The Native Plant Garden

The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 has as its mission statement the following: “The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System is to administer a national network of lands and waters for conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans.”

That is a major undertaking. Almost everyone that visits Bombay Hook comes to see the waterfowl and probably hopes to see some deer or, perhaps a red fox. But there is another major component to see and study at the refuge that ties in with the statement quoted above. That is the flora, or plant life. The refuge, in addition to the 13,000 acres of salt marsh, also comprises some 1,100 acres of cropland and close to 600 acres of woodlands. If one walks the trails in the Refuge you will see many plants, some native and some that are invasive. To assist in increasing the Refuge experience for the visitor, a native plant garden was started a couple of years ago. Some of the native plants found on the Refuge are planted here with appropriate labels. To take care of the garden and to plan for its future a garden committee, made up of members of the Friends and the staff, has been formed. The committee has been meeting monthly since late fall. The group has been formulating long range plans for the future of the garden, as well as determining what needs to be done immediately and setting up a schedule to insure that things take place in a timely manner. Several items that have been discussed or are under discussion are: making a layout sketch of the garden, updating the garden brochure, eradicating the Japanese stilt grass (an annual plant) in an environmentally friendly manner, and how, and with what material, to edge the garden. A significant part of the Refuge mission is education. To help further this mission the possibility of having a presentation by a master gardener at the Spring Festival (in May) has also been discussed.

So, the next time that you visit the Refuge, walk out behind the Visitor Center and take a look at the native plant garden. It is still in its infancy but it is certain to expand over the years. If you want to know what a groundsel bush looks like, then the native plant garden is the place to see one. Then when you walk the Boardwalk Trail, for instance, you will recognize it and your Refuge experience will be that much more complete.
You are invited to come in and see our new display area! It has almost doubled the space available to show items for sale, and we are very pleased the management permitted this.

We have new shirts for spring and feel you will like them very much. If you are a “tote bag person” come and see the one with the horseshoe crab on it - “A Delaware Dinosaur”.

There is a nice selection of T-shirts for kids, so come on, grandparents, and stock up for your favorite grandkids.

We hope to see you in our store soon and are looking forward to supplying all your gift needs for family and friends.

JUST ARRIVED!
The 5th edition of Peterson Field Guides - Birds of Eastern and Central North America

COME AND VISIT OUR STORE!!!!

***

Bird Notes
by: Frank Rawling

The Winter Season

Hello again. Here are the bird sightings for the winter months. Did I say winter? According to the national weather bureau the months of December, January and February were about 6 degrees above normal on average. Why, it felt like late fall! And, of course, precipitation was way below normal. To top it off we only had one really measurable snowfall. Well, what did this unusual weather bring us in the form of birds? We may not have had very much snow but did have a Snowy owl!

December

December 1 brought us the aforementioned Snowy owl. The immature bird took up residence at Bear Swamp pool and stayed around for the whole month, although it did disappear off and on for a few days. Nevertheless many visitors to the Refuge had the opportunity to look at this beautiful vagrant from the high arctic. On the 2nd Greater yellowlegs, Avocets and Black bellied plovers were seen at Raymond Pool. A Peregrine falcon was also seen at Bear Swamp pool on the 2nd. The Great white heron, reported on in the last Bird Notes column was seen again at Taylor’s Gut near the Woodland Beach observation tower on the 3rd and also on the 4th. Also seen on the 4th Gadwalls at Finis Pool, a Great egret and 17 Tundra swans at Shearness, a Bald eagle and the Snowy owl at Bear Swamp, a Red-breasted merganser on the bay side of Shearness, a Red-shouldered hawk and several Northern harriers. In addition, the field next to the Visitor Center had 20 or more American pipits and a fortunate couple of visitors saw a Fox sparrow on the trail at Bear Swamp. Bear Swamp also was the location for a Carolina wren, Hairy woodpecker, and Pied-billed grebe seen on the 5th. On the 6th along the Bear Swamp trail both a Golden-crowned and a Ruby-crowned kinglet were seen. No less than 5 Pine warblers were seen at the Parson Point parking area on the 9th. Northern shovelers, Northern pintails and Buffleheads were seen on the 22nd. The annual Bombay Hook Christmas Count was held on the 23rd. A Ross’s goose and a small race of Canada goose were seen. Perhaps the most unusual bird seen on the Christmas count was a Prairie warbler, seen in the hedgerow at the entrance gate. A total of 135 species were seen in the count circle. The Snow goose total was 71,363 and the Canada goose total was 14,571. The day after the Christmas Count a White-fronted goose was found at Bear Swamp. Also on the 24th White-crowned sparrows were seen at the Visitor Center along with Savannah sparrows. Two American widgeons were seen in the salt marsh at Shearness. On the 27th a Great
horned owl was seen on the Parson Point trail. The Snowy owl was still at Bear Swamp on the 30th and 31st. In addition, Horned larks were also seen at Bear Swamp on the 31st. A very rare migrant, a Western kingbird, put in an appearance on the 31st at Cedar Swamp Wildlife Management Area north of the Refuge along Route 9. White-crowned sparrows were also seen in the hedges in front of the Visitor Center on the 31st.

