

# RAPPAHANNOCK RIVER VALLEY

NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

In a tangle of twigs and grasses in the crook of a high evergreen limb, sits an eaglet. Apart from its fluff of feathers, it's all mouth, waiting for the return of its parents from a fishing foray in the Rappahannock River and its freshwater marshes. As the hatchling's calls rise to the canopy of this eastern Virginia forest, it joins a lively chorus of other flightless birds. Last year, 193 of these young bald eagles fledged in or near the Rappahannock River Valley National Wildlife Refuge.

The refuge's acquisition border, bounded by the Rappahannock River to the south and west, the Potomac River to the north and the Chesapeake Bay to the east, hosts a greater density of bald eagles than almost any other place on the East Coast. Nearly 400 individuals were counted here last year, making this refuge a continentally significant area for bald eagle conservation.<sup>7</sup>

But this refuge, established in 1996, also serves as forest habitat for species such as wood thrush and grassland nesting birds such as grasshopper sparrows and northern bobwhite. With more than 225 species of birds present, this refuge has become a rare haven in the densely populated East. Indigo buntings dart in bursts of electric blue, Acadian flycatchers find refuge in the forest, red-winged blackbirds chatter and sing on marsh grasses, while groups of eastern meadowlarks alight upon restored grasslands. They are joined by mammals, reptiles and amphibians, such as the green tree frog that choruses and croons for a mate in spring and river otters and beavers that swim the refuge waters with bass, catfish, croaker and endangered shortnose sturgeon. All these species are buoyed by the diverse plant communities that grow here, including the endangered joint-vetch, turk's cap lilies, marsh hibiscus and wild rice.

As it stands today, the refuge exists as a handful of scattered parcels within a larger seven-county acquisition boundary, where it is authorized to purchase property from willing sellers. Currently, this land remains largely a matrix of high-quality forested and riparian habitat and agricultural fields. But sprawl has been

River otter | © S. Michael Bisceglie/Animals Animals



washing over all of eastern Virginia as populations balloon in Washington, D.C., Fredericksburg and Richmond, gobbling up land in the process. Because the Bush administration has consistently starved the Land and Water Conservation Fund, which is supposed to help purchase land here, and ignored the provisions in the refuge improvement act that call for continued growth of the refuge system, the Rappahannock Valley River refuge remains a hodgepodge of scattered lands.

So far, the refuge has managed to cobble together about 7,700 acres, only a third of its goal, with much help from land donations and private partners. Meanwhile, willing sellers—landowners who want their land protected but can't afford to donate it—are being turned away, and high-priority habitat is being lost to development because the refuge just doesn't have the money. In general, land acquisition for the refuge system has ground to a halt under the Bush

administration, and for the Rappahannock River Valley refuge and the hundreds of bald eagles that depend on it, the spread of development means time is running out to protect one of the last and best places for wildlife in the mid-Atlantic.



Immature bald eagle | © Tim Fitzharris/Minden Pictures