

Bush Mill Stream Natural Area Preserve

103 Acres - Northumberland County, Virginia

The Site: Nestled along the sinuous curves of a Chesapeake Bay headwaters creek, Bush Mill Stream Natural Area Preserve provides a great sampling of some unspoiled coastal plain habitats. Freshwater flowing from a nearby bottomland meets salty tidal waters flowing up from the Chesapeake Bay via the Great Wicomico River. A variety of wetlands borders Bush Mill Stream and the preserve's steep hillsides and uplands are forested with a mixture of hardwoods and pines. One rare species, a tiny shrimp-like animal, is known to live in the preserve. This property was acquired with Virginia citizens' contributions to the Open Space Recreation and Conservation Fund, and with assistance from the Northern Neck of Virginia Audubon Society and from The Nature Conservancy.

Natural History: Bush Mill Stream, from which the preserve takes its name, is a typical upper Chesapeake Bay tidal creek with slightly brackish water. It serves as a nursery for blue crabs (*Callinectes sapidus*), Atlantic menhaden (*Brevoortia tyrannus*), white perch (*Morone americana*) and many other estuarine species. Wading birds, such as Great Blue Herons (*Ardea herodias*), are drawn by the abundance of prey, and waterfowl, such as Hooded Mergansers (*Lophodytes cucullatus*), seek these quiet backwaters, especially during the colder months.

The preserve's wetlands are varied and interact directly with the waterway. Near the mouth of the creek is a well developed marsh. Outer fringes of the marsh are dominated by species, such as big cordgrass (*Spartina cynosuroides*), which can tolerate frequent and prolonged inundation and moderated salinity levels. Species higher in the marsh are adapted to shorter periods of flooding and essentially freshwater conditions. These include rose mallow (*Hibiscus moscheutos*), arrow arum (*Peltandra virginica*) and smartweeds (*Polygonum* spp.).

Where the preserve borders the creek further upstream, swamp species, such as swamp tupelo (*Nyssa biflora*) and red maple (*Acer rubrum*), begin to appear. The bottomland extends for several miles upstream, well beyond the preserve boundaries. In the deep recesses of this swamp, one of Virginia's largest heron rookeries occupies the treetops. In some years, more than 200 pairs of Great Blue Herons have raised their young there.

Rising up from the wetlands are steep wooded slopes divided into a series of ridges and ravines. Most of these woods are a mixture of oaks (*Quercus* spp.), hickories (*Carya* spp.), tulip poplar (*Liriodendron tulipifera*) and American beech (*Fagus grandifolia*). Scattered about are mature pines (*Pinus* spp.), indicating that the woods are in transition from an earlier stage of succession. Mountain laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*) predominates the understory and produces quite a show of blooms in the spring.

In some of the ravines are springs, which are home to a rare (G3/S3) creature, the tidewater amphipod (*Stygobromus indentatus*). Easily overlooked, this white, blind, shrimp-like animal could easily fit on a pencil eraser. It is closely related to

other rare amphipods that dwell in caves and it, too, lives mostly below the surface in the groundwater. During periods of high flows, they may be flushed to the surface and will seek shelter in the leaf litter that accumulates in the springs. Little is known about this species and its survival may very well depend on clean groundwater and undisturbed, sheltered springs.

Resource Management: The preserve is managed to protect its natural resources and to provide public access for education, nature study and passive recreation.

Compatible Uses: The preserve can accommodate low impact activities, such as bird watching, hiking and nature photography. Off-road vehicles, bicycles, horseback riding and unrestrained pets would damage the preserve's resources and are not permitted.

Location: The preserve is in Northumberland County at the headwaters of the Great Wicomico River.

From Kilmarnock, travel north on Route 3 about 7 miles to Lancaster. Turn right (north) on Route 600 and go 1.5 miles to Route 201. Bear right (north) on Route 201 and go about 6.5 miles to Route 642. A brick church is on the right. Turn right (east) on Route 642 and go 0.3 mile to the preserve entrance on the left. The parking area is 0.1 mile down the gravel entrance road.

From Warsaw, take U.S. 360 east about 18 miles to Heathsville. Bear right (south) onto Route 201 and go 3.3 miles to Route 642. A brick church is on the left. Turn left (east) on Route 642 and go about 0.3 mile to the preserve entrance on the left. The parking area is 0.1 mile down the gravel entrance road.

Natural Heritage Resources

Animal

Tidewater amphipod (*Stygobromus indentatus*) G3/S3

Public Access Facilities

parking
walking trails & boardwalk
observation platform
interpretive signs

For more information contact:

Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation
Natural Heritage Program

Chesapeake Bay Region Steward (804) 225-2303

or

217 Governor Street

Richmond, VA 23219 (804) 786-7951

website: http://www.dcr.virginia.gov/natural_heritage/

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Department of Conservation & Recreation

CONSERVING VIRGINIA'S NATURAL & RECREATIONAL RESOURCES

*Natural Heritage Program -
Conserving Virginia's biodiversity through inventory,
protection, and stewardship*

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