

Amphibians, Reptiles, Birds and Mammals of the York River

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ABSTRACT

The York River and its watershed support many natural vegetative communities, from aquatic grass beds to tidal marshes to a variety of woodlands. These communities support a wide variety of resident and migratory amphibians, reptiles, birds and mammals. There are eight families and 26 species of amphibians and ten families and 36 species of reptiles represented within the York River watershed. All three species of sea turtles are protected under the Endangered Species Act and the Northern diamond-backed terrapin is a species of concern. Approximately 230 bird species, resident and migratory, have been recorded within the Chesapeake Bay area. Over 50 families and 190 species of birds have been observed along the estuarine environments of the York River. Specific Reserve components support Bald Eagle nests and Great Blue Heron rookeries. Nineteen families and 50 species of mammals are represented within the York River and its watershed. Of special note is the infrequent occurrence of large marine mammals, such as the bottlenose dolphin and manatee, within the lower York River region.

INTRODUCTION

From its headwaters in the Mattaponi and Pamunkey Rivers to its entrance into the Chesapeake Bay, the York River provides a variety of riverine and estuarine habitats. Consequently the York River system supports a diverse array of vertebrates. Portions of the Chesapeake Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve in Virginia located along the York River provide opportunities for study and observation of many of these species.

The watershed of the York River supports many natural communities, including tidal freshwater marshes, tidal oligohaline marshes, tidal mesohaline and polyhaline marshes, tidal shrub swamps, tidal bald cypress forests and woodlands, tidal hardwood swamps, tidal freshwater and oligohaline aquatic beds and tidal mesohaline and polyhaline aquatic beds (http://www.dcr.virginia.gov/natural_heritage/ncestuarine.shtml). These multiple natural vegetative communities, in turn, support a wide variety of resident and migratory birds, as well as many reptiles, amphibians, and mammals which are primarily year-round residents.

AMPHIBIANS

Amphibians within the York River watershed are dependent upon freshwater and limited by salt intrusion. All species are therefore located primarily in the upper portions of the river's tributaries or at its headwaters. Eight families and approximately 26 species of amphibians are represented in the York watershed, including species such as: marbled salamander (*Ambystoma opacum*; Figure 1), Eastern red-spotted newt (*Notophthalmus viridescens*), American toad (*Bufo americanus*), pine woods treefrog (*Hyla femoralis*), and bullfrog (*Rana catesbeiana*). The Appendix provides a listing of documented species.



Figure 1. Marbled salamander (Photo courtesy of the Virginia Fish and Wildlife Information Service)

REPTILES

Ten families and 36 species of reptiles occur along the York River and its tributaries, including 11 species of turtle, six species of lizards and 19 species of snakes. Of the four species of turtles found in brackish or salty portions of the river, three are sea turtles (commonly found near the mouth of the York River), the fourth is the Northern diamond-backed terrapin (*Malaclemmys terrapin*; Figure 2). This turtle is common along most portions of the lower river and its brackish tributaries where typical food items (fiddler crabs and periwinkle snails) are in abundance. Terrapins prefer open, sandy habitat for breeding where they lay eggs in sandy soils above the high tide line. Two species of sea turtles that are regular visitors to the saltier portions of the river (MANSFIELD, 2006), are the loggerhead turtle (*Caretta caretta*; Figure 3) and Kemp's Ridley (*Lepidochelys kempii*). The green sea turtle (*Chelonia mydas*) is relatively rare. All species of sea turtles found within the



Figure 2. Northern Diamond-backed Terrapin (Photo courtesy of the Virginia Fish and Wildlife Information Service)



Figure 3. Loggerhead Turtle (Photo courtesy of James Cook University)

