

FISHING BAY WATER TRAIL

A Wildlife Adventure

Fishing Bay WMA is for Wildlife Lovers

Welcome to the Fishing Bay Wildlife Management Area (WMA), the largest parcel of publicly owned tidal wetlands in Maryland. Situated adjacent to the Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge on the lower Eastern Shore, Fishing Bay's 28,500 acres offer boaters and paddlers a remote wilderness experience. Miles of meandering creeks, marsh grass habitats, secluded ponds and islands of loblolly pine have inspired some to refer to Fishing Bay as *Maryland's Everglades*. These tidal wetlands are rich in wildlife, from the common to the exotic and rare, promising a unique wildlife viewing experience.

The Fishing Bay WMA is managed by the Maryland Department of Natural Resources (MD DNR) Wildlife and Heritage Division to conserve wildlife and provide for wildlife-dependent recreation. Funds used to manage the area are derived from the sale of hunting licenses and equipment and are dedicated to wildlife purposes only. The result has been the restoration and conservation of a nearly pristine salt marsh habitat that supports wildlife species characteristic of the lower Eastern Shore of the Chesapeake Bay.

The Marsh

At the border between land and water is a special place where two ecosystems collide to produce magical results. This is the salt marsh, once the disdain of humans, but now recognized for its incredible productivity and critical role in maintaining the health of the Chesapeake Bay. Here wildlife flourishes. It is not the place for someone in a hurry or anxious to get to the next destination. The marsh's special qualities are only appreciated with time, patience and a willingness to meander.

Plants are the sustaining force of the marsh. They hold together the jelly-like soils of the marsh and provide the basis for an intricate food web. Without these plants, the marsh and the life it supports would not exist.

Grass-like bulrushes and cordgrass dominate the marsh plant community and are readily visible along the Fishing Bay water trails. Though they vary in height and form, they all have one thing in common - they are able to withstand the salty conditions common to tidal areas in this part of the Bay. The paddler can easily see that even small changes in elevation and soil moisture can result in different plant communities in this fragile ecosystem.

Winged Residents of the Marsh

Birds are the most visible of Fishing Bay's wildlife. Bald eagles and ospreys fish the open waters while ducks and geese enjoy the lush wetland plants. Make sure you bring your binoculars and field guide to identify the many birds you are likely to see and hear!

Herons, Egrets and Ibises

From the huge great blue heron to the diminutive green heron, these long-legged waders are characteristic of the marsh. The largest member of the tribe, the great blue heron, is common year-round, but its wariness makes a close view difficult. Often it will flush up ahead, staying tantalizing out of reach. Although primarily a fish-eater (like all the birds in this group), it has been known to catch rodents and rails during the harder times of winter. In summer, look for the smaller green heron as it suddenly appears crossing the river or darting into the marsh. The all-white plumaged egrets, including the larger, and more hardy great egret and the smaller snowy, can be seen. Egrets can be found in the Fishing Bay marshes in summer as they travel from their breeding colonies on islands in the Chesapeake Bay.

Raptors

The marsh supports large populations of marsh mice. In turn, this attracts many birds of prey, or raptors. For example, rough-legged hawks and short-eared owls that nest in the high arctic tundra, winter in the Fishing Bay marshes. Keep a look out for hawks throughout the day, and for owls at dawn, dusk and night. Year-round, barn owls feed on the same rodents, but this very nocturnal species is unlikely to be seen.

Perhaps the most characteristic raptor of the marsh is the northern harrier, formerly known as the marsh hawk. This graceful bird of prey flies back and forth, low over the marsh on slightly up-bowed wings, hoping to surprise a mouse or small bird. The males are a pearly gray above and white below, with a white rump patch. The females and young share the white rump, but otherwise are tawny brown. Fishing Bay is one of the few areas in Maryland where harriers breed.

At various points along Island Creek you will see large boxes erected in the marsh by MD DNR's Wildlife and Heritage Division for use by nesting barn owls. MD DNR biologists check these boxes annually and monitor their use by owls and other species. The number of young are counted, hatching dates estimated and bird's legs banded for future identification before being carefully returned to the box. From 1989 to 2000, over 1,000 barn owls were banded via this nesting box project.

