Department of Conservation & Recreation

PARKERS MARSH NATURAL AREA PRESERVE MANAGEMENT

Technical Information Provided to Del. Bloxom

Virginia's Natural Area Preserve System

Virginia's Natural Area Preserve System was created in 1986 to safeguard the **rarest plants, animals, and habitats** in the Commonwealth. These preserves are established with **biodiversity protection as their core purpose**. Passive public use is welcome when it can occur **without harm to the sensitive natural resources**. The Commonwealth's 67 Natural Area Preserves provide two types of public access:

- Some NAPs are designed for visitors, with trails, parking, and signage that help balance access with protection.
- Others—like Parker's Marsh—lack infrastructure. While public access is not prohibited, protecting sensitive areas becomes far more complex without physical guidance or control.

Parkers Marsh Natural Area Preserve

The Parkers Marsh Natural Area Preserve incorporates Chesapeake Bay beach habitat, low marsh, high marsh and shrub and forest vegetation. The wetland communities provide habitat for a variety of plant and animal species, including migrating waterfowl, shorebirds and songbirds. The extensive saltmarsh is by far the most notable feature within this area, comprising approximately 75% of the site. A maritime shrub community supporting species such as marsh elder (*Iva frutescens*) and black cherry is found on old dune ridges in the marsh and on the bay shore. Narrow bands of forest dominated by loblolly pine (*Pinus taeda*) and black cherry (*Prunus serotina* var. *serotina*) occur along the tops of old dunes. Some of the low primary dunes support grassland species such as saltmeadow cordgrass (*Spartina patens*) and beach panic grass (*Panicum amarum* var. *amarulum*, = *Panicum amarulum*). The salt marsh at this site provides ideal habitat for marsh nesting birds. One rare marsh nesting species, the sharp-tailed sparrow (*Ammodramus caudacutus*), has been observed here. Peregrine falcons have successfully nested here as recently as 1998.

The beach strand here supports an exemplary population of the federally protected Northeastern beach tiger beetle (*Habroscelimorpha dorsalis dorsalis*). The adults are active along the intertidal zone (the area between high and low tide) during the day and rest under the sand along the back beach at night. The larvae inhabit vertical burrows within

the intertidal zone, capturing food items washed ashore by waves. **For this reason, sand disturbance (digging) by visitors or their dogs is not permitted.**

The marsh has been designated an Audubon Important Bird Area as part of the Delmarva Bayside Marshes IBA, which extends from Saxis WMA to just north of the Northampton County line.

Parkers Marsh: A Sensitive Site with Unique Challenges

This preserve highlights a broader issue across similar shoreline habitats: How can we manage increasing public use while preserving the fragile ecological values that led to the permanent protection and preservation of the place?

Key considerations at Parker's Marsh:

1. **Boat-only access** and no visitor facility development means traditional visitor management tools—like parking limits and designated trails—are not available to aid in balancing use with impact.
2. A **small stretch of sandy shoreline** (~1 acre) is heavily used for recreation but also **hosts some of Virginia's most imperiled species**, including the **northeastern beach tiger beetle**.
3. Other shoreline areas in the preserve are less visited—but also less biologically significant—making this small zone **both the most desired and most vulnerable**.
4. **Public perception** is that decades of recreation indicate harmlessness of this activity, but this doesn't reflect the larger context of habitat loss statewide and the growing pressure on these last remaining strongholds. There is ecological evidence that continued heavy public use is negatively impacting the species protected at Parkers Marsh.
5. **Some impacts**—such as disturbance to burrowed insects or nesting avoidance by birds due to human presence—**are invisible but severe**. Even light use can result in long-term habitat degradation. Ecological impacts include:
    - **Burrow collapse and mortality** of **northeastern beach tiger beetles** due to compaction and digging.
    - **Loss of nesting bird habitat**—limited current nesting despite otherwise suitable conditions, attributed to consistent human disturbance.
    - **Silent impacts**—wildlife avoidance and degraded reproductive success are difficult to detect but ecologically significant.

What Are We Doing Now?

There are no public access restriction during daylight hours at Parkers Marsh Natural Area Preserve. Agency personnel are working to educate user groups about impacts and ways in which they can use the Natural Area Preserve in a more sustainable and sensitive manner, while still enjoying all that the site offers related to outdoor recreation access. This includes educating the public about the rules and regulations in effect at all our Natural Area Preserves (outlined on the next page) as well as specific rules at Parkers Marsh regarding sand disturbance.

