

Mackay Island

National Wildlife Refuge



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Refuge Facts

- Established: 1960.
- Acres: 8,737 (North Carolina and Virginia).
- Located in Currituck County, NC and the city of Virginia Beach, VA.
- Location: the refuge office is located 1 mile south of Virginia Beach, VA (in North Carolina) on NC Route 615. If coming from North Carolina: take the free Currituck Sound Ferry in Currituck, NC on NC Route 168 which lands at NC Route 615 at the South end of Knotts Island. Travel approximately 8.1 miles north to the refuge office.

Natural History

- Refuge is found in the northern portion of Currituck Sound and the southern portion of Back Bay on a peninsula/island which juts into the sound. Habitat ranges from fresh and brackish marsh to upland and lowland Eastern pine-hardwood forest.
- Concentrations of snow and Canada geese, ducks, osprey and other raptors, wading birds, and shorebirds. An active wood duck breeding population is present, along with one active bald eagle nest and many osprey nests.
- Wetlands 6,362 acres; woodlands 1,573 acres; croplands 235 acres; brush 187 acres.

Financial Impact of Refuge

- Six-person staff.
- 56,000 visitors annually.
- Current budget (FY 05): \$650,000.

Refuge Objectives

- Manage existing refuge and neighboring wetlands to gain optimum waterfowl, wading bird and shorebird use.
- Restore Indian Creek Basin to its pre-Mackay Island Road (early 1920's) state.

- Pursue, through state and local partnerships, the possibility of returning the natural flow of water north and south across the Great Marsh.
- Pursue an active public use program with the communities of southeastern Virginia and northeastern North Carolina.
- Pursue the development of a "Friends" group related to preservation/restoration of the Currituck Sound.

Management Tools

- Water management for waterfowl.
- Cooperative farming.
- Prescribed fire.
- Mechanical/chemical control of noxious plants.
- Deer management with public hunting.
- Education/interpretation.
- Law enforcement.
- Partnerships.

Public Use Opportunities

- Trails.
- Fishing, including youth fishing day.
- Wildlife observation.
- Photography.
- Deer hunting.

Calendar of Events

July, October, December: Open roads day.

March-October: refuge open to the public.

August: Green Wing Fishing Tournament.

October: National Wildlife Refuge Week.

September-December: Deer hunting.

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Questions and Answers

Why does the refuge burn the marsh?

Natural fires have historically occurred over the marshes surrounding Mackay Island.

Since the island has been settled, many of the natural fires have been controlled. Fire can provide many benefits to the natural ecosystem of the area. Prescribed fire is a useful management tool that is extensively used on Mackay NWR for vegetation management. Prescribed burns help to improve goose browse, reduce woody vegetation intrusion, and reduce wildfire hazards.

Goose browse is improved by removing old, rank vegetation and enabling the fresh green growth to be accessed by the birds. Fire helps to recycle nutrients that add to the productivity of the marsh. Fire also helps set back the successional stage and prevents the growth of woody vegetation. In addition these fires are used to help reduce the buildup of wildfire fuels. Due to the proximity of the refuge to the community of Knotts Island, wildfires threaten not only refuge facilities but private homes and businesses on the island.

What recreational opportunities are there at Mackay Island NWR?

Mackay Island is open from sunrise to sunset. All portions of the refuge are open to wildlife-dependent recreation from March 15 through October 15. Year-round public use is permitted in the following portions of the refuge:

- Corey's Ditch and the canal on the north side of the Marsh Causeway are open to fishing and crabbing.
- Mackay Island Road, from its junction with SR 615 to the Dike Gate and the Great Marsh Trail are open to walking, biking, motor vehicles (prohibited on the Great Marsh trail), bank fishing, wildlife observation and wildlife photography.

- Sport fishing for largemouth bass, catfish, bream and other species is allowed in all canals, bays and ponds from March 15 through October 15 each year. The refuge impoundments (East Pool, Middle Pool and West Pool) are open to bank fishing only. All refuge waters, ponds, canals and bays, are closed to boating from October 16 through March 14 each year.
- Public deer hunts (by permit only) are conducted during the fall months (September-December).
- Special "Open Roads Day" events are held throughout the year where visitors may drive the dike and trail system around the refuge impoundments to view wildlife. These are publicized in advance.

Can I hunt waterfowl on Mackay Island NWR?

MacKay Island NWR is closed to waterfowl hunting. The refuge was established as a wintering area, primarily for Greater snow geese, waterfowl and other migratory birds.

Access to most of the refuge is closed from October 16 through March 14 to reduce the disturbance to the wintering waterfowl. Currituck Sound, which surrounds the refuge, is heavily hunted. By eliminating waterfowl hunting on the refuge, a sanctuary area is provided for the birds.