



BIRDING GUIDE

DORCHESTER COUNTY

On Maryland's Eastern Shore

HEART OF THE CHESAPEAKE

DORCHESTER

water moves us





Green Heron

WELCOME TO DORCHESTER COUNTY!

Perhaps the prime reason that birders and nature enthusiasts flock to Dorchester is to marvel at the splendor of the vast marshlands and the wildlife that live here.

Dorchester County, Maryland, is the home of world-renowned Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge, one of the largest Bald Eagle populations on the East Coast and tidal marshes so vast they have been called "the Everglades of Maryland."

The Dorchester County Visitor Center should be the first stop on your journey to discover the incredible array of birds that reside or migrate here. Our friendly staff members can provide information on other must-see locations in the county.

Bring your binoculars, bird field guide, insect repellent, sunscreen, drinks, snacks, and a full tank of gas. A kayak or canoe provides an exceptional optional viewing opportunity.

Dorchester County marshland

BIRDS AND HABITATS OF DORCHESTER COUNTY

Thanks to the diversity of habitats found within Dorchester County, more than 300 bird species have been recorded here. Some are here seasonally (i.e. they migrate south for the winter or north for the summer); other birds are year-round residents. All birds have their favorite habitats and knowing which habitat each prefers is the first step in finding them.

FORESTS AND WOODLANDS

The forests of lower Dorchester County are mostly a mixture of loblolly pine and deciduous trees. Here, common forest birds like woodpeckers, wrens, and **Carolina Chickadee** are augmented by migratory songbirds, such as tanagers, warblers, and vireos, that return in the spring. Brilliant **Prothonotary Warblers** nest along wooded freshwater streams. In areas where the uplands meet the marshes, **Brown-headed Nuthatches** can be found. Look for **Bald Eagle** nests in large trees on pine islands or “hummocks” interspersed in marshes.

SHRUBLANDS

Shrubby areas, dense forest edges, and forests regenerating after harvest provide habitat to **Yellow-breasted Chat**, **Blue Grosbeak**, and **Prairie Warbler**. **Red-headed Woodpecker** can be found in harvested areas if enough scattered trees remain. Areas of dense Wax Myrtle shrubs on the edges of upland hummocks are home to breeding **Boat-tailed Grackle**.

FIELDS

Agricultural fields can provide habitat for many different birds. In winter, geese and swans feed on leftover corn. During spring and fall migration, flocks of shorebirds, such as plovers and various sandpipers, are sometimes found among muddy pools after a rain. In summer, bare fields provide breeding habitat for **Horned Lark**,

while other fields harbor **Grasshopper Sparrow** and other species, depending on the type of cover. **Eastern Meadowlark** and an occasional **American Kestrel** rely on pastures and patches of grasslands known as “old fields.” Watch for resident **Wild Turkey** and **Red-tailed Hawk** where fields and open areas meet forests.

MARSHES

Sometimes called “the Everglades of Maryland,” the wet, grass-like meadows known as salt marshes cover much of the southern extent of the county. Marshes are home to yet another suite of birds, many of which tend to hide in the grasses and are more likely heard than seen. Some are more active at dawn and dusk or at night rather than during the day. Breeding birds include **Black Duck**, **Northern Harrier**, four rail species, **Marsh Wren**, and **Seaside Sparrow**. Egrets and herons are seen spearing fishes along waterways. Most common during migration, shorebirds are found feeding among muddy openings within the marshes. These marshes are one of the best places in the state to find wintering **Northern Harrier**, **Rough-legged Hawk** and in late afternoon, **Short-eared Owl**.

OPEN WATER

Open water practically surrounds Dorchester County. The largest areas of open water, including Chesapeake Bay, Fishing Bay, Honga River and the lower reaches of the Nanticoke and Choptank Rivers, are the best places to find wintering **Common Loon**, **Horned Grebe** and diving ducks such as **Bufflehead** and **Canvasback**. Smaller creeks and ponds are often frequented by dabbling ducks like **Green-winged Teal** and **American Wigeon**. Exclusively fish eaters, **Ospreys** are a common sight; look for their large stick nests on channel markers and other man-made structures close to water.

1 Cambridge Waterfront Trail

5 miles round trip from Dorchester Visitor Center

The Cambridge waterfront is one of the best spots in the county to get close-up views of wintering waterfowl. The waterfront west of US Route 50, which includes the Dorchester County Visitor Center, usually has a mixed flock of diving ducks like **Canvasback** that local residents feed. The Visitor Center has parking and restroom facilities. From here you can access the Bill Burton Fishing Pier by following the waterfront boardwalk along the Choptank River. The pier is an excellent place to view **Osprey** spring through fall. **Great Blue Heron**, numerous gulls, possibly a **Peregrine Falcon**, and waterfowl including **Long-tailed Ducks** and scoters, are present fall through spring.

