

# North Landing River Natural Area Preserve

## 3441 acres - Virginia Beach, Virginia

**The Site:** Almost entirely wetland, this preserve harbors more rare plants, animals and natural communities than any place east of the Blue Ridge in Virginia. The preserve is comprised of three separate tracts and is part of a network of protected lands along the North Landing River. A coalition of public and private conservation organizations owns a total of more than 10,000 acres within the watershed. Acquisition of preserve properties was funded by the 1992 Virginia Parks and Natural Areas Bond, The Nature Conservancy, the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality's Virginia Coastal Program, Virginia citizen contributions to the Open Space Recreation and Conservation Fund, and state general funds.

**Natural History:** While quite biologically diverse, two simple words sum up North Landing River Natural Area Preserve: lush and wet. Expansive freshwater wind tide marshes, cypress swamps, pocosins and Atlantic white cedar forests are just a few of the wetland communities found along the North Landing River.

Community composition is influenced largely by water level, which, along the main channels, is controlled mostly by wind tides. Winds from the south push water up river, flooding the marshes and swamps. Northerly winds lower water levels in the wetlands by pushing water down river. Along the river and main tributaries, water levels can fluctuate by two feet or more, and marsh communities of sedges, grasses and rushes dominate. Black needle rush (*Juncus roemerianus*), typically a brackish marsh species, is especially prevalent in these marshes. Its presence is somewhat mysterious since this is essentially a freshwater system with only minute traces of salt. One explanation may be that an ocean inlet existed nearby in the recent past.

In some places, just inland from the marshes, are swamps, which have developed on organic soils and are also influenced by wind tides. First there is a band of shrub swamp, dominated by wax myrtle (*Morella cerifera*). This is bordered by an estuarine fringe swamp forest, an unusual mix of baldcypress (*Taxodium distichum*), swamp tupelo (*Nyssa biflora*) and loblolly pine (*Pinus taeda*).

Further inland, where wind tides have little influence, are three distinctive fire-dependent communities underlain by peaty soils. One is an Atlantic white cedar (*Chamaecyparis thyooides*) forest, which in one part of the preserve occurs as a nearly pure stand. Another is a pond pine (*Pinus serotina*) woodland with mature pond pine and relatively sparse scrubby understory. The third community is a unique type of fire-adapted broad-leaved evergreen shrub wetland called a pocosin. Pocosin vegetation is characterized by tangled masses of dense shrubs and vines with a scattered pond pine overstory.

**Resource Management:** Natural Heritage scientists are conducting studies to better understand the preserve's wetland systems and the rare species that live here. Prescribed fire and other ecological management practices are used to restore and maintain various natural communities within the preserve.

**Public Access:** A portion of the preserve can be explored from Blackwater Road where there is a small parking area, a trail and boardwalk, interpretive signs, a canoe launch, and an interpretive canoe trail along Altons Creek. It is a 0.4-mile portage from the parking area to the canoe put-in.

**Compatible Uses:** The preserve is especially suitable for passive recreation such as bird watching, nature photography, canoeing and kayaking. Camping, open fires, off-road vehicles, bicycles, unrestrained pets, and collecting plants and animals would threaten the preserve's resources and are not permitted.

**Location:** The preserve's public access point is in southern Virginia Beach about two miles north of Blackwater. From I-64 in Chesapeake, take Route 168 (Battlefield Blvd.) south for about 9 miles. Soon after passing Hickory High School on the left, turn left on Hickory Road and go 0.8 mile until it ends at Centerville Turnpike. Turn right and almost immediately turn left on Head of River Road. Go 6.5 miles until the road forks and bear left. Go 0.2 mile until the road ends at Blackwater Road. Turn left and go 0.6 mile to the preserve entrance on the right. Go 0.7 mile to the end of the gravel access road to the parking area and trailhead.

### Natural Heritage Resources

#### Plants

sawgrass (*Cladium jamaicense*) G5T5/S2  
big-headed rush (*Juncus megacephalus*) G4G5/S2  
Carolina sheep-laurel (*Kalmia carolina*) G4/S2  
winged seedbox (*Ludwigia alata*) G4/S1  
Elliott's aster (*Symphotrichum elliotii*) G5T3T4/S1  
large cranberry (*Vaccinium macrocarpon*) G4/S2

#### Animals

scarce swamp skipper (*Euphyes dukesi*) G3/S2  
canebroke rattlesnake (*Crotalus horridus atricaudatus*)  
G4TUQ/S1  
Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) G4/S2S3  
dismal swamp southeastern shrew (*Sorex longirostris fisheri*)  
G5T4/S2

#### Communities

estuarine fringe swamp forest  
high pocosin  
peatland Atlantic white cedar forest  
tidal shrub swamp  
tidal oligohaline marsh

### For more information contact:

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Department of Conservation & Recreation  
[www.dcr.virginia.gov](http://www.dcr.virginia.gov)  
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