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#### Virginia Marshbird Survey Annual Report: 2022

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## VIRGINIA MARSHBIRD SURVEY

## ANNUAL REPORT: 2022



**THE CENTER FOR CONSERVATION BIOLOGY WILLIAM & MARY**

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#### **Project Partners:**

Virginia Institute for Marine Resources The Center for Conservation Biology Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation The Nature Conservancy

**Front Cover Image:** Point Count location along the Deep Creek Route within a high marsh plant community that has persisted since before 1937. Photograph by Chance Hines.



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### <span id="page-4-0"></span>**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Over the past thirty years many marsh-obligate birds have experienced catastrophic declines along the Atlantic Coast. The presumptive cause for these declines appears to be ongoing sea-level rise and associated drops in key demographic parameters related to repeated inundation. One of the natural processes believed to mitigate sea-level induced habitat loss is the establishment of new marsh area upslope of existing marshes as inundation reaches higher elevations. Although this process is believed to maintain some marsh function within suitable landscapes, the extent to which marsh migration compensates for the wildlife value of existing marshes remains unclear. We surveyed the breeding marsh-bird community within newly created (via marsh migration) and reference marshes to compare marsh-obligate bird occupancy patterns. We found that whether marshes were established before or after 1937 for bayside marshes and 1949 for seaside marshes was important in predicted occupancy for six of eight species with sufficient data. Marshes that were more recently created were negatively associated with occupancy for all six of those species but the relationship was significant for only two species, willet and seaside sparrow. We plan to continue surveying the same marsh network in 2023 as well as more difficult to access points further from the mainland edge to better understand how recent marsh creation affects occupancy patterns.

### <span id="page-5-0"></span>**BACKGROUND**

#### <span id="page-5-1"></span>**Context**

The Chesapeake Bay is the largest estuary in North America and a variety of wildlife depend upon the extensive system of tidal marshes associated with the Bay for habitat (Stevenson et al 1985). Included among animals that use saltmarshes in the Chesapeake Bay are several species of birds adapted to tidal life that depend on marshes for nesting (i.e. marsh-obligates, Greenberg and Droege 1990, Greenberg and Maldonado 2006). Marsh-obligate species have experienced catastrophic declines along the Atlantic Coast over the last 30 years, including some areas of the Chesapeake Bay (Watts in review). Examples include the eastern black rail (*Laterallus jamaicensis jamaicensis)* and the saltmarsh sparrow (*Ammospiza caudacuta)*. Eastern black rails have experienced both a significant range contraction and a steep reduction in population size throughout their remaining range (ACJV 2020a).The form is now listed as federally threatened and is endangered in six states (including Virginia) along the Atlantic Coast. Without heroic intervention, the saltmarsh sparrow has been projected to go extinct during the 21<sup>st</sup> century and has been proposed for federal listing (ACJV 2020b).

The presumptive cause for the decline in salt marsh-nesting birds is ongoing sea-level rise and associated drops in key demographic parameters related to repeated inundation. One of the natural processes believed to mitigate sea-level induced habitat loss is the establishment of new marsh area upslope of existing marshes as inundation reaches higher elevations. Although this process is believed to maintain some marsh function within suitable landscapes, the extent to which marsh migration compensates for the wildlife value of existing marshes remains unclear.

Our overarching objectives are to 1) evaluate newly created marsh areas as habitat for the obligate breeding bird community and 2) compare the newly established community to reference bird communities within historic marshes.

### <span id="page-5-2"></span>**METHODS**

#### <span id="page-5-3"></span>**Survey Network**

The focal area for the effort is the northern portion of Virginia's Eastern Shore (Figure 1) and includes Doe Creek Wildlife Management Area (WMA, Figure 2), Saxis WMA (Figure 2), and Mutton Hunk Fen Natural Area Preserve (Figure 3). Our aim was to compare marshes that had recently converted from upland to those that had existed for longer periods of time so we compared aerial photography from 1937 for the bayside of the eastern shore and 1949 for the seaside to aerial photography from 2021 using the VIMS shoreline change viewer (Hardaway et al. 2020). We identified high and low marsh patches that had converted from forest or agriculture as well as high marsh patches that converted to low marsh, high marsh patches that persisted since

before the imagery, and low marsh patches that persisted since before the imagery. We also inspected each patch for the presence of historic agriculture use including abandoned fence lines and irrigation ditches.

**Figure 1. Survey points in Accomack County, Virginia.**











#### <span id="page-9-0"></span>**Survey Protocol**

Bird Surveys – Surveys were conducted between sunrise and four hours after sunrise between April 15 and July 15. We conducted four rounds of surveys at each point with ≥10 days between surveys at each point. The first two survey periods and second two survey periods were conducted on either side of 10 June. We recorded environmental variables at each point that may have influenced detection including date (ordinal day of year), wind speed (Beaufort Wind Scale), and sky conditions (scale 1:5, clear, partly cloudy, cloudy, fog, drizzle). Surveys consisted of 5 minutes of silence followed by five 1-minute tracks of bird calls from each of black rail, Virginia rail, king rail, clapper rail and saltmarsh sparrow. We recorded the number of birds observed within three distance bands (0-50 m, 51-100 m, and >100 m) for each species heard or seen.