Further west, visitors can often see **Tundra Swan**, **Common Goldeneye**, and other waterfowl wintering along the Choptank River shoreline area between the Cambridge Yacht Club and Hambrooks Bay.

From the Visitor Center, exit the parking lot via Dorchester Avenue; turn right onto Maryland Avenue. Go across the Cambridge Creek Bridge and bear right onto Academy Street (which turns into Spring Street). Turn right onto High Street and follow it to the water. After scanning the river from Long Wharf Park circle, turn right onto Water Street, which parallels the shoreline. Turn right on Somerset Avenue and proceed to Great Marsh Park. Here you can search for waterfowl along the Choptank as well as Hambrooks Bay to the west of the point.



MAX RAMEY

Canvasback



DANIEL IRONS

Saltmarsh Sparrow



Brown-headed Nuthatch

2 Elliott Island Trail

Nowhere are the “Everglades of Maryland” more accessible than along Elliott Island Road. This route allows exploration of the heart of the marshy peninsula bounded by Fishing Bay and the Nanticoke River, an area truly unique in Maryland.

From Route 50 east, take the Route 331 exit south to Vienna. Continue straight, crossing over Old Route 50 and turn left onto Race Street. Turn right on Market Street, which becomes Elliott Island Road.

For the first 7 miles, agricultural fields, woods, and regenerating clear cuts dominate the landscape. In summer, look for songbirds, such as **Blue Grosbeak**, **Summer Tanager**, and **Red-headed Woodpecker**, in shrubby harvested areas with standing dead trees. Once the Loblolly Pine forest becomes the primary habitat, **Pine Warbler** and **Brown-headed Nuthatch** are common. The latter is most often heard giving its rubber-ducky squeaky call from the edge of the forest as it opens into marsh. From here until you reach Elliott, the road

42 miles round trip from Vienna

shoulder in many areas is wet and soft, so be careful to pull off only in gravel parking areas.

As the tree line along the right disappears, look for the **Bald Eagle**’s large stick nest, which frequently has adults or dark-plumaged young nearby. Look for waterfowl on the left at Savanna Lake. The pond on the right with scattered mud clumps and muddy edges is the best location for **Common Gallinule** and may also contain waterfowl, **Black-necked Stilt**, and other shorebirds. Past the lake there is a primitive boat launch on the right. This launch provides entry to one of Fishing Bay’s water trails for an extraordinary view of birds from canoe or kayak.

Scan the horizon for egrets, herons, terns, waterfowl, and **Northern Harrier**. From November through March, this road is one of the best places in Maryland to find **Rough-legged Hawk** and **Short-eared Owl**. The secretive **Black Rail** and **Saltmarsh Sparrow** nest in these tidal marshes, particularly those dominated by *Spartina patens*, a low, dense, bright green grass.

Scattered within the marsh are pine islands or hummocks where breeding shrubland species and **Boat-tailed Grackles** may be seen. Toward the end, where the road parallels Fishing Bay, to the west look for **Common Loon**, **Canvasback**, and **Ruddy Ducks** in winter. In the late spring and summer, to the east in the marsh and ponds, look for herons, egrets, and nesting **Black-necked Stilts**.

You will cross a small bridge into the Town of Elliott. Pass the fire station and bear to the left to reach the harbor at McCready’s Creek.

In winter look for waterfowl, grebes, **Common Loon**, and gulls and **Dunlin** on the jetty. In late spring and summer, note nesting **Osprey** and possible **Brown Pelicans**. On your return, you may take the Fishing Bay Trail at Henry’s Crossroads, approximately 12 miles north of Elliott.

3 Fishing Bay Rivers Trail

32.5 miles round trip from Cambridge and Route 50

This trail allows exploration of the varied habitats in the area of the Transquaking and Chicamacomico Rivers. These large rivers cut through much of central Dorchester County, feeding freshwater swamps and marshes along the way until they merge and empty into Fishing Bay. Enjoying the beauty and birdlife of these rivers is best by canoe or kayak. However, the driving loop crosses the rivers and other wetlands in several places, which are focal points of the trail.

From the Dorchester Visitor Center in Cambridge, take Route 50 east for 2 miles and turn right onto Bucktown Road. The short grass fields around the Cambridge-Dorchester Regional Airport periphery provide habitat for **Eastern Meadowlark**, **Grasshopper Sparrow**, and other open-country species. Continuing south, agricultural fields and forest edges provide habitat for a number of species, as described in the Habitat section.

