



# Prime Hook Notes

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## FOWLER'S BEACH OVERWASH UPDATE

by Michael Stroeh, Refuge Manager

In 2006 Hurricane Ernesto caused a beach overwash just north of Fowler's Beach Road on Prime Hook NWR. This washout has been somewhat controversial. On May 12, 2008 a Nor'easter brought flooding and overtopped or completely removed beach dunes from the Slaughter Beach Community to Fowler's Beach Road. This includes the 2006 overwash area, totaling almost 2 miles of beach. The birds have responded to the situation. Thousand of shorebirds were using the area daily. The June 6, 2008 survey yielded approximately 8,700 shorebirds, 30 state endangered least terns, and State endangered American oystercatchers were confirmed nesting in the overwash. The horseshoe crabs were not productive during the peak migration. The washout may or had become one of the most important sites along the Bay for migrating birds, especially since the crabs were not spawning due to the weather conditions. The 2 miles of overwash north of Fowler's Beach Road is in a tidal salt marsh area. We are proposing to leave this area alone. Biologically, there is no reason to restore the dunes. The overwash provides great habitat for these birds and restores the natural tidal flow.

The area south of Fowler's Beach Road has also been overwashed. This is approximately 4,000 feet with 95% of the overwash on private lands. This area has been receiving high bird use, but not as high as the north end. During high tides this overwash floods the Unit II impoundment which is a freshwater marsh. Unit II is one of our premier waterfowl areas. Ducks Unlimited installed the water control structures which allowed for the water management of the unit. Separating Unit I (North) from Unit II (South) is Fowler's Beach Road.

The area south of Fowler's Beach Road is a fresh water impoundment. Re-establishing the dunes in this area prevents high tides from entering the freshwater impoundment from the Bay. Not re-establishing dunes changes the dynamics of the system. These changes not only result in species and habitat composition shift but a change in the quality of the refuge's hunt program. We propose re-establishing the dunes in this area. Most of this overwash is on private land.

The same problem has occurred in 1982, 1988, 1998, 2006, and now 2008. The dunes were rebuilt in 1999. So a precedent has been set for rebuilding dunes. Fowler's Beach remains one the best birding

locations in the State of Delaware. Shorebirds, waterfowl, and other migratory birds can be seen easily from a vehicle or at the observation platform at the end of the road. The waterfowl hunters and local beach community are very passionate on this issue. Many see the dunes as their only protection against storms.

Permits have been obtained and work has been completed restoring the dunes south of Fowler's Beach Rd on those areas where the refuge received permission. The refuge wants to protect the integrity of our freshwater marsh south of Fowler's Beach Road. Even if the dunes

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were restored on the north side, the system is still tidal and will flood over the road during high tides as it is doing currently. Restoring the dunes on the south side stops saltwater intrusion from the bay only. Fowler's Beach and Prime Hook Beach Roads need to be built up to ultimately fix the problem. These public roads are also being asked to serve as levees to protect the various impoundments.

Ducks Unlimited is interested in the project and has agreed to do some surveying to help develop a plan. They have invested much time and financial resources in the water control structures used in these impoundments. If history is our teacher, we will be restoring dunes on average every ten years if not more often. Elevating the roads may provide the only longer term solution to protecting the freshwater marsh.

We are very much aware of the changes in the refuge this year due to the Mother's Day storm. The salt intrusion plus the lack of rains to flush the salt from the system has slowed the healing process in the marsh. The marsh will eventually return to normal. The storm did provide some great benefits. The invasive plant species, phragmite and hydrilla, have been severely setback or even killed due to the salt intrusion. But all in all, we may have a poor waterfowl season due to the lack of food. However, it should be a banner year for shorebirds.

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