

[From Spring 1995]

A Unique Barrier Island

Fisherman Island is a new island that emerged from the sea in the mid 1800's to take its position at the southern end of the Virginia barrier island group. It is unique because it is growing in size and advancing against the sea. All the other islands are retreating before the rising sea and adjusting their size and shape as they migrate.

The island also has a unique history. In 1883, the Marine Hospital Service began leasing Fisherman Island for use as a quarantine station. Sailors suffering from smallpox and other communicable diseases were dropped off on the island. The island was permanently conveyed to the federal government in 1891 after condemnation proceedings. Fisherman Island was reported to be only twenty-five acres at the time of the acquisition. In 1918 the island was transferred to the Department of Defense as a coastal artillery station, and the U.S. Navy used the island as a submarine detection base during World War II. The Navy declared it excess property in 1969, and Fisherman Island was transferred to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. One-thousand acres of Fisherman Island became a national wildlife refuge, and the remaining five-hundred acres were privately owned. The refuge was initially managed by Back Bay NWR until 1984 when management was turned over to the newly established Eastern Shore of Virginia National Wildlife Refuge.

Fisherman Island continues to be a unique area with an important mission. During the spring and summer, the refuge is an extremely productive nursery for royal and common terns, black skimmers, brown pelicans, herons, and egrets and many other species. In the fall, millions of birds use Fisherman Island as a staging, area before flying across the Chesapeake Bay. Passerines are the most abundant species, but in late September and early October raptors also use the area.

Fisherman Island is closed to the general public throughout the year except for special tours. These tours are given on Saturdays from October 1 through March 15 by reservation only. While reservations can be made by telephone up to six months in advance (and will be accommodated on a first-come, first-served basis), a follow-up written request is recommended. Scheduled tours are subject to change or cancellation due to weather conditions or staff availability.

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