Vegetation Surveys – We surveyed vegetation between 22 June and 24 July. We estimated the percentage of upland, saltmarsh-terrestrial border, high marsh, low marsh, and open water habitats within 50 m of the survey point. We also estimated the percentage of habitat each plant species composed as well as the number of large living trees (>2 m high), short living trees (<2 m high), and snags within 50 m of the survey point.

#### <span id="page-9-1"></span>**Statistical Analyses**

We estimated occupancy for 11 marsh-obligate species including American black duck (*Anas rubripes*), clapper rail (*Rallus crepitans*), king rail (*Rallus elegans*), Virginia rail (*Rallus limicola*), least bittern (*Ixobrychus exilis*), marsh wren (*Cistothorus palustris*), sedge Wren (*Cistothorus stellaris*), saltmarsh sparrow (*Ammospiza caudacuta*) and seaside sparrow (*Ammospiza maritima*). We report raw occupancy as the number of survey points a species was observed (any distance form observer)/total number of survey points for marsh obligate species. For species with robust data, we limit analyses to observations within 50 m to more accurately estimate effects of vegetation and other parameters on occupancy (Mackenzie et al. 2002) using the package 'unmarked' (Fiske and Chandler 2011) in Program R (R Core Team 2021). We constructed models that included environmental variables and observer identity as predictors within the detection function of our occupancy model, an intercept-only model that included no environmental predictors within the detection function for each marshbird species. After determining which predictors to include within the detection function, we constructed models that included those predictors as well as binary and continuous variables in the occupancy function. Binary predictors included whether the survey occurred on the bayside or seaside, whether the survey was located in a recently created marsh and whether the survey was located in an abandoned agricultural field. Continuous predictors included the percentage of each broad habitat type within 50 m of the survey point, the percentage of each plant species within 50 m of each habitat point, and the number of large living trees, small living trees, and snags within 50 m of the survey point. We also constructed models that included all combinations of binary predictors. We retained any single binary or combination of binary predictors if the model had a lower AIC score than the model containing only the intercept for the occupancy function. We then evaluated whether the addition of any single broad habitat, plant species or number of small, large, or dead trees resulted in a lower AIC. All continuous predictors were scaled.

### <span id="page-10-0"></span>**RESULTS**

During the 2022 field season, we conducted 952 surveys at 238 survey points (Appendix I). We detected a total of 21,162 birds, including 5,406 birds observed between 1- 50 m, 6,662 birds between 51-100 m, and 9,094 birds greater than 100 m away from the observer. On average, we observed 5.7 total birds and 2.9 species within 50 m of the observer per point count at marshes created since 1937 on the bayside of the eastern shore and those created since 1949 on the seaside of the eastern shore. We also observed 5.7 birds per point at marshes that persisted between the two time periods but the number of species was fewer at 2.5 birds per point.

We were unable to incorporate detection and other predictors of interest for three species including American black duck, black rail, and sedge wren because data was too sparse. Whether a marsh existed prior to 1937 on the bayside or 1949 on the seaside was included in the top model for six of eight species with sufficient data. The relationship between occupancy and recently created marsh was negative for all six species, though the effect was only significant for two species, including willet and seaside sparrow (See below for details).

American Black Duck – We recorded American black duck at 17 of 238 (4.4%) survey locations. Data was too sparse to incorporate detection rate and other predictors of interest. The majority of these survey locations were along three survey routes including Bagwell (4 points), Saxis South (5 points) and Saxis North (3 points, Appendix I).

Willet – We recorded willet at 123 of 238 (32.0%) survey locations. We included observer identity within the detection function for this species and willet were more likely to occur in marshes that existed prior to the 1937 and 1949 benchmarks (1.10 ±0.43, p=0.011) and marshes with greater proportions of tall *Sporobulus alterniflorus* (0.72±0.24, p=0.003). The proportion of saltmarsh terrestrial border within 50 m of the survey point was also included in the model for this species but the effect was not significant (-0.46±0.28, p=0.103).

Least Bittern – We recorded least bitterns at 36 of 238 (9.4%) survey locations. We included observer identity within the detection function for this species. Whether the marsh patch was located on Seaside or Bayside (Bayside:  $23.38 \pm 120.7$ , p = 0.846), in a an area where agriculture was historically practiced (Agricultural evidence: 7.06±37.5, p = 0.851), whether the marsh recently created (Recently created β: -9.51±40.7, p=0.815), and the proportion of pine within 50 m (-24.34±160.7, p=0.880) were all included within the topranked model, but no effect was significant.

