

## SWAN CREEK/COX CREEK: DESTINATION BIRDING

A Black Rail put the icing on the cake, so to speak. When **Stan Arnold** first heard this rarity on June 10, 2011, the Swan Creek wetland and adjacent Cox Creek dredged material containment facility outside Baltimore had already established itself as a go-to site for birders. Two Black-necked Stilts that had shown up on June 5 were still picking along the muddy dredge spoil ponds in mid-June, a Long-billed Curlew had stopped by for a few hours in May, and a Stilt Sandpiper had boosted the 2011 May Count. In the last couple of years the site had hosted several scarce species of shorebird, including Whimbrel and Buff-breasted Sandpiper—as well as White Ibis, Swallow-tailed Kite, and a couple of dozen other regional rarities. And in July 2011, the tally would be upped by Black Skimmers, Baird's Sandpiper, and Marbled Godwit.

A cousin of Hart-Miller Island and Poplar Island, Cox Creek is located on the Patapsco River in far northeastern Anne Arundel County, in the shadow of the Key Bridge, where it is sandwiched between a chemical factory and a power plant. The Cox Creek component consists of two vast gritty dredge spoil cells ringed by dikes busy with heavy equipment, where the Maryland Port Administration deposits sediments dredged from the Baltimore Harbor. The adjacent Swan Creek Tidal Wetlands is a verdant 11-acre oasis, part of more than 100 acres of woodlands and wetlands preserved as open space.



Cox Creek lies on the Patapsco River in the shadow of the Key Bridge.

A gravel road leads from the dredge facility through a patch of woods—itsself a magnet for migrating warblers and sparrows—to the wetlands. There an observation platform overlooks a combination of open water, low marsh, and high marsh, lush with marsh grasses, water lilies, and pickerel weed. Over the past few years more than 300 reef balls have been installed along the shoreline to help reduce wave action and limit erosion, as well as to enhance habitat for fish and other species. Each year additional marsh plants, saltbrush shrubs, and submerged aquatic vegetation have been added to supplement the naturally-occurring plant species.



A “totem” species at the Swan Creek marshes; Little Blue Heron.

This potent Swan Creek/Cox Creek combo has a complex history, and its existence is a testament to a broad cooperative effort by an assortment of government agencies, public institutions, and individual volunteers. **Sue Ricciardi**, who became involved as the site was redeveloped, traces its origins:

“The current Cox Creek Dredged Material Containment Facility was predated by dredge impoundments built there by the Army Corps of Engineers in the mid-1960s. The Army Corps operated the site through 1984, when it was essentially abandoned. The Maryland Port Administration (MPA) then purchased the site and some surrounding property in the 1990s and began to reactivate the facility, which is now accepting more dredge spoil.



Do you hear what I hear? Check out photographer Bill Hubick's audio link of the Black Rail (<http://www.billhubick.com/audioFiles.php>) calling at this very spot at this very minute.

“At the same time, at the request of Lewis Bellingier, Mary Rosso, and other community leaders, MPA agreed to preserve more than 100 acres of the property's woodlands and wetlands, known as Swan Creek, as open space. MPA contacted the Maryland Environmental Trust (MET)) to explore placing a conservation easement on the acreage. However, MET was barred by state law from holding a conservation easement on land owned by another state agency unless a non-governmental organization could be found to co-hold the easement. That's when community leaders Marcia Drenzyk and Rebecca Kolberg came to the rescue and, with the assistance of MET's Local Land Trust Coordinator Nick Williams, solved the problem by forming the all-volunteer, non-profit North County Land Trust (NCLT). The conservation easement on the preserved property was completed in 2002 and is co-held by MET and NCLT.

“In addition, MPA was required to perform wetlands mitigation due to disturbance of some wetland habitat during renovation activities. Thus was created the 11.13-acre Swan Creek Tidal Wetland, adjacent to the impoundments and to the property protected by the conservation easement. The National Aquarium in Baltimore was asked to play a major role in the mitigation project, which

involved using community and student volunteers. With partner NCLT, over 14,000 units of wetland plantings were installed.”

Over the years, a few birders had been visiting the abandoned impoundments. **Bob Ringler** first saw the site with Rick Blom while atlasing on July 4, 1985. “We were pleased to find downy young Pied-billed Grebes and moorhens, a summering male Lesser Scaup, and three fall migrant Least Sandpipers. (This seems reminiscent of birds there this summer.) In those days the large building along Kembo Road was a huge electroplating facility for Kennecott Copper. We would walk along the fence bordering the property to get to the wetlands that are now occupied by the current impoundments. . . . On July 4, 1986 I found nesting Pied-billed Grebes and moorhens again. Additional birds were two Black-crowned Night-Herons and a Glossy Ibis with two Lesser Yellowlegs for fall migrants. . . . I also went there on December 7, 1985 to see what non-breeders were around; highlights that day were an estimated 8,000 Ruddy Ducks, a very late moorhen, about 135 coots, and some Tree Sparrows.”



