



Winging It

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Fort Belvoir, Virginia:

Birding on Department of Defense Lands

BY DOROTHY KEOUGH AND CHRIS EBERLY

Washington, D.C., and its suburbs constitute the seventh largest metropolitan area in the United States. But the 4.8 million residents of this area nevertheless have access to an amazing variety of outdoor recreational opportunities. In particular, the convergence of mountain ridges, the Potomac and Susquehanna Rivers, and Chesapeake Bay, together with the abundance of publicly accessible land throughout this region, provides for spectacular year-round birding. Fort Belvoir is one of the region's premier birding spots, encompassing nearly 9,000 acres along the Potomac River just two miles west of Mount Vernon and twelve miles south of the White House. With active wildlife management plans in effect and extensive tracts of woodland, riparian, and shoreline set aside for conservation, Fort Belvoir offers a relaxing and rewarding birding experience along a network of uncrowded trails.

History

Present-day conditions at Fort Belvoir reflect nearly four centuries of changing land uses. Large manorial holdings and plantations dominated the area during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, altering the natural environment by removing climax forest communities, introducing non-native plant species, and depleting soil (a consequence of tobacco farming). The late eigh-

teenth century brought new land-use patterns—division of large agricultural tracts into smaller farms, and commercial timber operations—that continued the conversion of climax forest into open land and, eventually, second-growth woodland.

As a military facility, Fort Belvoir dates back to 1915, when the U.S. Army Engineer School began using the parcel as a summer training facility. By that time, second-growth forest had reclaimed large parts of the area. Military use of Fort Belvoir during the rest of the twentieth century resulted in alternating periods of land clearing and reforestation, as engineer field training activities waxed and waned according to wartime needs. Engineer training continued on Fort Belvoir until the late 1980s, when the installation's military mission shifted from field training and testing to administration and logistics. Today, Fort Belvoir is home to more than 100 tenant organizations from all levels of the Army and the Department of Defense.

As logistics and support functions gained importance at Fort Belvoir, the Army began setting aside specific installation areas for natural resources conservation. Today, Fort Belvoir has two designated refuges: the 1,360-acre Accotink Bay Wildlife Refuge, encompassing expansive freshwater tidal marshes and adjacent forested slopes, and the 146-acre Jackson Miles Abbott Wetland

(continued on next page)



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Refuge, encompassing a large beaver pond wetland system. (This refuge honors Lt. Col. Jackson Miles Abbott, whose thirty-year study of nesting bald eagles in the Fort Belvoir area proved invaluable in relating the decline in eagles to the use of DDT. This study played an important role in banning the pesticide on a national level.)

Fort Belvoir also maintains a 742-acre Forest and Wildlife Corridor across the entire installation to protect significant wildlife habitats and to provide regional connectivity of on-post and off-post wildlife habitats. Installation policy to consider wildlife movement through this area led to specially designed wildlife underpass structures on two new roads within the Corridor. Fort Belvoir has also designated all stream valleys and steep sloped areas as “environmentally sensitive areas”, effectively preserving forested riparian conditions along the Potomac River shoreline and on-post streams.

Environmental Setting

Fort Belvoir sits on the transition between two physiographic provinces: the Coastal Plain and the Piedmont. The Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation’s Division of Natural Heritage has documented seventeen native ecological community types on the post, including seven ranked as uncommon to extremely rare. Fort Belvoir exemplifies mixed oak-pine forest types at the transition between northern and southern pine species. Large unbroken areas of oak/heath and wetter beech/mixed-oak forest occur in the interior. Virtually all the forested riparian corridors within the installation are intact, and most of the Potomac River shoreline remains undeveloped and wooded. Expansive wetland areas occur in association with the installation’s three main waterways (Dogue, Accotink, and Pohick Creeks), and smaller isolated and seepage wetlands are scattered

throughout. As a result of its varied habitats, Fort Belvoir supports a highly diverse fauna: 272 bird, 57 fish, 27 amphibian, 32 reptile, and 43 mammal species. The installation boasts populations of a number of rare plant and animal species, including *Stygobromus phreaticus*, a groundwater amphipod thought to be endemic to Fort Belvoir.