Clapper Rail – We recorded clapper rails at 189 of 238 (49.2%) survey locations. We included observer identity within the detection function for this species and clapper rails were more likely to occur in marshes on the bayside (2.38 ±0.91, p=0.008), where evidence of agriculture was absent (-1.73 ±0.82, p=0.031), where saltmarsh-terrestrial border was less abundant (-0.83 ±0.30, p=0.005) and common reed (*Phragmites australis*  *australis*) was less abundant (-0.58 ±0.25, p=0.020). Whether the marsh patch was recently created was also included in the model for this species but the effect was not significant (Recently created β: -0.89±58, p=0.121).

King Rail – King rail and clapper rails are known to hybridize and vocalizations of hybrids are difficult to distinguish as one species or the other. We recorded intermediate vocalizations like these as king rail and included these birds as king rails for analyses. We recorded king rails at 35 of 238 (14.7%) survey locations. We included observer identity within the detection function for this species and king rails were more likely to occupy marsh patches where black needlerush (*Juncus roemerianus*) was more abundant (4.64 ±2.14, p=0.030). Whether the marsh patch was recently created (Recently created: -2.76±2.47, p = 0.265), evidence of past agriculture was observed (past agriculture use: 5.01±3.02, p=0.096), and proportion of high marsh (-2.08 ±1.49, p=0.163) were also included in the model but their effects were not significant.

Virginia Rail – We recorded Virginia rails at 94 of 238 (39.5%) survey locations. We did not include any predictors within the detection function for this species. Virginia rails were more likely to occupy marsh patches on the bayside (2.18±0.78, p<0.001) and where black needlerush was more abundant (2.18 ±0.78, p<0.001).

Black Rail – We had a single black rail detection out of our 238 (0.4%) survey points so we were unable to incorporate detection and other predictors into our occupancy analysis. The one detection occurred at Free School Marsh at Saxis WMA on 1 June at 8:50 AM in response to a black rail vocalization track. This detection occurred in a marsh patch that existed prior to 1937, does not exhibit evidence of past agricultural use and is dominated by black needlerush.

Marsh Wren – We recorded marsh wrens at 79 of 238 (20.1%) survey locations. We included observer identity within the detection function for this species and marsh wrens were more likely to occur in marshes with higher percentages of black needlerush (0.82±0.23, p<0.001). Whether the marsh patch was located on the bayside and seaside was also included in the model for this species but the effect was not significant (Bayside β: 13.83±108.59, p=0.910).

Sedge Wren – We recorded a single sedge wren at one of 238 (0.4%) survey locations so we were unable to incorporate detection and other predictors into our occupancy analysis. The one detection occurred at a marsh patch that existed prior to 1937 along the Cattail Creek survey route (Appendix I) on 7 July. Prior to this detection a sedge wren had been observed off-survey at a hummock in Michael Marsh on 22 and 23 June.

Seaside Sparrow – We recorded seaside sparrows at 140 of 238 (36.5%) survey locations. We did not include any predictors within the detection function for this species. Seaside sparrows were more likely to occupy marsh patches on the bayside (4.118 ±0.67, p<0.001), lacking evidence of past agricultural use (1.60±0.46, p<0.001), existing since 1937 on bayside or 1949 on seaside (2.34±0.53, p=0.001), and higher percentages of blackneedlerush (0.95±0.30, p=0.001). The percentage of saltmarsh-terrestrial border was also included in the model for this species but the effect was not significant  $(-0.44\pm0.28, p=0.120)$ .

Saltmarsh Sparrow – We recorded saltmarsh sparrows at 20 of 238 (5.2%) survey locations. We included observer identity within the detection function for this species. The number of large trees within 50 m of the survey point (-0.40±0.45, p=0.380) and whether the point was located in recently created marsh (newly created β: -4.24±5.64, p=0.452) were both included in the top model but their effects were not significant. This species overwinters in the study area and is known to depart wintering grounds as late as early June, but data was not sufficient to incorporate predictors when limiting analyses to the two later rounds (post June 10). However, saltmarsh sparrows were observed at five of 109 existing salt-marsh patches and five of 129 newly established saltmarsh patches prior to June 10 and at seven of 109 existing salt-marsh patches compared to two of 129 newly established saltmarsh patches after June 10.

### <span id="page-12-0"></span>**FUTURE DIRECTION**

We plan to conduct surveys during the 2023 breeding season at the same points that were surveyed during the 2022 breeding season as well as at additional points that we were unable to access on foot. The additional points will be accessed by boat and we hope the data collected at these additional points will allow more indepth occupancy analyses for species that were data-deficient like the saltmarsh sparrow.

## <span id="page-12-1"></span>**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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### **APPENDICES**

**Appendix I.** Results of occupancy surveys at all survey points during the 2022 breeding season including the latitude, longitude, total number of species, number of birds observed ≤50 m, number of birds observed between 51 and 100 m, number of birds observed >100 m from the observer and the total number of birds observed at each point (total).

<span id="page-15-0"></span>