January

The month began with 2 Common snipe seen at Bear Swamp on the 2nd. This was followed on the 4th with a sighting at Bear Swamp of a Yellow-bellied sapsucker. A Virginia rail was seen on the 5th at Bear Swamp. On the 6th a Bald eagle was seen at Shearness. Also on the 6th a Great horned owl was seen at Bear Swamp. The 6th was a good day for owls for a Barred owl was seen in the woods on the south side of the Finis dike. Also 50 American pipits were observed at the turnaround at the Allee House. Finis Road, always a good spot for landbirding, played host to Hairy woodpecker, Golden-crowned kinglets, and American goldfinch on the 6th. The same day saw a White-breasted nuthatch in the native plant garden at the Visitor Center. On January 8, 4 Short-eared owls were seen at Raymond Pool. On the 8th the second rarity of the season, a Dusky flycatcher, put in an appearance at Cedar Swamp WMA. This was a first for Delaware, I believe. This bird, one of the Empidonax species, is a western species. The id. was confirmed by trapping the bird in a mist net and measuring it. On the 10th the Snowy Owl was spotted at Shearness Pool. Another Snowy owl was seen along Port Mahon Road in Little Creek on the 11th. Over 15 Hooded mergansers were seen at Bear Swamp on the 15th. The same day an American woodcock seen in the wooded area near the Bear Swamp observation tower. Bear Swamp also played host to 2 Ring-necked ducks on the 15th as well as 20 Common mergansers. On the 21st, the flock of Common mergansers had risen to 51 and the Hooded mergansers had increased to 22. A Savannah sparrow was at the entrance to the Refuge on the 26th. A King rail was seen along the Boardwalk Trail on both the 26th and the 27th. An American bittern was seen near Shearness Pool on the 27th. On the 29th a Lapland longspur was seen along Catanza Road. This road is just beyond the old octagonal schoolhouse between Bombay Hook and Little Creek. The month ended with a sighting of 3 White-fronted geese and 2 Ross's geese at Raymond Pool.

February

A flock of American pipits opened up the month in the field next to the Visitor Center. 6 American avocets were at Raymond on the 1st. Also on the 1st a raft of 13 males and 5 female Canvasbacks were at Shearness Pool. On the 2nd some Bobwhites were seen along Finis Road. On the 3rd 2 Black-crowned night herons were seen at Bear Swamp. An adult Lesser black-backed gull was observed at Bear Swamp on the 8th. And on the 9th, a Grey catbird was at Raymond Pool. The same day a flock of 100 plus American pipits were seen at the Allee House. On the 10th an adult Bald eagle was seen carrying nesting material in the Finis Pool area. Also on the 10th there were 2 pair of Hooded mergansers at Shearness Pool. On the bay side of Shearness were 10 plus Green-winged teal. The Dusky flycatcher was still in residence at Cedar Swamp WMA at mid-month. On the 15th 30 Common mergansers were at the north end of Bear Swamp. They were joined by some Hooded mergansers on the 16th. The 21st saw a Pied-billed grebe at the north end of Bear Swamp. A Barred owl was spotted near the Shearness tower on the 24th. And on the 25th a Great horned owl was seen near a nest. This was the same location where it was spotted last year. That's it for this season.

CHEERS AND GOOD BIRDING!

****
Spring is the season when reptiles and amphibians come out of hibernation. Reptiles include snakes, lizards, turtles, alligators and crocodile. The first three orders are represented at Bombay Hook. Reptiles have scales or plates, and their toes have claws.

