

CAPE MAY MIGRATORY BIRD REFUGE

HISTORY

The Cape May Migratory Bird Refuge is located where the now-vanished town of South Cape May once bustled as a Victorian resort. Destroyed by a storm and overtaken by the sea in the early 1950s, most of the old seaside spot lies scattered along the ocean floor. When the great flood abated, a portion of the devastated area reverted to its natural state, with meadows, low grasses and shrubs, along with mud flats and wetland areas, serving as prime habitat for shorebirds, migrating songbirds and raptors.

In 1981, The Nature Conservancy acquired 212 acres of the former town site as a migratory bird refuge.

THE PRESERVE TODAY

An internationally recognized birding mecca, the Refuge and surrounding Cape May area is one of the premier birding spots on the East Coast. The preserve's diverse habitats including: ocean beach, primary and secondary dune, fresh and brackish water marshes, maritime forest, thicket, wetland meadows and fields provide a haven for countless species of birds, both rare and common.

The arrival of autumn marks an especially dramatic time of year at the Refuge, as migrating songbirds, shorebirds and waterfowl stop here to rest en route to their winter breeding grounds.



About 60,000 raptors and over 1,000,000 seabirds migrate through this area each year. *Great Egret - photo credit: Dottie Dowling*

Tens of thousands of raptors, including Bald Eagles, Peregrine Falcons, Osprey, Coopers Hawks, and several species of owls also flock to the peninsula-- one of the last spots to feed

and rest before their arduous journey south across the Delaware Bay along the Atlantic Flyway. Migrating dragonflies and butterflies also use the peninsula as a resting area on their way to wintering grounds in Central America.

In addition to the wetland habitat valued by migrants, the Cape May Migratory Bird Refuge features a full mile of beachfront property - a precious commodity in New Jersey. Because of this feature, the refuge provides a haven for two endangered species: the Least Tern and the Piping Plover.

Both of these species build their nests on beaches by forming small depressions in the sand, which has left them especially vulnerable to human disturbance.



photo credit: Carrie Bell

The Piping Plover and the Least Tern are struggling against the odds to survive. With the help of summer interns and the volunteer

"Plover Patrol," the Conservancy erects fencing around nesting areas, patrols the beach, educates the public, and helps protect the birds from people, dogs, and other predators.

THE RESTORATION PROJECT

The Cape May Migratory Bird Refuge restoration project, facilitated with help from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the NJ DEP, grew out of the need to provide ecosystem restoration and storm damage reduction. Restoration was essential after shoreline erosion drastically degraded the existing freshwater ecosystem through saltwater intrusion and drainage pattern alteration. Dune breaching caused flooding to Cape May Point, West Cape May and Lower Township, and also altered the freshwater wetlands. As a result, invasive species became pervasive.



photo credit: Chris Kisiel




For more information and the latest information or FIELD TRIPS and VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES... Please contact Khara McKeen, Outreach Assistant kmckeen@tnc.org or (609)861-4134


RESTORATION RESULTS

FRESHWATER WETLAND WORK ENTAILED:


- ✓ **Phragmites control:** *Phragmites australis*, or foxtail, threatens natural communities by crowding out native species. This highly invasive species has been mowed and sprayed (with a glyphosate-based herbicide), causing a significant reduction in density.
- ✓ **Beach replenishment:** of 1.9 miles of beach.
- ✓ **Dune creation and enhancement:** A new 1-mile-long dune was created with several "Piping Plover crossovers" (areas of gently sloping dune that will remain vegetation-free) providing a place for plovers and their chicks to forage behind the dunes. An existing 0.4-mile-long dune was also increased by 4-5 feet, dune fencing at the trail crossovers was installed and dune grass was planted.
- ✓ **Piping Plover foraging ponds:** Three ponds were created behind the dunes and feature gentle slopes for ease of access by Piping Plovers.
- ✓ **Topographical mapping:** The entire Refuge has been mapped to six-inch elevation differentials.
- ✓ **Levee creation and enhancement:** A new levee was created in the eastern portion of the Refuge and existing levees, including the two where the Main and East trails are located, have been raised by 2-3 feet.
- ✓ **Enhanced water control:** A 60-foot-wide channel was created that runs from the southwestern part of the neighboring Cape May Point State Park to the drainage point on the east end of the Refuge where Cape Island Creek is piped under the city of Cape May. Each of the levees has a water control structure, allowing TNC to control water levels at different areas within the Refuge.
- ✓ **Enriched habitat:** Several gull and tern islands were built in the wetlands, making the site a suitable nesting location for terns or herons.
- ✓ **Frog ponds:** Five small frog ponds have been built on the eastern end of the Refuge, providing additional habitat for the state-endangered Southern Grey Treefrog.


MANY NEW VISITOR ENHANCEMENTS INCLUDE:


-  A new viewing platform on the East trail allows for a 360° view of the Refuge and across the Delaware Bay.
-  A new trail was created between the freshwater wetlands and the dunes and existing trails were raised, allowing for improved wildlife viewing opportunities.
-  The new parking area provides access for more vehicles and includes a new bicycle rack that accommodates 50 bicycles. Split rail fence and native plant landscaping frame the entire parking lot. Specific plants were chosen for their high value to a variety of preserve wildlife.

 The new Cape May Migratory Bird Refuge entrance sign helps to identify the preserve. Other new visitor enhancements include kiosk signs explaining the ecological value of the project and a visitor welcome booth, where visitors can sign in and record their wildlife observations.

