

## For Fragile Md. Isle, Help From Holiday Past

Old Christmas Trees Offer Roosts as Land Restored

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Carolyn Kolstad of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service drags dead Christmas trees to a boat for shipment to Poplar Island, which has been restored to close to its original 1,000 acres. (Photos By Craig Herndon -- The Washington Post)

POPLAR ISLAND, Md. -- Only one explanation seemed to fit the scene unfolding at an Eastern Shore dock: The Grinch was back. He'd bought a boat. And he was about to get away with it again.

It was a frigid morning in the watermen's town of Tilghman, and the big ship *Terrapin* was being loaded with Christmas trees. Full, round trees. Stunted, apartment-size ones. Dried-out brownish trees and oddly-still-green trees and a couple of trees with ornaments still stowed away in them.

"Ho! Ho! Ho!" said Derek Dombrowski, an environmental specialist with the Maryland Environmental Service, standing amid the brushy, pine-smelling pile. "Merry Christmas!"

But despite the Seussian overtones, these trees were being taken for science, not spite.

On this January day, they were headed to a wind-blasted spot in the middle of the Chesapeake Bay, where scientists are trying to reconstruct a nearly vanished island. Out there, last year's holiday greenery has an unusual second life, providing birds with a place to roost until the island can grow its own trees.

"We're losing the island habitats pretty rapidly" as development and erosion take their toll around the Chesapeake, said Peter McGowan, a biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. By placing the trees on this island, he said, "we're trying to give the habitat a jump-start."

Poplar Island, the trees' new home, sits across the bay from Anne Arundel County, a little more than a mile off the Eastern Shore. Planners say the environmental project is one of the most ambitious in this area in recent memory: an attempt to re-create an island, and the wild communities that once lived on it, on a foundation of dredged-up Chesapeake mud.

"We would expect, when we are finished, to have a beautiful marsh, to have a forest," that would replace acres of lost island habitat for Chesapeake birds, said Mark Mendelsohn, a biologist working on the island for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. "It would just be kind of a paradise."

The island once was more than 1,000 acres, making it more than three times the size of the Mall in Washington. The first white settlers arrived in the 1630s, and at times there were a church, a schoolhouse and a moonshining operation. There also were farm fields. After a raid cleared out the moonshiners in 1929, the island was used as a hunting club for Democratic Party bigwigs.

But the whole time, it was slowly eroding.

The Chesapeake has not been kind to its islands. The land under them is sinking because of a geological hangover from the last ice age. In recent decades, the water has been rising, pushed up by factors including climate change.

By the late 1990s, the island had dwindled to fewer than 10 acres.



Near Maryland Environmental Service trailers, Chris Guy of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife works on a habitat. (Craig Herndon)

"This is all that was left of Poplar," said Chris Guy, a Fish and Wildlife Service biologist. He had stopped his truck beside a low patch of marshland the size of a couple of football fields.

But 10 years into the reconstruction of the island, the patch is surrounded by land, not open water.

Acres upon acres of mud, dredged to clear the approach channels to Baltimore's harbor, have been dumped on Poplar

Island as part of a multimillion-dollar state and federal project. The island is now filled out to a crescent-moon shape, reaching something close to its original footprint.

Scientists want to create marsh and forest habitats on Poplar Island and make it a haven for birds. But the island's plants are still growing, so much of the island looks more like a barren, dusty construction site.

This is where the Christmas greenery comes in: The trees are botanical placeholders, stand-in shrubbery.

Scientists first got the idea to use them last year and brought over more than 300 trees, many donated by nurseries and Fish and Wildlife Service employees. Their plan was to give the island's birds and small mammals a thicket of branches where they could hide from such predators as marsh harriers and short-eared owls.

"What this does is, it provides cover," Mendelsohn said. Among the Christmas trees, he said, birds "can hide. They can nest in there, [which is important] because we really don't have a lot of trees there."



An egg under a Poplar Island Christmas tree shows that ducks feel comfortable in the habitat, a biologist says. (Craig Herndon)

And the plan seems to be working. On one recent day, McGowan, of the Fish and Wildlife Service, stopped at one of last year's piles of Christmas trees. He pulled one up, revealing a grayish oval in the mud and marsh grass underneath.

"There's an egg here from a past nest," McGowan said.

Although the mallard duckling inside it did not hatch, McGowan said, the egg's presence was still a good indication that ducks felt comfortable there. He said one survey found that at least 90 percent of the Christmas tree piles had been inhabited by mallards, black ducks, mice, voles and other animals. Bald

eagles have even been spotted perching on them.

McGowan said he would like to bring Christmas trees out to the island for perhaps the next five or six years, until the foliage has grown thick enough to provide the same kind of cover.

On this cold morning, the scientists brought out about 160 trees, donated by the trash collection agency in Easton. After ferrying them from Tilghman by boat, then hauling them across the island in a pickup truck, Guy and Fish and Wildlife Service biologist Carolyn Kolstad dragged four trees the last few feet by hand.

They arranged the trees into a three-foot-plus mound, a holiday-green pile in the middle of a gray-brown winter marsh. It looked like nothing the Grinch would ever have done.

"Aww," Guy said, mock-proud. "That's beautiful."