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

- Some preserves are open year-round, from sunrise to sunset. However, others have limited hours and may be closed for management purposes. Before you visit, check the preserve's web page for updates and driving directions at dcr.virginia.gov/ natural-heritage/natural-area-preserves/.
- Research and keep an eye on weather conditions. Know your limitations and skills, as well as those of your group.
- Poor, or lack of, cell phone coverage is common. Always tell someone where you are going before you visit a preserve. Trails may be steep, narrow and remote. Most are inaccessible to emergency vehicles. There is unlikely to be DCR staff on site when you visit a preserve, so be prepared and have an emergency action plan.
- Carry maps, a compass or GPS unit and plenty of drinking water.

RESPECT THE RULES

- Park only in designated spaces. If the parking area is full, the preserve is at maximum capacity. Please come back another time.
- Obey posted signs.
- To protect fragile habitats and prevent damage to trails, stay on marked trails.
- Keep pets leashed.
- ATVs, off-road vehicles, camping and fires are not allowed.
- Horses and bicycles are not allowed (unless specifically permitted).
- Public Use of Alcohol is Prohibited
- Preserve the past; examine, but do not remove, cultural or historic artifacts.
- Leave rocks, plants, animals and other natural objects as you find them.

WILDLIFE

- Respect wildlife and observe wild animals from a distance. Use binoculars and cameras.
- Never feed wild animals. Feeding wild animals damages their health and exposes them to predators and other dangers.
- Avoid wildlife during sensitive times, such as when they are mating, nesting or raising young.
- If you observe a wild animal acting strangely (not running away from you), use caution and back away as the animal may have rabies and pose a serious danger.

MANAGE WASTE PROPERLY

- Clean up trash and waste. Leave the preserve cleaner than you found it.
- Please do not dispose of human or pet waste in bodies of water. Most preserves have no restrooms or trash receptacles. Plan accordingly, and always pack out your trash and bagged pet waste.

The Path Forward

While **no public access restrictions are currently proposed**, there is a need to evaluate options that could **sustain both the preserve's ecological value and allow for continued public use and enjoyment.**

Options the agency may consider include:

- **Seasonal adjustments**: Certain periods may be more critical for nesting and sensitive species would benefit from reduced visitation during those windows.
- **Soft zoning**: Signage or outreach that encourages visitors to avoid the most fragile sections of shoreline.

- **Managed access models**: Examples from other state or federal lands where small-scale permitting systems help reduce impact while preserving equity and access.

Each of these approaches would be subject to careful review, community engagement, and transparency before any implementation.

Key Messages

- Parkers Marsh is one of the Commonwealth's most biologically rich and fragile shoreline preserves. It provides rare habitat for species that have disappeared from much of the East Coast—like the **northeastern beach tiger beetle**, a federally protected insect that depends on sandy shorelines.

- Virginia's Eastern Shore has remained less developed than many other coastal areas—and that's precisely why species like the tiger beetle still survive here. But heavy/growing use, even by respectful visitors, is **impacting these fragile ecosystems**.

- A **small area of open beach (<1 acre)** is heavily visited—often over 100 people on summer weekends. That exact area is also the **most ecologically sensitive**—used by tiger beetles and likely avoided by nesting birds due to noise and activity. We want to preserve this shoreline **for both people and wildlife**. That means thinking carefully about how use and protection can coexist—so that neither is lost.

- We're working with local leaders, experts, and community members to explore solutions. **No changes have been decided**, and any proposals would involve public input.

THINGS TO REMEMBER WHEN VISITING PARKERS MARSH NAP

- Fires, ATVs, and camping are not allowed.
- Dogs must be leashed at all times.
- No hunting and no discharge of firearms.
- Please do not damage or remove plants and wildlife.
- Public consumption of alcohol is prohibited.
- Disturbing or causing the compaction of sand can result in the destruction of critical species, therefor digging in the sand is not allowed.
- We request that visitors be careful with things that can result in negatively impacting the beach habitat by compacting the sand. Examples include heavy coolers or wheeled coolers.
- The Natural Area Preserve is open from dawn to dusk. Visting at other times is not allowed.
- Please respect any barriers placed on the Natural Area Preserve to protect sensitive habitats or nesting sites.
- Please observe and follow information posted on official signs.