US are federally protected under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The lower Chesapeake Bay is an important developmental area for both juvenile loggerheads and Kemp's Ridleys as they move into the lower bay and York River for foraging and shelter. Between 5,000 and 10,000 sea turtles enter the Chesapeake Bay each spring and summer, and Mansfield (2006) estimates approximately 1,000 to 3,000 individuals are seasonal residents in the lower Bay. The majority are either juvenile loggerheads or Kemp's Ridleys that use the Bay as a feeding ground. Mansfield (2006) found that juvenile loggerheads and Kemp's Ridleys sea turtles spend approximately 10% of their time at the surface. Unfortunately, it is at this time that they are subject to injury and death due to encounters with vessels and humans. In the 1980s approximately 33% of Virginia's sea turtle mortalities were attributed to entanglement in large mesh pound net leaders (MANSFIELD, 2006). Winter temperatures in Virginia are too cold for the turtles to remain year round, and many individuals found in the lower bay are migrating along the East Coast of the US, or are dispersing young. Since 1979, VIMS has served as the Commonwealth of Virginia's center for the monitoring, study and conservation of endangered and threatened sea turtles within Virginia's waters. Approximately 250 to 350 sea turtles strand within Virginia's waters each year. Most strand during May and June when populations enter the bay, and in October when leaving. Sick or injured sea turtles are treated and/or

rehabilitated at the VIMS campus or other nearby rehabilitation facilities before release back into the wild.

Two families, and 20 species of snakes are known from the York River watershed. One of the most common species may be the northern water snake (*Nerodia sipedon*; Figure 4), which is frequently mistaken for the Eastern cottonmouth (*Agkistrodon piscivorus*; Figure 5). The cottonmouth is one of only two venomous snakes found in the watershed, the other being the Northern copperhead (*Agkistrodon contortrix*). A listing of reptile species documented from the York River watershed is provided in the Appendix.



Figure 4. Northern Water Snake (Photo courtesy of the University of North Carolina)



Figure 5. Eastern Cottonmouth (Photo courtesy of the Armed Forces Pest Management Board)

BIRDS

Approximately 230 bird species have been recorded from the Chesapeake Bay area, both residents and migrants. In marsh, swamp, beach and more open estuarine environments along the York River, approximately 52 families and 192 species are represented. Most species are allied with swamps and associated woodlands, and with fresh and saltwater marshes. A listing of bird species documented from the York River and its tributaries is provided in the Appendix.

Extensive low marsh areas support significant populations of Clapper Rail (*Rallus longirostris*), Seaside Sparrow (*Ammodramus maritimus*), and Marsh Wrens (*Cistothorus palustris*), while tide pools support a large diversity of breeding species, as well as, migratory species. Large high marsh areas provide habitat for breeding populations of Sedge Wrens (*Cistothorus platensis*), Northern Harriers (*Circus cyaneus*; Figure 6), Prairie Warblers



Figure 6. Northern Harrier (Photo courtesy of Coffee Creek Watershed Preserve)



Figure 7. American Oystercatcher (Photo courtesy of Daphne Bremer)

(*Dendroica discolor*), and Eastern Meadowlarks (*Sturnella magna*). Least Terns (*Sterna antillarum*) and American Oystercatchers (*Haematopus palliatus*) are found on sandy berms and barriers while scattered pine hummocks and adjacent maritime forests support significant populations of Brown-headed Nuthatches (*Sitta pusilla*) and Chuck-wills-widows (*Caprimulgus carolinensis*). Marsh, scrub and overwash habitats at the isolated marsh islands of Goodwin Islands support numerous breeding birds including the American Black Ducks (*Anas rubripes*) and American Oystercatchers (*Haematopus palliatus*; Figure 7) (VAD-CR 2005a). American Oystercatchers are on the Audubon Watchlist and are listed as a high priority species in the U.S. Shorebird Conservation Plan.

Aerial surveys of Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) nests and heron nest colonies are flown annually by staff of the Center for Conservation Biology of the College of William and Mary (<http://ccb.wm.edu>). Historically, Goodwin Islands supported a large nesting colony of Great Blue Herons (*Ardea herodias*). By the late 1980s, the colony on Goodwin Islands had grown to approximately 150 pairs and had begun to split and develop other nesting colonies elsewhere. The Catlett Islands reserve site currently supports a small nesting colony of Great Blue Herons (ERDLE and HEFFERNAN, 2005b). Until a hurricane in the fall of 2003 destroyed the nest and large nest trees, at least one pair of Bald Eagles nested at Goodwin Islands, as well as at Catlett Islands. Unlike the Goodwin Islands reserve site, large nest trees are still intact at Catlett Islands, so re-nesting there is possible. Both nesting herons and Bald Eagles are sensitive to disturbance, therefore the isolated locations of these two reserve sites provide critical habitat for nest development. Currently, one Bald Eagle nest is known near the Taskinas Creek Reserve site (MYERS *et al.*, 2008).