RESTORATION SIGNS OF SUCCESS

 Ospreys are nesting for the first time on the platform overlooking the Piping Plover Pond at the Refuge. An exciting sign of a successful restoration project is the habitat being used by a pair of Osprey to feed and raise their young, producing a thriving brood of young birds at the site.

 Black Skimmers are back and utilizing the undisturbed feeding and resting habitats found at the Refuge, which are becoming scarce for Endangered beach-nesting birds like the Black Skimmer. Visitors can witness the skimmers feeding in the newly created channel at the Refuge from the platform above.

 Beach-nesting birds find refuge within the Refuge as adults and chicks feed completely undisturbed behind the dunes at the new Plover Pond. With threats from both natural predators and people engaging in inappropriate recreation the pond provides a perfect haven, where beach-nesting birds have made this unique area their primary feeding source at the Refuge.


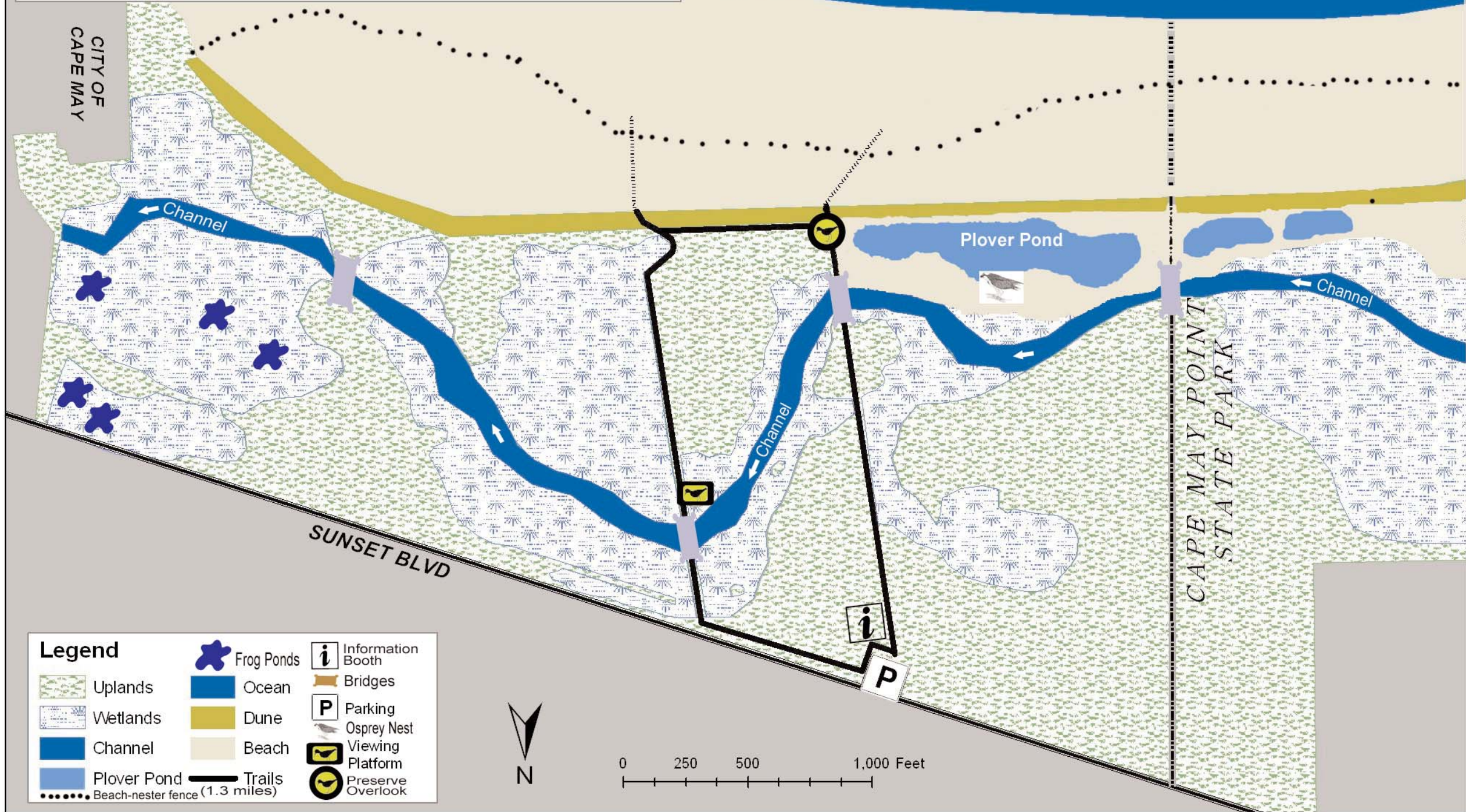
 Critical habitat is exposed and wetlands are productive since invasive species have been removed. TNC's ability to control water levels in different areas of the Refuge coupled with the removal of invasive phragmites provides migrating and resident shorebirds a variety of microhabitats like shallow freshwater depressions, mud and sand flats where they can feed or rest.



photo credit: Alyssa Jones

Cape May Migratory Bird Refuge

ATLANTIC OCEAN



Legend

- | | | |
|--------------------------------|------------|-------------------|
| Uplands | Frog Ponds | Information Booth |
| Wetlands | Ocean | Bridges |
| Channel | Dune | Parking |
| Plover Pond | Beach | Osprey Nest |
| Beach-nester fence (1.3 miles) | Trails | Viewing Platform |
| | | Preserve Overlook |