Fort Belvoir participates actively in regional, national, and international birding initiatives. Fort Belvoir hosted the Partners in Flight Mid-Atlantic Coastal Plain Bird Conservation Workshop in 2000, bringing together over 100 land owners and conservation professionals to discuss regional conservation of birds and their habitats. The Fort Belvoir Christmas Bird Count, first conducted in 1911, recorded 117 species (75 on Fort Belvoir proper) this past year. Fairfax Audubon Society established 50 permanent point-count stations on the post in 1994 as part of the Northern Virginia Bird Survey. These points are now part of a larger 135-point seasonal bird survey to assess bird populations and monitor



Streamside habitats at Fort Belvoir are protected as environmentally sensitive areas. Substantial tracts of intact riparian woodland are among the productive natural communities accessible to birders visiting the fort. Photo: Gregory W. Fleming

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- The American Birding Association aims to inspire all people to enjoy and protect wild birds.
 - The American Birding Association represents the North American birding community and supports birders through publications, conferences, workshops, tours, partnerships, and networks.
 - The ABA's education programs promote birding skills, ornithological knowledge, and the development of a conservation ethic.
 - The ABA encourages birders to apply their skills to help conserve birds and their habitats, and we represent the interests of birders in planning and legislative arenas.
 - ABA Sales, the ABA's for-profit subsidiary, supplies birders with tools, equipment, and accessories to make their birding more enjoyable.
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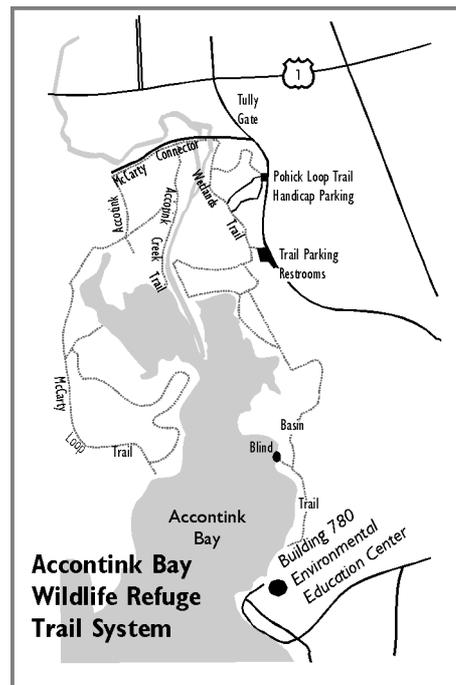


The fiery plumage and ringing song of a Prothonotary Warbler may highlight a breeding-season visit to the Accotink Bay Wildlife Sanctuary at Fort Belvoir. Photo: Gregory W. Fleming

trends. The Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survivorship Program (MAPS) is providing data on nesting productivity of the post's avifauna. These long-term surveys and productivity studies guide installation staff in making specific habitat management decision. The studies also provide part of the scientific basis for the Fort Belvoir Integrated Natural Resources Management Plan, which directs all habitat management on the post and recognizes the importance Fort Belvoir has to the region's bird life.

Birding at Fort Belvoir

Seasonal surveys have documented both rarities and diversity on Fort Belvoir. The first Cinnamon Teal recorded in Virginia was found here in late 1998 during the first year of the winter waterfowl survey. Waterfowl, spring and fall shorebird, and point count surveys, plus incidental observations, have uncovered Eurasian Wigeon, Tufted Duck, Black Scoter, Golden Eagle (five records of immature birds), and American Golden-Plover. On 13 November 2002, over 2,000 individuals of thirteen duck species were tallied. The 2003 winter bird survey recorded 87 species. Bald Eagles gather here in large numbers in midwinter, and there are at least two active nests on the post. Notable shorebirds have included White-rumped and Stilt Sandpipers and both dowitchers. Interestingly, the most abundant shorebird (Least Sandpiper) and duck (American Black Duck) species on the post are among the ones in most need of conservation attention in the region. In fact, Accotink Bay ranks among the best places on the East Coast to find American Black Duck, with 724 recorded on 6 December 2003.



Forested habitats on Fort Belvoir host migrating and breeding neotropical migrants. During the peak of spring migration, it is not uncommon to find 20 or more warbler species in a day. In his book, *Where Have All the Birds Gone?*, John Terborgh offers a detailed account of one of the last confirmed sightings of Bachman's Warbler, in the extensive bottomland forest along Pohick Creek in May 1954.

Fort Belvoir is a Watchable Wildlife site and is part of the Mason Neck Loop of the Virginia Coastal Birding and Wildlife Trail. See <www.dgif.state.va.us/wildlife/vbwt> or call (866) VABIRDS for a free Trail book. The following areas of Fort Belvoir are open to the public for birding: the Accotink Bay Wildlife Refuge with its 9-mile trail network, the 0.5-mile Jackson Miles Abbott Wetland Refuge Trail, the 1.5-mile Belvoir Ruins/Potomac View Nature Trail, and the Tompkins Basin shoreline along Gunston Cove (Swift Road and Little Road, at the mouth of Accotink Bay). These areas are accessible from sunrise to sunset seven days a week. A temporary pass is required for access (except for the Abbott Refuge). Portions of the two refuge trails are accessible to persons with disabilities. Detailed trail maps and bird checklists can be found at each trailhead or on the web at <www.dodpif.org/checklist.htm>. Fort Belvoir offers guided bird walks on an irregular basis throughout the year. Additionally, the Fort Belvoir Accotink Bay Wildlife Environmental Education Center provides educational opportunities for all ages. Center hours vary seasonally; hours and announcements of upcoming events and programs are posted on the Fort Belvoir website and available by calling (703) 805-3972.

