

Bald Head-Smith Island

Location: Brunswick County

Total Size: 5,955.0 ha (14,708.9 acres)



Site Description: The site is located on the eastern bank of the lower Cape Fear River, south of Wilmington and east of Southport. It includes an area from Fort Fisher, south to Cape Fear Point and west to the intertidal sand flats near Battery Island, including open water, sandflats, mudflats, marshes east of the main river channel, and adjacent waters of the Cape Fear River. Bald Head and Middle Islands have well-developed maritime forest and are among the best examples of this habitat type in North Carolina. The site also has a spectacular tidal creek and marsh system. The diversity of habitats found at this site support a great diversity of bird life throughout the year. This site is part of the Southport Christmas Bird Count, which consistently has one of the highest numbers of species in North Carolina.

Habitats: maritime forest, saltmarsh, barrier beach/dune, river, sandflat/mudflat

Land Use: wildlife conservation, other conservation, recreation/tourism, residential development

Primary Threats: residential/commercial development, recreational development/overuse, disturbance to birds, predation

Protection Status: 10,000 acres are protected by the NC State Park system and NC Division of Coastal Management. This includes all marshes, Zeke's Island, Bluff Island and portions of Bald Head Island. The majority of Bald Head and Middle Islands are privately owned.

Conservation Issues: Bald Head and Middle Islands are being developed, although tracts within both areas have been set aside for conservation. The majority of development will directly impact the maritime forest community. Raccoon and fox populations are unusually high and likely have a significant impact on ground-nesting birds. The southern end of the Fort Fisher spit is open to vehicles. This activity and increased recreational use of the area have contributed to the decline in beach-nesting birds in recent years.

Birds: The site includes one of the state's largest and best examples of maritime forest and significant saltmarsh (Criteria NC4). The forest supports the state's largest population of breeding painted buntings and provides excellent stopover habitat for migrant songbirds. Shorebirds abound on the extensive tidal flats, marshes, and beach. Wading birds from the nearby Battery Island colony forage in the marshes, freshwater ponds, and along tidal creeks. Waterfowl numbers have declined over the past decade, but at least 12 species of ducks are common in the river, tidal creeks, bays and ponds. The site supports a small population of wintering Common Goldeneyes, the largest known, regularly occurring population of this species in the state. A few Least Terns, Black Skimmers, Willets, Wilson's Plovers, and American Oystercatchers nest on area beaches during most seasons, but total numbers are not known. The site supports North Carolina's largest wintering population of American Oystercatchers. Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrows, Seaside Sparrows, and Clapper Rails are abundant in area marshes. Raptors, especially peregrines, merlins, kestrels and Sharp-shins are regular visitors during migration.

Key Bird Species

Criteria		Season	Number	Year
2a	Painted Bunting	B	40+ prs.	2002
3a	American Oystercatcher	W	260	2002
3ei	Waterbirds	All (NB)	10,000	2003
3d	Shorebirds	SM, W, FM	6,500	2003
3a	Common Goldeneye	W	20	2002
3g	migratory landbirds	FM, SM	--	

B=Breeding FM=Fall Migration SM=Spring Migration W=Winter NB=non-breeding