The most frequently observed turtles at Bombay Hook are snapping. Eastern painted and Northern Diamondback terrapin. The Eastern painted turtle frequents the freshwater impoundments. The Northern Diamondback terrapin lives in the brackish and salt marshes, and the common snapping turtle can be seen in fresh and brackish wetland habitats, though it prefers freshwater.

June is the main month to observe these three turtle species, for it is at this time that they lay their eggs on trails and also on the auto tour route. Adult turtles do not stay with their eggs. Eggs are buried and when the young hatch they must find their own way. Snapping turtles lay spherical eggs in a flask-shaped cavity. Incubation takes 9-18 weeks. Snappers eat invertebrates, fish, birds, small mammals and aquatic plants. Painted turtles leave the freshwater areas and lay their elliptical eggs in trails, particularly Parson Point. Incubation averages 10-11 weeks. This is a colorful turtle with yellow plastron aligned scutes on the carapace and red and yellow stripes on the neck, legs and tail. It can often be seen basking in the sun in the freshwater impoundments, particularly Finis. The Diamondback Terrapin comes up from the saltmarsh to lay its eggs on the auto tour route. Its carapace has a pattern like the lines on a contour map, and has keeled scutes. The head and neck are peppered gray. The Diamondback lays pinkish white leathery eggs. Incubation is 9-15 weeks. They also nest out in the saltmarsh flats, not visible to the general public, and they eat marine snails, clams and worms.

Other less frequently seen turtles on the refuge are the Eastern box, Eastern mud, red-bellied, spotted and stinkpot.

Only two species of lizards have been seen on the refuge, the five-lined skink and the Northern fence lizard. Sightings of both are rare.

There are no poisonous snakes at Bombay Hook. The most commonly seen snake is the Northern Water Snake which lives in the ponds and marshes, both fresh and salt. They are frequently seen basking on rocks, banks, or in the road. They eat frogs, fish and crustaceans. Their body is a grayish brown with reddish bands, but becomes darkened with age. Other commonly seen snakes are the black rat snake, garter snake and ribbon snake. The Eastern garter snake has a side stripe on the second and third scale rows, with dark spots present between stripes. The Eastern ribbon snake is similar but has three bright stripes, involving the third and fourth scale rows. The black rat snake is black on top and white underneath, young are blotched. It is a powerful constrictor, and is a skillful climber, often ascending trees and rafters in search of birds, eggs, and mice.

Some of the less frequently seen snakes are ringneck, Northern black racer, rough green, Eastern kingsnake and Eastern worm snake.

The best time to observe reptiles is in the spring and early summer. On hot summer days reptiles estivate (go in the shade), the opposite of hibernate, which they do during the late fall and winter. Reptiles can still be seen in the early fall before the hard frost hits.

It takes a quiet and patient observer to spot reptiles. You may also find them by turning over logs or digging through the leaf litter. When using this technique, be sure to cover holes and return logs to their original position. Also, be careful when driving through the refuge in June, so as not to run over nesting turtles. Enjoy your search for these fascinating creatures.

Amphibians will appear in the next newsletter

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>April 20, 2002</td>
<td><strong>Bombay Hook NWR Environmental Education Workshop</strong>&lt;br&gt;Meet at Bombay Hook Visitor Center. 2nd day of workshop will be at the Shorebird &amp; Horseshoe Crab Festival on May 18, 2002. Training for Horseshoe Crab Surveys will be included.</td>
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<tr>
<td>April 20, 2002</td>
<td><strong>Friends of Bombay Hook Highway Clean-up</strong>&lt;br&gt;Bombay Hook Visitor Center.</td>
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<tr>
<td>April 27, 2002</td>
<td><strong>Early Spring Migrants Bird Walk at Bombay Hook</strong>&lt;br&gt;with Frank Rawling and Ken Liehr. Meet at the Visitor Center.</td>
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<tr>
<td>May 5, 2002</td>
<td><strong>Friends of Bombay Hook Birding Trip to White Clay Creek State Park.</strong>&lt;br&gt;Leave from Bombay Hook at 7:00 a.m. or meet at White Clay Creek Park at 8:00 a.m.&lt;br&gt;Call to register 302-653-6872.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May and June</td>
<td><strong>Horseshoe Crab Survey Dates. Call Refuge to register.</strong>&lt;br&gt;Surveys will be on May 10, 12, 14, 24, 26 and 28 and June 8, 10, 12, 22, 24, and 26, 2002 at Pickering Beach.</td>
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<tr>
<td>May 11, 2002</td>
<td><strong>Spring Bird Count</strong>&lt;br&gt;Meet at Bombay Hook Visitor Center.</td>
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<tr>
<td>May 11, 2002</td>
<td><strong>Free to the First State</strong> - Admission to the Refuge is free for all Delawareans.</td>
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<tr>
<td>May 18, 2002</td>
<td><strong>Shorebird &amp; Horseshoe Crab Festival</strong>&lt;br&gt;Call for schedule of events.</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 8, 2001</td>
<td><strong>Friends of Bombay Hook, Inc. Annual Board Meeting</strong>&lt;br&gt;Details to follow.</td>
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Check Bombay Hook's website for updates: [http://bombayhook.fws.gov](http://bombayhook.fws.gov)
Shorebird and Horseshoe Crab Festival
Bombay Hook National Wildlife Refuge
May 18, 2002
8:00 am - 7:00 pm