Unlike the herons and Bald Eagles, Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*) are widespread nesters in this region and appear to be more tolerant of disturbance. There are over 2,000 breeding pairs in the Chesapeake Bay area; the largest known concentration in the world (www.fws.gov/chesapeakebay/osprey.htm). Osprey nesting is common adjacent to reserve monitoring sites along the York River system (Figure 8) and the population appears to be increasing.



Figure 8. Osprey and chicks on nest near CBNERSVA York River water quality monitoring station (Photo courtesy of Betty Neikirk, VIMS)

Threats to bird populations within the site in general and the Goodwin Islands region, in particular, include: 1) loss of habitat to the invasive marsh grass-common reed (*Phragmites australis*), 2) loss of habitat to sea-level rise, 3) increases in mammal populations and associated predation, and 4) human disturbance. The aggressive invasive plant, common reed, is spreading throughout Goodwin Islands and many other areas in the York River area. Although some high marshes within this system have not been degraded to the same extent as many areas within the upper Chesapeake Bay, many marshes within the system are highly threatened. Rising sea levels continue to threaten low-lying areas, and isolated marsh islands are particularly vulnerable to this ongoing process. Over the past 30 years, mammalian predators such as raccoon, fox, domestic dog and cat have had a detrimental effect on reproductive rates of marsh-bird populations. Human disturbance is a chronic problem at most locations. It is notable that at the present time Bald Eagle, Osprey and Peregrine Falcons (*Falco peregrinus*) have made substantial recoveries from near extirpation in this region.

MAMMALS

Approximately 19 families and 50 species of mammals are represented within the York River watershed. A listing of species documented from the York River watershed is provided in the Appendix. Most of these are small to medium-sized mammals, as there are few large mammals remaining in the area, although some large marine mammals do occur here. Some species, like muskrat (*Ondatra zibethicus*), raccoon (*Procyon lotor*), beaver (*Castor canadensis*), river otter (*Lutra canadensis*), and white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*) are relatively common, while bobcats (*Lynx rufus*) and black bear (*Ursus americanus*) are uncommon. There are few significant invasive mammal species in this area, although the potential for establishment of the nutria (*Myocastor coypus*) in the York system is high (Chesapeake Bay Nutria Working Group 2003). The white-tailed deer (a native species) can have significant negative effects on native tree and herbaceous plant regeneration, recruitment and compositions (HORSELY *et al.*, 2003) and can even disrupt bird populations (DECALETA, 1994). Deer avoid browsing on some invasive non-native plants, such as Japanese stilt grass (TU, 2000) and therefore can indirectly in-

crease the spread of these invasives. Deer were nearly hunted out of many areas in Virginia by the end of the 19th century, however factors such as the implementation of hunting laws, loss of natural predators and increases in foraging habitats has resulted in increased populations that in many areas may now exceed estimated pre-settlement deer densities (ERDLE and HEFFERNAN, 2005a). Although deer are currently in abundance overall, many mammal populations are threatened by large-scale landscape alterations and habitat fragmentation. These trends are occurring in the York River watershed, as they are everywhere. Therefore, large, unfragmented riverine forests and marshes of the reserve, as well as adjacent and nearby lands serve as critical refugia for mammals in a landscape that is increasingly altered and developed.

Large marine mammals are infrequent visitors in the York system, and generally occur close to the Chesapeake Bay and in the lowest reaches of the river. The most common marine mammal, the bottlenose dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*; Figure 9), is an occasional to frequent visitor in summer months (BLAYLOCK, 1988). Most bottlenose dolphin are found near shore with water depths of less than 10m. It is thought that pod



Figure 9. Bottlenose dolphin common to the York River (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

density is related to prey abundance with the main prey in this area being Atlantic croaker (*Micropogon undulates*), spot (*Leiostomus xanthurus*), and sea trout (*Cynoscion* sp.). Mean pod size is greatest in May and September during peak periods of migration (BLAYLOCK, 1988). Another marine mammal occasionally documented from the York River is the manatee (*Trichechus manatus*) (MORGAN *et al.*, 2002). Usually manatee occurrences consist of single individuals that have traveled 800 or more miles north of its usual habitat in Florida. Occasionally these individuals succumb to cold stress in the fall and are found dead. In 1994 though, a manatee nicknamed “Chessie” was observed to have traveled up the Eastern Seaboard into the Chesapeake Bay. As water temperatures dropped, the animal was captured and released back in Florida. In 1995 that same individual again migrated north and was observed in Rhode Island, and in 2001 that same individual was again observed in Virginia. Some migration patterns and/or movements by individuals are not well understood at this time.

