

History of the Farm Creek Sanctuary

Farm Creek Sanctuary is an approximately 750 acre tract of marsh and forest located near Toddville in Dorchester County, Maryland, and owned by Chesapeake Audubon Society (CAS). Its history shows how a group of enthusiastic volunteers can preserve land and make a difference for wildlife.

In 1977, a real estate ad in the *Baltimore Sunpapers* caught the eye of CAS member Joann Theobald. The small ad was a listing for 300 acres of marshland on Maryland's Eastern Shore. Calls to CAS Board members quickly verified enthusiasm for possible purchase of the property. With this in mind, Bob Augustine and Rodger Waldman set out to locate the property to get a feel for its suitability as a wildlife sanctuary. Near the site, they got out of the car and commented about the mosquitoes most likely joking about them but started down the dirt road none-the-less. After about 50 yards they stopped talking, as they could not speak without getting a mouth full of mosquitoes; after another 10 yards they looked at each other and sprinted for the car.

But Rodger and Bob found the area beautiful and ecologically significant. Indeed, a Smithsonian study found the area marshes a top priority for preservation. The owner of the 300 acres was contacted. CAS learned that the land was only accessible by water, which clarified why the price was only \$11,000. Still not deterred, arrangements were made to visit the site. Ted Baird and Rodger met the owner with his boat at the Toddville dock. (At the time, there was an active seafood processing plant and many watermen bringing in their catch at the dock. Sadly that is no longer the situation.) Before departing for Baltimore, Rodger pulled a wad of bills from his pocket, and with only a handshake, an agreement to purchase was concluded.

A May 6, 1977 letter to NAS requesting financial help pointed out that, Dorchester County contains 13 of the 42 active bald eagle nests in Maryland . [By 2004 the number of active Maryland nests had increased to 368. Earlier this year an eagle's nest was observed at the Farm Creek Audubon Sanctuary (FCAS) but it is unknown whether it is active.] Also, ospreys, herons, numerous species of ducks, geese, otters, deer, turtles, and other plants and animal life indigenous to the marshes of the Eastern Shore of Maryland, all frequent the sanctuary. Approximately 60 percent of the 300 acres is bordered by navigable water Farm Creek on the south, and Bridges Creek on the east. Total water and creek frontage is three miles. We have oystering rights to the middle of Farm Creek.

On May 31, 1977, NAS issued an \$11,000 check in the form of a LOAN FOR PURCHASE OF 300 ACRES OF MARSHLAND ON THE LOWER DELMARVA PENINSULA-AS A WILDLIFE SANCTUARY. Earlier, NAS's Sanctuary Director (Frosty Anderson) and Regional Representative (Frank Dunstan) had visited the property and agreed this was priority wetland habitat that fit within the preservation goals of NAS. The money was made available through the G.S. Whittell Fund, a revolving fund for Chapter use. Terms of the interest free loan were generous in that payment had to be made within five years. Even so, this was a big commitment, especially when no one in Chesapeake Audubon had any fundraising experience.

This commitment, however, was about to grow. Within a couple of months of establishing Farm

Creek Sanctuary, CAS learned that the adjoining land was available to CAS for purchase. Terms of the option agreement were that CAS must raise \$60,000 to obtain 800 acres or \$30,000 to obtain 400 acres. Great excitement accompanied this, as this purchase would provide land access to the complete Sanctuary.

Once again NAS came through with a \$30,000 loan. The November, 1977 membership newsletter stated, "Our Sanctuary was increased by the purchase of an additional 540 acres. The Sanctuary now consists of 840 acres. Marshland surveys are notoriously inaccurate, as are the tax maps. A more recent Aguesstimate is that the Sanctuary consists of about 750 acres.

This newsletter also revealed that, The Sanctuary Fund now totals \$5,723.54. Without an affluent donor base the only way to repay the loan was for the membership to work for it. And work they did! Funding events included selling chances, T-shirts, holding dances and an art show, working a concession stand during Oriole baseball games, birdseed sales, (which reached 100,000 pounds some years), bake sales, etc. Additionally, a large percentage of membership dues were diverted to the loan, and donations from members, friends, and other organizations allowed the debt to be paid in February, 1984. The names of those who accomplished this are too numerous to mention but their efforts are reflected in the beauty and ecological value of Farm Creek.

Chesapeake Audubon has owned Farm Creek Sanctuary for more than thirty years. Although it is remote, difficult of access, and seldom visited, it remains a pristine component of the Chesapeake Bay ecosystem. It is one of a very few tracts of marshland that have not been burned for at least forty years, and thus provides a reference for scientists who study marshes. Saltmarsh sharp-tailed sparrows, a rare species on the Audubon Watch List, are common here. Black rails, on the State list of rare species, have been heard on the property. We at Chesapeake Audubon are proud of the foresight of our early members that has allowed preservation of this wonderful slice of the Chesapeake!