Excellent forest and upland habitats make the **Accotink Bay Wildlife Refuge** a productive birding spot throughout the year. During migration and breeding seasons, Wood Thrushes and Scarlet Tanagers can be found in most forested areas,

Summer Tanagers may be found around wooded edges associated with pine forest, and Ovenbirds can be found deeper in the forests. During migration and winter, Nearctic migrants such as kinglets, Hermit Thrush, and Fox Sparrow can be found in mixed pine-hardwood and brushy areas, and Brown Creeper in wooded areas. The Wetlands Trail is the best spot for Louisiana Waterthrush during migration and breeding seasons and is also good for migrant warblers in spring. Northern Parula is common in the forested wetlands on each side of Accotink Creek during migration and breeding seasons. Eastern Towhee, a declining species in the northeast, can be found year-round in the shrubby areas on the east side of the bridge crossing the creek on Beaver Pond Trail.

Accotink Creek Trail is noted for migrant and breeding Prothonotary Warblers and occasionally Yellow-throated

Vireos, plus Blue-winged and Golden-winged Warblers in migration. The viewing platform at the south end of this trail is a good spot to view waterfowl and Northern Harrier at high tide. McCarty Trail can be especially productive as you move from forested to more open upland habitats. Watch for Prairie Warbler, Field Sparrow, Indigo Bunting, and an occasional Blue Grosbeak during migration and breeding seasons. American Woodcock display in the open fields between Poe Road and the McCarty/Accotink Connector, where Le Conte's Sparrow has been found during fall migration. An occasional Yellow-breasted Chat can be found during migration or breeding season on the Mound Trail, off the Connector.

Accotink Bay is among the best locations in Northern Virginia to view shorebirds. Low tide provides the best viewing from the bird blind on Basin Trail, where seventeen shorebird species have been observed during migration. Peregrine Falcon is sighted annually in the fall here, too. The shoreline along Accotink Bay near the Environmental Education Center is a great place to find Baltimore and Orchard Orioles during migration and breeding seasons. A geographic "funnel" channels southbound fall migrants toward the south end of Basin Trail, near the Center. Connecticut Warblers have been found here in the fall. Mid-August through early October provide spectacular opportunities to view Chimney Swifts swirling around and dropping out of the sky into nighttime roosts throughout the installation. A thousand or more swifts can be seen during the peak of migration at a number of different chimney roosts, with a high count of 1,775 birds in 2001.

Spring migration is the best time to find Sora in the **Jackson Miles Abbott Wetland Refuge**. Great Egret and Blue-winged Teal were found here on the recent Christmas Bird Count; a Trumpeter Swan was seen here in 1990. Hooded Mergansers breed here, and a pair has nested in a Wood Duck box the past two years. In spring and summer, look for Pine Warbler in the pines, Common Yellowthroat and Song Sparrow in the wet forest edges, and Least Bitterns in the wetland.

The **Belvoir Ruins/Potomac View Nature Trail** is usually reliable for breeding Worm-eating Warbler. This trail benefits from another natural funneling effect during fall migration. You will also find the best vantage points for viewing Bald Eagle flying (sometimes below you!) along the shoreline here.

Access and Getting There

The public is welcome to bird on Fort Belvoir, consistent with installation security requirements. Persons without a valid military identification card and vehicle decal must obtain a temporary pass at the Fort Belvoir Visitor Center at Tulley Gate (Pohick Road) during federal work days, or at Pence Gate (Belvoir Road) during weekends and federal holidays. A valid driver's license and vehicle registration are required. See <www.belvoir.army.mil> for directions, map, and current access control requirements.

From Interstate Route 95, take the Fort Belvoir/Newington exit (#166) to the southern leg of the Fairfax County Parkway (Route 7100). Follow the Parkway south/east for approximately three miles until it ends at Richmond Highway (U.S. Route 1). Turn left onto Route 1 North. On federal work days, follow Route 1 to the first light (about .25 mile) and turn right onto Pohick Road. Proceed through the Tulley Gate to the Visitors Center to obtain a pass. On weekends and federal holidays, follow Route 1 to the second light (one mile beyond Pohick Road) and make a right onto Belvoir Road into Pence Gate. A pass can be obtained at that gate.

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