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APPENDIX

COMMON AMPHIBIANS, REPTILES, BIRDS AND MAMMALS OF YORK RIVER SYSTEM

AMPHIBIANS

- Family Ambystomatidae-Mole salamanders
Ambystoma maculatum-spotted salamander
Ambystoma opacum-marbled salamander
Ambystoma mabeei-Mabee's salamander
Family Salamandridae-Newts
Notophthalmus viridescens-Eastern red-spotted newt
Family Plethodontidae-Lungless salamanders

REPTILES

- Family Chelydridae-Snapping turtles
Chelydra serpentina-snapping turtle
Family Kinosternidae-Musk and mud turtles
Sternotherus odoratus-stinkpot
Kinosternon subrubrum-Eastern mud turtle
Family Emydidae-Box and water turtles
Clemmys guttata-spotted turtle
Terrapene carolina carolina-Eastern box turtle
Malaclemmys terrapin terrapin-Northern diamondback terrapin
Chrysemys rubriventris rubriventris-Northern red-bellied turtle
Chrysemys picta picta-Eastern painted turtle
Family Cheloniidae-Sea turtles
Chelonia mydas mydas-Atlantic green turtle
Caretta caretta-Loggerhead turtle
Lepidochelys kempii-Kemp's Ridley sea turtle
Family Iguanidae-Iguanid lizards
Sceloporus undulatus-fence lizard
Family Teiidae-Whiptail lizards
Cnemidophorus sexlineatus sexlineatus-six-lined racerunner
Family Scincidae-Skinks
Scincella lateralis-ground skink
Eumeces fasciatus-five-lined skink
Eumeces laticeps-broad-headed skink
Family Anguidae-Glass lizards
Ophisaurus attenuatus-Eastern slender glass lizard
Family Colubridae-Colubrid snakes
Nerodia sipedon sipedon-Northern water snake
Storeria dekayi dekayi-Northern brown snake
Thamnophis sirtalis sirtalis-Eastern garter snake
Thamnophis sauritus sauritus-Eastern ribbon snake
Virginia valeriae-smooth earth snake
Virginia striatula-rough earth snake
Heterodon platyrhinos-Eastern hognose snake
Diadophis punctatus edwardsi-Northern ringneck snake
Carphophis amoenus amoenus-Eastern worm snake
Farancia erythrogramma-rainbow snake
Coluber constrictor constrictor-Northern black racer
Opheodrys aestivus-rough green snake
Elaphe guttata guttata-corn snake
Elaphe obsoleta obsoleta-black rat snake
Lampropeltis getulus getulus-Eastern kingsnake
Lampropeltis triangulum triangulum-Eastern milk snake
Lampropeltis calligaster rhombomaculata-mole snake
Cemophora coccinea-scarlet snake

- Family Viperidae-Vipers and pit-vipers
Agkistrodon contortrix mokeson-Northern copperhead
Agkistrodon piscivorous-Eastern cottonmouth