Proceed for approximately 6 miles and turn left onto Decoursey Bridge Road. Travel 1 mile before stopping at the Transquaking River. Scan the river for waterfowl; the freshwater wetlands for herons, shorebirds, and marshbirds; and the treeline for perched raptors. The next stretch of the road passes through some of the best deciduous forest in southern Dorchester. Spring and summer herald the songs of **Wood Thrush**, **Summer** and **Scarlet Tanagers**, **Ovenbird**, and other forest species. In the early morning, listen for the song of the **Barred Owl**.

Pause at the shrub swamp and keep your eyes open for flycatchers, **Yellow-billed Cuckoo**, and **Prothonotary Warbler**.

Turn right at the stop sign onto Drawbridge Road, continuing for 2 miles to the Chicamacomico River. The habitats presented here are very similar

to those of the Transquaking River. The marshes extend along the route as it turns to the right. Bear right onto Griffiths Neck Road. After passing Henry's Crossroads Road, continue for 6.5 miles to reach the marshes at Bestpitch. Turn left on Bestpitch Road. This is another excellent location for viewing **Short-eared Owl** in winter and **Northern Harrier** and **Bald Eagle** year-round. Shorebirds frequent the mudflats south of the road and secretive, but vocal, marshbirds occur throughout.

Because the bridge over the Transquaking River is closed on Bestpitch Road, make a U-turn and return to Henry's Crossroads Road, where you'll turn right. When you reach Elliott Island Road, turn left to return to Route 50, or turn right to join the Elliott Island Trail.

KOJO BAIDOO

PATRICK B. NEWCOMBE



Prothonotary Warbler



Barred Owl

4 Taylors Island/Hoopers Island Trail

68 miles round trip from Cambridge Route 50

This trail takes you to the far western portion of Dorchester County. Although the marshes in this area are more limited than along the other trails, they still contain many of the more common marsh species, such as **Marsh Wren**, **Common Yellowthroat**, and **Red-winged Blackbird**. The southern portion of the route is best in fall and winter when southbound migrating species and waterfowl are most numerous.

From Cambridge (Route 50 east), turn onto Route 16 west. Continue on this road until you reach the town of Church Creek. The park and ride lot at the corner of Route 16 and Route 335 is a good stopping point and may offer some viewing opportunities.

You'll then pass through the small towns of Woolford and Madison with local marinas along the way that offer views of the water and waterfowl. During the spring and summer, look for **Purple Martins** in yards where residents have erected boxes and **Chimney Swifts** flying over inviting chimneys.

After Parson's Creek Bridge, turn left onto Smithville Road. This road winds through picturesque woods and low marshy areas. There are no shoulders for pulling off. On the right is Taylors Island Wildlife Management Area. A simple wooden sign marks the parking area. There are no facilities here, but you can walk around and observe forest species. Additional marsh and water views can be enjoyed from the small parking area and boat ramp at Beaver Dam Creek just south of Taylors Island. Scan the tops of telephone poles in summer for **Willet** and the wires for **Eastern Bluebird**.

At the end of Smithville Road you will come to a stop sign. Turn right on Hoopers Island Road (Route 335) toward Hoopers Island.

Scan for raptors, herons, and other marshbirds in this area. As the southbound route winds through pine woodlands, listen for the telltale rubber-ducky squeak of **Brown-headed Nuthatch**.

Once across the Honga River Bridge, there are no shoulders to accommodate pull-offs. The road continues for over 12 miles south to a string of islands. This area features panoramas of open bays and creeks, Loblolly Pine forests, and tidal marsh. Mixed deciduous-pine forests in the north part of the islands are good for warblers, thrushes, and other landbirds in fall, especially after the passage of a cold front. On autumn days of moderate winds, this area may also have good flights of migrating hawks. **Sharp-shinned and Red-tailed Hawks** are the most common.

Along the causeway on both sides of the Narrows Ferry Bridge are pull-offs with panoramic views of the Honga River and the Chesapeake Bay. Look for wintering loons, scoters, **Redheads**, both **Greater and Lesser Scaup**, and birds resting or feeding on the breakwaters.

If you reach the turn-around at the end of the road during the summertime, watch for **Eastern Kingbird**, **Ruby-throated Hummingbird** (feeding at the red flowers of Trumpet Vine), and **Boat-tailed Grackle**. **Brown Pelican** might be seen flying offshore.

Retrace your route to return to Cambridge, or stay on Route 335 rather than turning left onto Smithville Road to reach the Blackwater Refuge Trail.

