

[From Summer 2003]

## **Assawoman Island Great for Birds & Fishing**

Assawoman Island is a small barrier island located south of Chincoteague and Wallops Islands. It is a favorite nesting spot for piping plovers, Wilson's plovers, least terns, common terns and American oystercatchers. Assawoman Island has also been a long-time favorite fishing spot for a lot of local fishermen. More and more people are discovering the once secluded Virginia barrier islands and more people leads to more potential disturbance to nesting birds.

The motto of Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge is "Where People and Wildlife Meet." A great concept for a National Wildlife Refuge. But when the presence of humans is deemed to be potentially detrimental to a wildlife species, fortunately the needs of the wildlife will come first. The south tip of Assawoman Island is where this type of conflict between people and wildlife (particularly, nesting birds) occurs. Over the past few years, the southern tip of the island has changed dramatically to create ideal nesting habitat for beach nesting shorebirds. Each year, more birds are calling the southern tip home for the nesting season.

Assawoman Island was completely closed to all visitor use last year as a result of several thoughtless people not obeying closed area signs encircling the nesting area, by walking through the middle of a tern colony. This year we are going to try again to allow limited public use of Assawoman Island's southern tip by requiring a refuge permit to land a boat to fish the area. The only activity allowed by the permit will be fishing and the permit must be obtained by each individual prior to going to the island. The island will be patrolled by Refuge law enforcement officers every day this year to help reduce the trespassing problems encountered in the past. However, the island may be closed to the public even though everyone follows all the rules. It all depends on where the piping plovers, Wilson's plovers, least terns, common terns, black skimmers, willets, and American oystercatchers set up their nests and where they move the chicks after they hatch. If piping plovers move their chicks into the area where people would be fishing, then that area will be temporarily closed until the chicks and adults have moved on or the chicks have fledged. This will require the continued cooperation and understanding of the public.

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