MAMMALS

- Family Didelphidae-Opossums
Didelphis virginiana-Virginia opossum
Family Soricidae-Shrews
Sorex longirostris longirostris-Southeastern shrew
Cryptotis parva-least shrew
Blarina carolinensis-Southern short-tailed shrew
Blarina brevicauda-Northern short-tailed shrew
Sorex hoyi-pygmy shrew
Family Talpidae-Moles
Scalopus aquaticus-Eastern mole
Condylura cristata-star-nosed mole
Family Vespertilionidae-Vespertilionid bats
Myotis lucifugus-little brown myotis
Lasiorycteris noctivagans-silver-haired bat
Pipistrellus subflavus-Eastern pipistrelle
Eptesicus fuscus-big brown bat
Nycticeius humeralis-evening bat
Lasiurus borealis-Eastern red bat
Lasiurus intermedius floridanus-Northern yellow bat
Family Leporidae-Hares and rabbits
Sylvilagus palustris-marsh rabbit
Sylvilagus floridanus-Eastern cottontail
Family Sciuridae-Squirrels
Marmota monax-woodchuck
Tamias striatus-Eastern chipmunk
Sciurus carolinensis-gray squirrel
Glaucomys volans-Southern flying squirrel
Family Castoridae-Beavers
Castor canadensis-American beaver
Family Muridae-Murid rats and mice
Reithrodontomys humulis-Eastern harvest mouse
Peromyscus leucopus-white-footed mouse
Peromyscus gossypinus-cotton mouse
Ochrotomys nuttalli-golden mouse
Oryzomys palustris-marsh rice rat
Sigmodon hispidus-hispid cotton rat
Clethrionomys gapperi-Southern red-backed vole
Microtus pennsylvanicus-meadow vole
Microtus pinetorum-woodland vole
Ondatra zibethicus-common muskrat
Rattus norvegicus-Norway rat (introduced)
Mus musculus-house mouse (introduced)
Family Zapodidae-Jumping mice
Zapus hudsonius hudsonius-meadow jumping mouse
Family Myocastoridae-Nutria
Myocastor coypus-nutria (introduced)
Family Delphinidae-Dolphins
Tursiops truncatus-bottle-nosed dolphin
Family Cervidae-Deer
Odocoileus virginianus-white-tailed deer

Family Canidae-Dogs
Vulpes vulpes fulva-red fox
Urocyon cinereoargenteus-gray fox
Canis latrans-coyote

Family Ursidae-Bears
Ursus americanus americanus-black bear

Family Procyonidae-Raccoons and weasels
Procyon lotor-raccoon
Mustela frenata-long-tailed weasel
Mustela vison-mink
Lutra canadensis-Northern river otter

Family Mephitidae-Skunks
Mephitis mephitis-striped skunk

Family Felidae-Cats
Lynx rufus-bobcat

Family Phocidae-Hair seals
Phoca vitulina-harbor seal

Family Trichechidae-Manatees
Trichechus manatus-manatee

BIRDS

Gavia immer Common Loon
Podiceps grisegena Red-Necked Grebe
Podiceps auritus Horned Grebe
Podilymbus podiceps Pied-Billed Grebe
Pelecanus occidentalis Brown Pelican
Morus bassanus Gannet
Phalacrocorax auritus Double-Crested Cormorant
Botaurus lentiginosus American Bittern
Ixobrychus exilis Least Bittern
Nycticorax nycticorax Black-Crowned Night Heron
Nyctanassa violacea Yellow-Crowned Night Heron
Butorides virescens Green Heron
Bubulcus ibis Cattle Egret
Egretta caerulea Little blue Heron
Egretta rufescens Reddish Egret
Egretta tricolor Louisiana Heron
Egretta thula Snowy Egret
Ardea alba Common Egret
Ardea herodias Great Blue Heron
Plegadis falcinellus Glossy Ibis
Cygnus olor Mute Swan
Olor columbianus Whistling Swan
Chen caerulescens Snow Goose
Branta canadensis Canada Goose
Branta bernicla Brant
Aix sponsa Wood Duck
Anas americana American Widgeon
Anas strepera Gadwall
Anas crecca Common Teal
Anas carolinensis Green-Winged Teal
Anas platyrhynchos Mallard
Anas rubripes Black Duck
Anas acuta Northern Pintail
Anas discors Blue-Winged Teal
Anas cyanoptera Cinnamon Teal
Anas clypeata Shoveler
Aythya valisineria Canvasback
Aythya americana Redhead
Aythya collaris Ring-Necked Duck
Aythya marila Greater Scaup
Aythya affinis Lesser Scaup