A Long-billed Curlew visited Cox Creek on May 23, 2011.

Sue Ricciardi herself had been on the site once or twice and requested permission from Anne Arundel County to obtain formal access to the property about the time MPA purchased it, as a favor for her completing some bird surveys for the County. A visit in July of 1996 with Hal Wierenga revealed Common Moorhens and Least Bitterns with young, and probable nesting of Pied-billed Grebe

and Marsh Wren; they saw more than 25 Marsh Wrens and heard a Virginia Rail. Subsequent to that, MPA allowed Sue and Pete Webb to visit for the 1998 Baltimore Harbor Christmas Count. “Northern Shovelers, Virginia Rails, American Coots, Marsh Wrens, and a Northern Harrier were the highlights,” Sue recalls.

Sometime in 2000, Sue and Rebecca Kolberg met, and a plan was drawn up for Sue to conduct a breeding bird survey for NCLT in spring 2001 on what was to become the land trust property. However, for safety reasons MPA was reluctant to allow visitors until the site was cleaned up. She was finally granted one visit in June 2001. “Notable finds were Little Blue Heron, Green Heron, Black-crowned Night-Heron, Least Tern, Yellow Warbler, Yellow-breasted Chat, and Field Sparrow.” Fortunately, in spring 2002, MPA permitted the NCLT survey to resume, by which time Maryland’s second Breeding Bird Atlas Project had also begun.

“In the second half of 2002,” Sue writes, “the conservation easement was finally completed and, in addition, a decision was made to monitor the wetland mitigation area for birdlife.” Through MPA and the Aquarium, a formal monitoring process was put into place and in October 2003, Sue and Jim Peters began regular surveys of the mitigated wetland area. They also surveyed the birdlife in other portions of the MPA site, including the land trust property. Matt Grey became interested in the Swan Creek area in 2005 and, when Jim Peters ended his participation, Matt took his place.” Adds Stan Arnold, “Matt Grey is the one who put Swan Creek on the map for the birding community, by posting his sightings back in 2007 and 2008.”

Stan made his first visit in August 2008, promptly discovered an American Avocet, and became enamored with the site; he lives nearby and began visiting regularly. He was joined the following year by Ed Carlson. Stan has made more than 200 visits, Ed has made more than half that many, and they have recently been joined by Bill Hubick to provide

almost daily coverage during prime shorebird migration (July-August). Sue keeps the data in a spreadsheet form; Stan, Ed, and Bill submit the information to eBird. Sue also makes a yearly report to the Aquarium, NCLT, and the Maryland Environmental Service (MES), which is the MPA’s operations contractor.

“To the credit of all involved, a most cooperative relationship exists among the surveyors, MES, and MPA,” Sue points out. “This will bode well for the future as the site continues to evolve into a first-rate birding venue.”



The dredge spoil cells at Cox Creek prove irresistible to migrating shorebirds.

## LOGISTICS

**HOURS.** Swan Creek is open on weekdays from 7:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Do not try to arrange visitation outside of these times. Sometimes the gates open before 7:30, and you can drive in if the gates are opened. Plan on being in your car and leaving at 3:30 p.m.

**DIRECTIONS,** per Stan Arnold: Swan Creek is off Fort Smallwood Road (Rte 173), near the Key Bridge. To get to the facility from Baltimore and points west, take the last exit off the I-695 beltway prior to the Key Bridge, onto Hawkins Point Rd, and turn left on Fort Smallwood Rd. Pass the stoplight at Pitman Road and take the next left, onto Kembo Road. Drive to the end of Kembo Road, through two gates, and park at the end of the fence to the right, just prior to the flagpole.

**PROCEDURES.** All visitors **MUST** check in at the office/trailer on the left each time they visit, and sign the visitor log that is just inside the door. On your first visit, you will need to fill out a waiver. The people there are very friendly and welcome birders. If you have questions, you can call them directly at 410-439-4990.

The north and south dredge cells lie directly ahead of where you parked. You can scan these via scope, standing in the area near the flagpole; do not wander onto the dikes. To get to the wetlands, follow the lower road past the south cell.