Rails

The ultimate inhabitant of the marsh, rails are rarely seen. Rather, these short-winged cousins to the crane are usually recorded only by their loud calls. Most active at dawn and dusk during the summer breeding season, the marsh comes alive with the squawks of at least four species - clapper, king, Virginia and black.

Although the Virginia is the most commonly observed rail, Fishing Bay is famous for its population of tiny, mouse-sized black rails. Search the salt-meadow hay along Island Creek, and listen for the repetitive song of the male. Its song, *kee-kee-do, kee-kee-do*, can often be heard from late-April through June between 11 p.m. and 2 a.m. Birders throughout the United States visit Fishing Bay's marshes along Elliott's Island Road to record a black rail for their "life list." Black rails are an endangered species, so please be careful not to disturb them.

Waterfowl

Collectively, Fishing Bay WMA and adjacent Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge support one of the most diverse waterfowl populations in Maryland. Most visible to the paddler will be Canada geese and puddle ducks such as black ducks, mallards, green-winged and blue-winged teal, widgeon, gadwalls, pintails, wood ducks and shovelers. Paddlers venturing out onto Fishing Bay itself may see divers like canvasbacks, scaup, goldeneyes and buffleheads. Even oldsquaws and scoters, ducks typically restricted to large open water habitats, can occasionally be seen in Fishing Bay.

Fish and Other Aquatic Life

Fishing Bay is not just a home for birds, the waters of the Transquaking River and Island Creek support good fish populations too. Bring your rod and reel to try your luck. Those fishing should expect to catch a variety of estuarine and freshwater species such as: largemouth bass, striped bass (rockfish), white perch, yellow perch, black crappie, catfish, carp, and pumpkinseed sunfish. Be sure to have a MD Chesapeake Bay Sport Fishing License in possession while fishing.

Mammals of the Marsh

The cautious paddler has a good chance of seeing some of the mammals that frequent the Fishing Bay marshes. Perhaps the most familiar is the white-tailed deer, common along the edges of the marsh. Less familiar is the diminutive sika deer. This small relative of the elk is native to Japan and was introduced into the marshes of Dorchester County in the early 1900s. Paddlers may be treated to the eerie, scream-like "bugle" of mating bucks starting in mid to late October.

The most visible mammals are the semi-aquatic muskrats and nutrias. Both species swim readily, usually leaving a V-shaped wake with just their heads skimming the top of the water. Nutrias are native to South America and were released into the marshes of Dorchester County in the 1930s. As with many introduced species, nutrias have reached unnaturally high populations in Dorchester County and are inflicting serious damage to marsh ecosystems due to their habit of feeding extensively on the roots of marsh plants.

On rare occasions, paddlers may chance upon a river otter, or even an otter family group. Otters are renown for their antics and may entertain the lucky paddler with their swimming skills. Though common in the Fishing Bay wetlands, otters are secretive and only rarely seen.

Wildlife Viewing Ethics

- ◆ View wild animals from an appropriate distance.
- ◆ Stay clear of nests, dens and rookeries.
- ◆ Do not touch or feed wild animals.
- ◆ Do not use calls or whistles, or try to rouse animals in any way.
- ◆ Limit your stay to minimize stress on the animals.
- ◆ Do not allow pets to interfere with wild animals.
- ◆ Do not surround a wild animal with a group of people.

Fire as a Management Tool

The marshes surrounding Fishing Bay are the largest in Maryland and are dynamic, ever-changing habitats. Factors such as erosion, sea level rise and land subsidence all interact to change the shape of the landscape. Historically, wildfires were one of the many natural factors influencing the marsh ecosystem. Whether ignited by Native Americans to make it easier to hunt game and trap, or lightning, fire occurred with some regularity. After exhaustive research, the Maryland Department of Natural Resources and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service staff at neighboring Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge have agreed to keep fire as part of the ecology of the Fishing Bay marshes through the use of carefully controlled burns. Paddlers need to be on the lookout for marsh fires during the months of January through early March.

Visitors in early spring may see vast areas of burned marsh and the vigorous, bright green growth that follows this natural phenomenon. This is a good time to paddle the Fishing Bay trail as many of the wildlife species present flock to the recently burned areas and are more readily seen.