5 Blackwater Refuge Trail

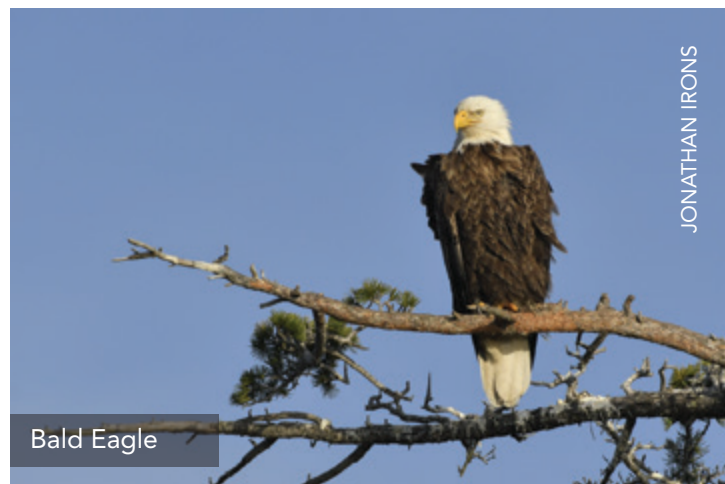
42 miles round trip from Cambridge Route 50

This trail takes you into Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge (NWR). Established in 1933 as a refuge for migratory birds, Blackwater encompasses over 30,000 acres. The refuge consists of tidal river and rich tidal marsh, mixed evergreen and deciduous forests, freshwater ponds and managed impoundments for waterfowl use. Views of herons, waterfowl, **Bald Eagles**, **Canada Geese** and many other species are typical. For the most up-to-date information, contact the refuge office at 410.228.2677. From Cambridge follow Route 50 east and turn onto Route 16 west. Continue for 2 miles, then turn left onto Maple Dam Road. Continue for 7.5 miles. This stretch of road has some of the best agricultural fields in the county.

In addition to the field birds mentioned in the habitat section, **Prothonotary Warbler** can be found at forested creek crossings in spring and early summer. Scan the sky, treeline and telephone wires for hunting raptors year-round.

Turn right onto Key Wallace Drive. Continue for 2.5 miles to the Blackwater NWR Visitor Center for displays and information. Turn left onto Key Wallace Drive and then left onto Route 335 to continue this birding trail. A recommended option from the Visitor Center is to turn right onto Key Wallace and after 1 mile, turn right onto the refuge's designated Wildlife Drive. Several thousand **Snow Geese**, numerous **Canada Geese**, **White Pelicans**, **Pintails**, **Shovelers**, and other waterfowl winter in the Blackwater area and can be seen from the Wildlife Drive and often from Key Wallace Drive. Wildlife Drive ends at Route 335. Turn left to continue this birding trail.

As you approach the Blackwater River, pull into the parking lot on your right to scan the area. If you have not yet seen **Snow Geese**, look for them here especially on winter evenings. Other waterfowl and shorebirds can also be seen. Cross the bridge and continue south, pausing at fields, creek crossings, ponds, or forest edges that look inviting for birds. At the stop sign, turn left onto Route 336 east and

