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Today the 2,277-acre refuge encompasses approximately 2,000 acres of mature hardwood forest, the largest freshwater marsh in northern Virginia, and nearly six miles of shoreline. Because of this unique blend of habitat, Mason Neck supports a diversity of wildlife throughout the year.



D. Dewhurst

High Point Creek

History

The recorded history of Mason Neck began around 1775 with the construction of nearby Gunston Hall, home of George Mason. Mason was an author of the Virginia Bill of Rights, predecessor to the United States Bill of Rights.

During the 1800s and early 1900s, logging was the principle land use of what is now refuge land. Roads were cut and much of the mature pine and hardwood timber removed. As time went on, sediment and pollution from upstream filled the river and water quality around the peninsula declined. These impacts and disturbances, along with the elimination of nest trees, caused a decline in the bald eagle population.

By the 1960s, timber had grown back but residential development posed an additional threat. Local residents working with the Nature

Conservancy to protect the land brought their concerns to the attention of local, state, and federal agencies. In 1969, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service purchased 845 acres from the Nature Conservancy and the Mason Neck National Wildlife Refuge was established.

Management

The refuge, along with Mason Neck State Park, the Northern Virginia Park Authority, the Gunston Hall Plantation, and the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, cooperate in the management of their combined lands on the Mason Neck peninsula with each agency focusing on their strengths of recreation, interpretation, and preservation. This cooperation provides a wide variety of recreational activities while protecting the natural resources.

The primary objective of Mason Neck National Wildlife Refuge is to protect essential nesting, feeding, and roosting habitat for bald eagles. Altogether over 6,000 acres is managed cooperatively to protect the eagles and the results have been heartening. Eagles nest successfully at several sites and overall numbers of eagles in the area have increased dramatically over the past 10 years with up to 50 or more birds in the winter.

The refuge also enhances species diversity by managing habitat for a variety of wildlife, from tree frogs to herons. Managing one of the largest great blue heron rookeries in Virginia includes protecting the nesting birds from human disturbance. Wood ducks, bluebirds, and bats use nesting boxes that have been provided to supplement natural cavities. Management of migratory and wintering waterfowl includes native food plants, monitoring flock sizes and assessing habitat use.



Great blue heron

C. Koppe



Volunteer building Wood duck boxes

D. Dewhurst

Visitor Opportunities

The refuge provides many opportunities for visitors to participate in wildlife-dependent recreation. Two hiking trails provide an outstanding opportunity to watch and photograph wildlife.



Woodmarsh Trail

D. McCrensky

Woodmarsh Trail

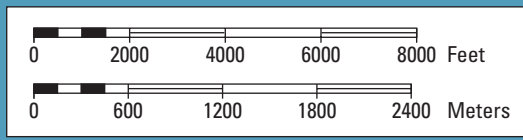
This trail loops through a hardwood forest, carpets of ferns, over small streams, and along a marsh for a round trip of three miles. An observation platform overlooks a marsh where beavers and otters, as well as waterfowl, feed. Portions of the trail are closed from December through June due to Eagle nesting areas.

Great Marsh Trail

Follow a forested ridge along a natural peninsula, ending with a sweeping view of the Great Marsh. This overlook provides the best opportunity to see eagles and wintering waterfowl. This three-quarters of a mile trail is accessible to disabled visitors.

Environmental education

An educational pavilion and adjacent fields and trails are available for use by organized groups on a reservation basis.



Regulations

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service invites you to take advantage of the unique opportunities to see wildlife on Mason Neck National Wildlife Refuge. You can help ensure that wildlife has a place to grow and survive for future generations by respecting refuge rules and obeying posted signs. All visitors to Mason Neck are expected to comply with local, state, and federal laws and regulations, as well as with the following conditions:

Trails are open daily during daylight hours. You can access other portions of the refuge by permit for educational or research purposes.

Bicyclists are permitted only on paved roads

Traveling off trails, off roads, and in closed areas is prohibited

Pets must be on a leash (up to 10 feet)

Camping and open fires are prohibited

Plants and animals (living or dead) may not be disturbed, introduced, or removed

Possession of firearms or weapons is prohibited

Alcoholic beverages are prohibited

Dispose of all litter in designated containers

Wildlife Calendar

January/February Resident bald eagles rebuild nests and lay eggs in February. Wintering eagles commonly feed in Great Marsh. Open water freezes, concentrating diving ducks in deeper sections of the river. Deer shed their antlers.

March Resident eagles incubate their eggs. Most waterfowl have migrated north. Wood ducks take up residence in nest boxes and natural cavities. Beavers begin rebuilding dams and lodges. Woodland ponds become laced with frog and salamander eggs.

April Eaglets hatch. Great blue heron courtship and nesting activity peaks in the rookery. Spring wildflowers fill the woods. Teal pass through on northward migration. Deer grow new antlers.

May Broods of wood ducks, black ducks, and Canada geese feed along the creeks and marsh. Songbird migration peaks early in the month with many pairs staying to nest. Mountain laurel brightens the hillsides. White-tailed deer give birth to their fawns.

June Eaglets fledge. Turtle nesting season peaks. Spatterdock, arrowhead, and wild rice flourish in the marsh. Muskrats repopulate the marsh, producing the first of several litters for the year.



Wood duck drake



J. Leopold

White tailed deer

July

Young great blue herons learn to fish in the marsh. Young geese and ducklings start to fly. Swallows, kingbirds, and flycatchers feast on the abundant insects.

August

Adult bald eagles leave Mason Neck after the young fledge. Immatures from the surrounding area arrive. Shore and wading birds increase in numbers. Marsh hibiscus (mallow) blooms in the marsh.

September

Puddle ducks (teal, mallards, black ducks) arrive on their southward journey. Egret and heron numbers increase until cold weather pushes them south. Songbird and raptor migration peaks late in the month.

October

Eagles, and their young, that nested elsewhere arrive to spend the winter. Autumn leaves fill the woods with color.

*November/
December*

Resident eagles begin courtship and breeding. Wintering eagles are visible feeding in the marsh and flying to and from the roost. The influx of diving ducks swells the winter waterfowl population. Breeding season for deer begins.



L. Poissenot

Beaver

Mason Neck National Wildlife Refuge is one of over 500 national wildlife refuges and thousands of waterfowl management areas in the National Wildlife Refuge System administered by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. The National Wildlife Refuge System is a network of lands and waters managed specifically for the protection of wildlife and its habitat and represents the most comprehensive wildlife management program in the world.

The Service also manages national fish hatcheries and provides leadership in habitat protection, fish and wildlife research technical assistance, and the conservation and protection of migratory birds, certain marine mammals and threatened and endangered species.