Guides and Outfitters

The Department of Natural Resources has partnership agreements with several outfitters who provide complete equipment rental and/or guide services. Contact the DNR Nature Tourism Coordinator for more information at 410-968-1565, or visit the Nature Tourism Program on the web: www.dnr.state.md.us/outdooradventures. Also, information may be obtained from the Dorchester County Department of Tourism at (410) 228-1000 or on the web at www.tourdorchester.org.

Camping

Camping is available in Fishing Bay for education groups and Nause-Waiwash tribe members only. Contact the MD DNR wildlife office at 410-376-3236 for information and a permit. Overnight accommodations are available nearby, including a private campground, hotel, and bed & breakfast lodging. Contact the Dorchester County Department of Tourism at (410) 228-1000, visit them on the web at www.tourdorchester.org, or stop by the Visitor Center at Sailwinds Park.

Hunting

Fishing Bay is a popular area for an age-old tradition on the Chesapeake Bay, waterfowl hunting. Water trail users should be mindful of the hunting seasons, which typically occur from mid-September through mid-January. Deer hunting also occurs at Fishing Bay WMA. This activity peaks in November and December and most commonly occurs on the higher portions of the area.

Although these hunting seasons should not preclude a trip almost all hunting takes place in the quieter backwaters and isolated marsh ponds), water trail users should take precautions for increased boat traffic on the waterways, particularly at dawn and dusk. For more information, contact the MD DNR wildlife office at 410-376-3236 or visit the MD DNR website at: www.dnr.state.md.us.

Leave No Trace Ethics

Fishing Bay Wildlife Management Area is a sensitive ecosystem. Please be sure that you understand and practice the following stewardship principles of Leave No Trace:

- Plan ahead and prepare.
- Travel on durable surfaces.
- Dispose of waste properly.
- Leave what you find.
- Respect wildlife.
- Be considerate of other visitors.



For more information visit the Leave No Trace, Inc. website: www.lnt.org or contact them at: 1-800-332-4100.

Nearby Natural Resource Attractions

Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge

Established in 1933 as a refuge for migratory birds, Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge includes more than 25,000 acres. It is composed mainly of rich tidal marsh along with freshwater ponds, mixed evergreen and deciduous forests, and managed impoundments seasonally flooded for waterfowl use. The bald eagle and endangered Delmarva fox squirrel find the woods and marsh lands a haven. For additional information contact: Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge, 2145 Key Wallace Drive, Cambridge, Maryland 21613. Tel. (410) 228-2677, Fax: (410) 228-3261, e-mail: RSRW_BWNWR@mail.fws.gov.

LeCompte Wildlife Management Area

These 500 acres of mature oak and loblolly pine forests were set aside to provide a refuge for the native Delmarva fox squirrel, designated an endangered species in 1967. This WMA is home to numerous wildlife species, including the wild turkey. Hunting is available, including a hunting area for the physically challenged. For additional information contact the MD DNR wildlife office at (410) 376-3236.

Taylor's Island Wildlife Management Area

Tidal marshes with small loblolly pine and cedar forest "islands" make up these 1,100 acres along the Chesapeake Bay. Boat ramps are nearby for water access. Hunting and fishing are also available. For additional information, contact the MD DNR wildlife office at (410) 376-3236.

For More Information

The Dorchester County Dept. of Tourism
2 Rose Hill Place
Cambridge, MD 21613
Tel. (410) 228-1000, Fax: (410) 221-6545
E-mail: info@tourdorchester.org
Or visit www.tourdorchester.org

Maryland Department of Natural Resources Eastern Regional Wildlife and Heritage Office

201 Baptist Street, Suite 22
Salisbury, MD 21801
Tel. (410) 543-6595
Or visit www.dnr.state.md.us

The Maryland Greenways Commission

coordinates the creation of a statewide system of greenways and water trails.

580 Taylor Ave., E-2
Annapolis, MD 21401
Tel. (410) 260-8780, Fax: (410) 260-8779
Or visit www.dnr.state.md.us/greenways

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The facilities and services of the Department of Natural Resources are available to all without regard to race, color, religion, sex, age, national origin, physical or mental disability. TTY # 1-800-735-2258 or 711

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A PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN
MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES
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