Somateria mollissima Common Eider
Clangula hyemalis Oldsquaw
Melanitta nigra Common Scoter
Melanitta perspicillata Surf Scoter
Bucephala albeola Bufflehead
Bucephala clangula Common Goldeneye
Lophodytes cucullatus Hooded Merganser
Mergus serrator Red-breasted Merganser
Mergus merganser Common Merganser
Oxyura jamaicensis Ruddy Duck
Buteo lagopus Rough-Legged Hawk
Haliaeetus leucocephalus Bald Eagle
Circus cyaneus Marsh Hawk
Pandion haliaetus Osprey
Falco peregrinus Peregrine Falcon
Rallus longirostris Clapper Rail
Rallus elegans King Rail
Rallus limicola Virginia Rail
Porzana carolina Sora
Gallinula chloropus Common Gallinule
Fulica americana American Coot
Haematopus palliatus American Oystercatcher
Charadrius vociferus Killdeer
Pluvialis dominica American Golden Plover
Pluvialis squatarola Black-Bellied Plover
Scolopax minor American Woodcock
Gallinago gallinago Common Snipe
Catoptrophorus semipalmatus Willet
Actitis macularia Spotted Sandpiper
Tringa melanoleuca Greater Yellowlegs
Tringa flavipes Lesser Yellowlegs
Erolia alpina Dunlin
Larus atricilla Laughing Gull
Larus delawarensis Ring-Billed Gull
Larus hyperboreus Glaucous Gull
Larus fuscus Lesser Black-Backed Gull
Larus argentatus Herring Gull
Larus marinus Great Black-Backed Gull
Rhynchops niger Black Skimmer
Sterna maxima Royal Tern
Sterna caspia Caspian Tern
Sterna hirundo Common Tern
Sterna antillarum Least Tern
Tyto alba Barn Owl
Strix varia Barred Owl
Bubo virginianus Great-Horned Owl
Archilochus colubris Ruby-Throated Hummingbird
Megasceryle alcyon Belted Kingfisher
Dryocopus pileatus Pileated Woodpecker
Melanerpes carolinus Red-Bellied Woodpecker
Picoides pubescens Downy Woodpecker
Picoides villosus Hairy Woodpecker
Sphyrapicus varius Easter Sapsucker
Colaptes auratus Yellow-Shafted Flicker
Gallinula chloropus Common Gallinule
Sayornis phoebe Easter Phoebe
Tachycineta bicolor Tree Swallow
Riparia riparia Bank Swallow
Hirundo rustica Barn Swallow
Corvus ossifragus Fish Crow
Corvus brachyrhynchos Common Crow
Sitta carolinensis White-Breasted Nuthatch

<i>Sitta pusilla</i>	Brown-Headed Nuthatch
<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	Winter Wren
<i>Cistothorus palustris</i>	Long-Billed Marsh Wren
<i>Cistothorus platensis</i>	Short-Billed Marsh Wren
<i>Dumetella carolinensis</i>	Catbird
<i>Poliophtila caerulea</i>	Blue-Gray Gnatcatcher
<i>Vireo griseus</i>	White-Eyed Vireo
<i>Mniotilta varia</i>	Black and White Warbler
<i>Vermivora pinus</i>	Blue-Winged Warbler
<i>Dendroica dominica</i>	Yellow-Throated Warbler
<i>Dendroica discolor</i>	Prairie Warbler
<i>Dendroica coronata</i>	Myrtle Warbler
<i>Setophaga ruticilla</i>	American Redstart
<i>Limothlypis swainsonii</i>	Swainson's Warbler
<i>Protonotaria citrea</i>	Prothonotary Warbler
<i>Geothlypis trichas</i>	Yellowthroat
<i>Wilsonia citrina</i>	Hooded Warbler
<i>Dolichonyx oryzivorus</i>	Bobolink
<i>Sturnella magna</i>	Eastern Meadowlark
<i>Agelaius phoeniceus</i>	Red-Winged Blackbird
<i>Quiscalus major</i>	Boat-Tailed Grackle
<i>Molothrus ater</i>	Cowbird
<i>Carduelis tristis</i>	American Goldfinch
<i>Ammodramus maritimus</i>	Seaside Sparrow
<i>Melospiza melodia</i>	Song Sparrow
<i>Zonotrichia albicollis</i>	White-Throated Sparrow
<i>Carpodacus mexicanus</i>	House Finch
<i>Sayornis phoebe</i>	Easter Phoebe