Schedule of Events - Tentative

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8:00 a.m. - 10:00 a.m.</td>
<td>Songbird Birding Tour - Joel Citron</td>
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<tr>
<td>9:00 a.m. - 9:30 a.m.</td>
<td>Film on Shorebirds and Horseshoe Crabs</td>
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<tr>
<td>10:00 a.m. - 10:30 a.m.</td>
<td>Welcome by Terry Villanueva and a Film on the National Wildlife Refuge Centennial Celebration</td>
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<tr>
<td>10:00 a.m. - 11:30 a.m.</td>
<td>Plant Walk - Mushrooms - Mike Maciarello</td>
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<tr>
<td>10:30 a.m. - 12 noon</td>
<td>Refuge Management Tour - Frank Rawling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:00 a.m. - 12 noon</td>
<td>Mammal Program - Dawn Failing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:00 noon - 1:00 p.m.</td>
<td>Native Plant Garden Presentation - Julia Lynch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:00 noon - 2:00 p.m.</td>
<td>Horseshoe Crab Touch Tank</td>
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<tr>
<td>1:00 p.m. - 2:30 p.m.</td>
<td>Wildflower Walk - Susan Yost</td>
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<tr>
<td>1:00 p.m. - 4 p.m.</td>
<td>Tours of the Historic Allee House</td>
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<td>2:00 p.m. - 3:00 p.m.</td>
<td>Shorebirds and Migration - Bill Stott</td>
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<tr>
<td>2:00 p.m. - 3:00 p.m.</td>
<td>Children's Games, Crafts and Puppet Show</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3:00 p.m. - 5:00 p.m.</td>
<td>Shorebird Birding Tour - Frank Rawling</td>
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<tr>
<td>3:00 p.m. &amp; 4:00 p.m.</td>
<td>Salt Marsh Boat Trips - Frank Smith. Call to Register.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3:00 p.m. - 4:00 p.m.</td>
<td>Live Amphibians and Reptiles - Mick McLaughlin &amp; Jim White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4:00 p.m. - 5:00 p.m.</td>
<td>Horseshoe Crab Presentation - Stew Michels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5:00 p.m. - 7:00 p.m.</td>
<td>Trip to Pickering Beach to see Horseshoe Crabs-Stew Michels</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All Day

Cutler Camera - Scopes and Binoculars
Hand painted ornaments by Marcia Poling
Photography Exhibits by Earl West and Jamie Richie
First State Webfooters Walking Club 10 K Walk
Wally's Bar-be-cue available from 11:00 a.m. - 3:30 p.m.
Tri-State Bird Rescue
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For Information call:
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2591 Whitehall Neck Road
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(302)653-6872
The Refuge Corner  
by: Terry Villanueva

Managing Grasslands Habitats for Birds

Bombay Hook National Wildlife Refuge is participating in a regional study by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on providing and managing grassland habitats for birds. This study will determine grassland bird use of fields established through the traditional method of planting native warm season grasses such as big bluestem or switchgrass compared to shorter, non-native cool season grassland vegetation such as fescue and orchard grass.

This study was initiated because of nationwide declines of birds that are dependent on open habitats for nesting over the last 30 years. These birds are often referred to as grassland obligate breeding birds because they will only breed in these types of habitats. Seven formerly common grassland birds are each listed as endangered or threatened in at least one state in the Northeast Region: Upland Sandpiper (*Bartramia longicauda*), Horned Lark (*Eremophila alpestris*), Vesper Sparrow (*Pooecetes gramineus*), Savannah Sparrow (*Passerculus sandwichensis*), Grasshopper Sparrow (*Ammodramus savannarum*), Henslow’s Sparrow (*Ammodramus henslowii*), and Bobolink (*Dolichonyx oryzivorus*). Information on use of these fields by these species will be an important component of this study.

