

Savage Neck Dunes Natural Area Preserve

298 acres - Northampton County, Virginia

The Site: Savage Neck Natural Area Preserve with its mile of Chesapeake Bay shoreline is special for its unusual bay-side dunes and associated plant communities, and because it supports one of the most important conservation areas in the world for the federally threatened northeastern beach tiger beetle (*Cicindela dorsalis dorsalis*). The diverse maritime plant communities on the preserve represent highly important habitats for migratory birds. The land was acquired with funds from the 1992 Parks and Natural Areas Bond and from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Natural History: The preserve's most striking physical feature is a well developed system of sand dunes that tower as high as 50 feet above the bay. These dunes, arranged in two main ranks, are among the highest points on Virginia's Eastern Shore. Closest to the bay are the younger, primary dunes which rise to about 20 feet above sea level and are sparsely vegetated with a mix of beach grass (*Ammophila breviligulata*), bitter seabeach grass (*Panicum amarum*), wax myrtle (*Morella cerifera*), sassafras (*Sassafras albidum*) and persimmon (*Diospyros virginiana*). Inland from these are the taller, secondary dunes thought to have formed during the last 10,000 years. Here, stunted loblolly pines (*Pinus taeda*) form an open-canopied woodland. Dense thickets of loblolly pine, oaks (*Quercus* spp.), eastern redcedar (*Juniperus virginiana*), black cherry (*Prunus serotina*) and poison ivy (*Toxicodendron radicans*) thrive in the swales between the dune ridges. The rare southern bladderwort (*Utricularia juncea*) has been found in one depression within the swales. On the landward side, the dune back-slope supports a century-old maritime pine-hardwood forest with several spectacularly large loblolly pines – some nearly three feet in diameter.

Forests, woodlands and scrub at Savage Neck Dunes are vital habitat for a wide variety of birds. Trees and shrubs provide escape cover and feeding areas for year-round residents and summer nesters. In the fall, millions of land birds, headed for Central and South America, congregate on the lower end of the Eastern Shore in preparation for the flight south. The tip of the Eastern Shore supports one of the largest congregations of land birds found anywhere along the Atlantic coast and is a critical link in a long chain of habitats from Canada to Central and South America. Many songbird species, which travel primarily at night, seek shelter and food in woodlands during the daytime. Also, birds of prey flock to the area during the fall migration, including Peregrine Falcons (*Falco peregrinus*) and Cooper's Hawks (*Accipiter cooperi*).

On the beach lives a rare, light-colored insect, the northeastern beach tiger beetle. These beetles scurry in front of beachcombers before flying to safer spots a few feet away. In the summer, female tiger beetles lay their eggs in shallow burrows on the beach. Upon hatching, the larvae dig burrows 4 to 10 inches deep in the sand and capture small organisms that pass near their burrow openings. This rare beetle formerly occurred along the northeast Atlantic coast from Massachusetts to New Jersey, with isolated populations in the Chesapeake Bay

Region. Now, the species is known from only two sites along the Atlantic and about 75 sites on the Chesapeake Bay in Virginia and Maryland. Northeastern beach tiger beetles require relatively undisturbed beaches with fine sand particles and vegetation along the upper edge of the beach. They are especially susceptible to intensive beach use by humans, including concentrated sunbathing, heavy foot traffic, bicycles, horses and motor vehicles.

Resource Management: Currently management activities at Savage Neck are focused on enhancing migratory songbird habitat, conducting a detailed inventory and analysis of plant communities and monitoring tiger beetle populations. Information obtained from these studies will help us manage all resources more wisely.

Compatible Uses: Visitors can take a 0.75-mile, marked trail through some of the highest sand dunes on the Eastern Shore. In the fall, the annual Eastern Shore Birding and Wildlife Festival provides a wonderful opportunity for birdwatchers to visit Savage Neck Dunes and see a variety of neo-tropical warblers and other migratory songbirds.

Location: The preserve is in Northampton County, on Virginia's Eastern Shore, 3 miles north of the town of Cape Charles. It can be reached from Business Route 13 in Eastville by traveling west and south on Savage Neck Road (Route 634) 5 miles. The preserve borders the right side of the road.

Natural Heritage Resources

Plants

Engelmann's umbrella-sedge (*Cyperus engelmannii*) G5?/S1
dwarf burhead (*Echinodorus tenellus*) G5?/S1
southern bladderwort (*Utricularia juncea*) G5/S2

Animals

northeastern beach tiger beetle (*Cicindela dorsalis dorsalis*)
G4T2/S2

Communities

maritime dune grassland
maritime mixed forest
maritime dune woodland
interdune pond

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*Natural Heritage Program -
Conserving Virginia's biodiversity through inventory,
protection, and stewardship*

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