

# Forsythe Wildlife Refuge celebrates 80 years of nature on the wing

By MARJORIE PRESTON

Visitors to the Edwin B. Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge in Oceanville will find lots of airborne companions: flocks of water fowl and warbling songbirds, egrets and eagles, hawks and hummingbirds.

This unspoiled sanctuary — more than 47,000 acres of it, stretching from Atlantic County to Brick Township — offers a glimpse of what local coastal landscapes may have looked like a century ago, before the region was developed (and overdeveloped).

Season to season, the vast expanse of saltmarshes, isolated shores, and wooded trails is a favorite stop-over for migratory birds like snowy owls, snow geese, Canada geese, mallards and others, some of which flock here by the tens of thousands to rest and feed before taking flight again.

Naturalist Kyle Chelius of Mullica Hill, who leads bird walks at the refuge every Friday morning, says Forsythe is “one of the greatest places in New Jersey to see birds,” as popular among avid birders as its friendly rival, Cape May. Both are key links in the 3,000-mile Atlantic Flyway, a sort of expressway for migrating birds that ranges from the Arctic tundra of Baffin Island to the fair climes of the Caribbean.

## Walk on the Wild Side

Conveniently located along Route 9 in Galloway Township, Forsythe Wildlife Refuge—part of the National Wildlife Refuge System — is remarkably untouched by the tumult of modern life. This is a world of shimmering waters, waving grasses, native greenery and abundant wildlife, in the air, on foot and in the water. There’s a kind of hush about the place, punctuated only by birdsong and the occasional rustle of wings.

“It’s one of the Top 10 birding destinations in the United States,” says Keena Graham, visitor services manager. “Many wildlife photographers consider Forsythe their home base. We want people to come here to paint, draw, write or even feel inspired to design. I mean, who wouldn’t want to wear a hoodie that looked like a hooded merganser?”

Of course, she adds, “Some people come here just to relax.”

Established in 1939, the refuge is named for Edwin Bell Forsythe, an Ocean County legislator, congressman and conservationist who was instrumental in the enactment of the 1972 Marine Mammal Protection Act and the 1973 Endangered Species Act. Over the years additional lands were acquired; 82 percent is made up of wetlands, the preferred habitat for declining species including rails, Atlantic brant and the American black duck. Holgate and Little Beach, two of the few remaining undeveloped barrier beaches in the state, attract rare piping plover, black skimmers and least terns.

“Post-Dust Bowl, the refuge was established because of concerns about populations of migratory birds and waterfowl,” says refuge manager Virginia Rettig. “The Barnegat area was added in the 1960s, before there were any federal protection for wetlands and New Jersey was developing coastal saltmarsh at an unprecedented rate,

destroying thousands of acres. That was when grass-roots efforts started. People said, ‘We need to protect what’s left, or we’re going to lose it all.’”

## Bird’s Eye Views

Forsythe is a uniquely unspoiled destination — and, even for many locals, still undiscovered. Spring is a good time to visit. Terrapins are about to lay their eggs, pairs of geese are tending their goslings and osprey are on their platform nests along circular Wildlife Drive, which meanders through eight miles of coastal marsh and wetlands. This is the place to observe wild things in their natural element — Chelius has even seen otters at play — ironically, with the Atlantic City skyline in the distance.

“What you get to witness is concentrations of wildlife, and it can be spectacular,” Rettig says. “We’re in the middle of spring migration now, with lots of songbirds; one morning you’ll hear great crested flycatchers everywhere, because they just came in from Central America. It’s amazing.”

It’s not unusual to spot wild turkeys, peregrine falcons, and rarer species like roseate spoonbills, green shanks, boreal chickadees and gyrfalcons. Bald eagles are also in residence; both male and female have the distinctive white head plumage, but surprisingly, females are about 25 percent larger than their mates. Bring your camera.

Birding is often stereotyped as the ultimate geeky activity, and there’s some truth to that, says Rettig, a birder herself. “They’ve got their vests and their binoculars, and they’re operating at this level of inquisition and data collection. At the same time, there’s this total emotional feeling of, ‘God, look at that hummingbird on that flower — that bird flew all the way from South America. How did they do that?’”

“When I started birdwatching, I realized I was pretty much ignoring half the world by not noticing the birds go by,” she says. “Not anymore.” Birding can lead to a wider appreciation of the natural world, she adds — making it a fun, healthful pastime for kids.

Want to get started? Join one of Forsythe’s free Bird and Nature Walks, Fridays, 8 a.m. to 10 a.m. Binoculars are on loan from the visitor’s center. For more leisurely explorations, hop aboard the Forsythe Explorer, a 12-passenger solar electric tram that hosts tours of Wildlife Drive, Saturdays at 1 p.m.

## Fun facts

- To witness the domestic life of a feathered family in real time, check out the Osprey Cam at [FriendsOfForsythe.org/visit/osprey-cam](https://FriendsOfForsythe.org/visit/osprey-cam). The live feed is powered by solar energy and streams 24/7.
- In addition to songbirds, shorebirds, ducks and geese, monarch butterflies also migrate through the refuge. Look for them in the fall as they make their way to overwintering destinations on the West Coast and in Mexico.
- Wild minks are native to New Jersey and have been spotted at the refuge. These weasel-like creatures live along lake shores, wetlands and river banks.
- Protection of habitat for the endangered piping plover is an important mission of the refuge. According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, due to habitat destruction only 8,000 of these small sand-colored birds remain in the world. Piping plovers are named for their melodious call.

Visit Gull Pond Tower to see into the marsh and areas of canopy occupied by shy birds such as American bitterns, soras and Virginia rails.

The Leeds Eco-trail features a raised boardwalk over the marshland. On warm days at low tide, look for fiddler crabs scurrying across the mud beneath the boards.