Historically, these birds used naturally open areas, such as eastern prairies, savannas, glades, beaver meadows, xeric scrublands, bogs, and pine and oak barrens. After European settlement resulted in extensive land clearing, these birds also used agricultural lands such as pastures, hayfields, and old fields. During the latter half of the twentieth century agricultural lands have been abandoned to woody cover, or are more intensively managed for crops. Naturally open habitats have declined due to development or suppression of natural disturbances such as fire.

Bombay Hook has established several fields with warm season grasses in an effort to provide grassland habitat. Most of these were fields that historically have not been very productive for cropland management. Last year, we allowed two fields of 30 acres each to go fallow. One is near the Allee House and the other is outside the entrance gate on the north side of Whitehall Neck Road. The warm season grassland field at the corner of Route 9 and Dutch Neck Road is being used for comparison. One fallow field will be mowed and one prescribed burned to compare the response by the vegetation and bird use. Aggressive weed control to prevent the spread of Canada thistle and Johnson grass is also an important component of the study.

As a part of this study, Bombay Hook recently completed the first prescribed burn at the Refuge since 2000. The 20 acre warm season grass field at the corner of Route 9 and Dutch Neck Road and a 30 acre fallow field across the Allee House were burned on March 8th. The burn was the culmination of a great deal of work and planning and cooperative work with refuge partners and other nearby refuges. The fire crew from Great Dismal Swamp provided their expertise in managing the prescribed burn operations. Bombay Hook’s own Frank Smith and Arthur Straughn were on the fire line operating the refuge’s pumper truck. The Leipsic Volunteer Fire Company, Delaware State Forest Fire Service, and Prime Hook provided valuable support in the form of crew and equipment. Laura Mitchell, a Regional Biologist, also assisted on the burn and monitored the burn itself and its impact on the vegetation.

Refuge Biologist Frank Smith was instrumental in get-
ting the refuge Fire Management Plan and Prescribed Burn Plan completed so that we could carefully plan and conduct the burn to desired results. The time of year, weather, forecasted weather, wind, humidity and fuel moisture are part of the components of the prescription of the fire.

Surveys will be conducted in these fields to listen for singing males during the breeding season. Information is also collected on the vegetation that becomes established in these areas including vegetation structure and density. Last year, baseline data was conducted on bird use and vegetation. Surveys will be continued to determine responses to prescribed burning and mowing.

Because the grassland study is being conducted on refuges throughout the Region, information will be gathered that considers differences in geographic location such as more northern or mid-Atlantic sites and inland versus coastal sites. This study will provide valuable information for future management of grasslands in the Northeast to improve their value for use by grassland breeding birds.

The project is funded by USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service and supported by the U.S. Geological Survey. Thanks to Laura Mitchell, Regional Biologist, located at Prime Hook NWR, who is coordinating this project and provided valuable information for this column.

Water Control Structure Rehab
by: Frank Smith
Refuge Biologist

Visitors to the refuge during the latter part of February or early March may have noticed construction equipment near the water control structures at Raymond and Shearness Pools. Through the generous funding of Ducks Unlimited significant improvements were made to the interior bays of the structures. Aluminum liners were fitted into slots enabling us to more easily and safely manipulate water levels within the impoundments. In addition, new devices were installed to impede the movement of carp from the saltmarsh into the impoundments during spawning since these exotic fish can play havoc with desirable vegetation growing in these units. New aluminum decking was also installed which replaced existing wooden decking. These improvements should better enable us to provide optimal wildlife habitat within the managed wetlands.

CHECK IT OUT!

Bombay Hook’s website is up and running.
The address is:
http://bombayhook.fws.gov

The March/April 2002 issue of Wildbird Magazine has an article on Bombay Hook titled, “Get Hooked!” When you come to the Visitor Center ask to see a copy of the article.

WANTED!!!!

Do You Have What it Takes to be a Webmaster?

The Friends of Bombay Hook need a webmaster to set up and manage our new website.

If you have the time and talent please contact Tina Watson at Friends of Bombay Hook (302) 653-6872.
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