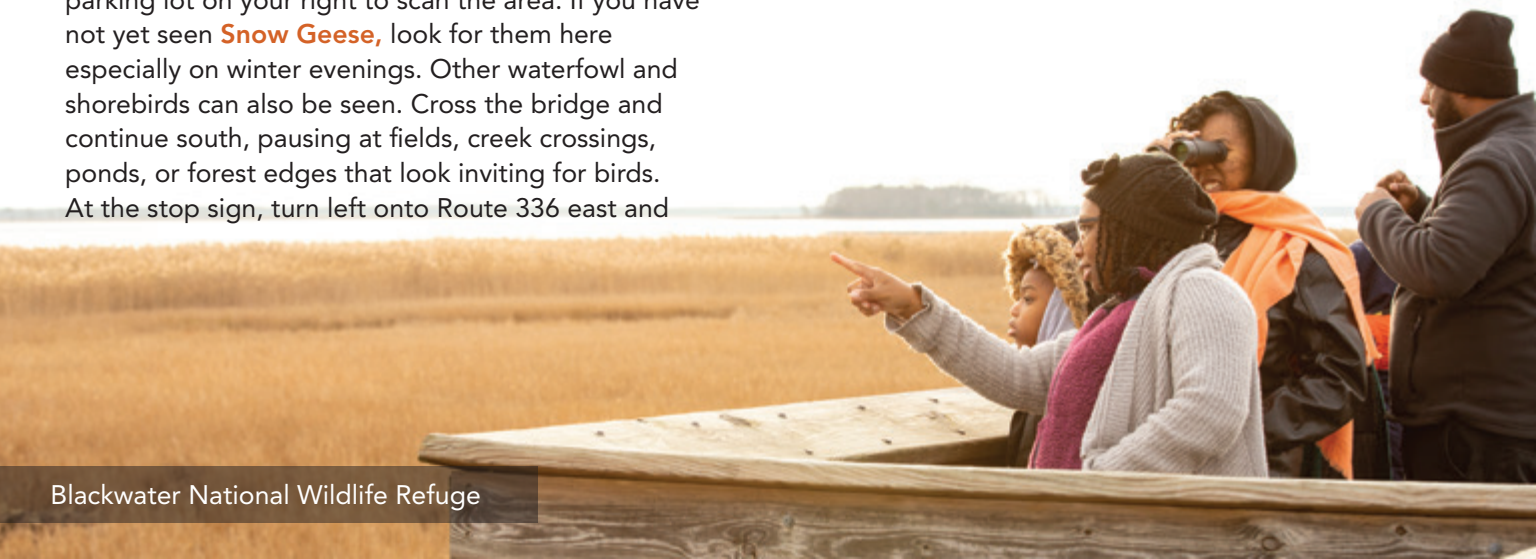


Bald Eagle

JONATHAN IRONS

continue for 4.5 miles. A large marsh is on the right. Look and listen here for various marshbirds, as well as forest edge birds like **Orchard Oriole**, **Indigo Bunting**, and **White-eyed Vireo**. Turn left onto Andrews Road and proceed for 4.5 miles to the parking lot on the left, before the bridge crossing the Blackwater River. This is a good vantage point to scan for marshbirds, shorebirds, and in the summer feeding terns and swallows. Continue north on Maple Dam Road through extensive salt marsh, which is excellent habitat for many wintering shorebirds, **Harriers**, and wintering ducks. In late afternoons in winter, look for **Short-eared Owls** working the marshes for food. **Bald Eagles** nest close to this road and may be seen in any season.

Continue north for 12.5 miles back to Route 16 and turn right to complete this trail. As an alternative, after passing Key Wallace Drive, turn right onto Greenbriar Road and pick up the Fishing Bay Trail at Bucktown.



DORCHESTER COUNTY BIRDING TRAILS



KEY

- Trail Starting Point
- Trail Turn-Around Point
- Trail 1
- Trail 2
- Trail 3
- Trail 4
- Trail 5
- Restaurant/Food
- Attraction
- Downtown Cambridge with Restaurants, Shops, Galleries, Museums



HELPFUL HINTS FOR BIRDING

- **Respect wildlife** by viewing wild animals from an appropriate distance. Never touch or feed wild animals.
- **Avoid stressing birds** or exposing them to danger. Be particularly cautious around active nests and nesting colonies, roosts, display sites, and feeding sites. Limit your stay to minimize stress on the animals.
- **Limit the use of recordings** and other audio methods of attracting birds, particularly in heavily birded areas, for species that are rare in the area, and for species that are threatened or endangered.
- **Exercise caution** and restraint when photographing, recording, or otherwise approaching birds.
- **Do not enter private property** without the owner's explicit permission.
- **Plan ahead.** Be prepared for variable weather and outdoor conditions.
- **Think small.** Keep groups to a size that limits impact on the environment.
- **Stay on roads, trails, and paths** where they exist and keep habitat disturbance to a minimum.
- **Do not allow pets** to interfere with wild animals.

- **Be considerate** of other visitors and respect the interests, rights, and skills of fellow birders as well as people participating in other outdoor activities.
- **Dispose of all waste properly.** Pack out what you bring with you.
- **Leave rocks, plants, and other natural objects** and areas as you find them.
- **Do not disturb** nests, nesting colonies, roosts, display areas, or important feeding sites. In such sensitive areas, if there is a need for extended observation, try to use a blind or take advantage of natural cover.

FIND OUT MORE

Birder's Guide to Maryland and DC – look for the section on Dorchester County
birdersguidemddc.org

eBird page for Dorchester County with recent bird sightings at the refuge.
ebird.org/region/US-MD-019

Maryland Ornithological Society
mdbirds.org

Merlin Birding App
merlin.allaboutbirds.org



Rail

ON THE COVER:

Snowy Egret by Jonathan Irons

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Dorchester County Tourism
2 Rose Hill Pl., Cambridge, MD 21613
VisitDorchester.org
410.228.1000