

the Natural History of Blennerhassett Island

By Josh Vance

In the Ohio River between Parkersburg, West Virginia, and Belpre, Ohio, sits beautiful Blennerhassett Island. Many people are familiar with the island's rich history. Archeologic evidence indicates Native American use of this land as early as 12,000 years ago. Nemocolin, the famous Delaware Indian, lived on the island in the 1760s. George Washington documented the island in 1770 during his early exploration of the Ohio Valley. Blennerhassett

Island has been visited by many presidents, vice presidents and famous frontiersmen over the past 200 years. The island's most noted historical feature, however, is the setting where former Vice President Aaron Burr, in conjunction with island owners Harmon and Margaret Blennerhassett, allegedly plotted treason against the United States. While many people are familiar with the island's history, the island's unique and extensive natural history is less well known.

Nearly 200 species of birds have been documented on Blennerhassett Island, including, from left to right, wood duck, prothonotary warbler, tundra swan, great blue heron and ring-necked duck.

The four-acre open water slough on the island, background, is one of the few reliable places in the state where one can see prothonotary warblers.

WV DNR



Maslowski photo / USFWS



Matt Orsie

Blennerhassett Island comprises about 425 acres with a variety of habitats including bottomland hardwood forest, old fields of grassy and herbaceous vegetation, and a large four-acre open water slough. Because of this great diversity of habitat, the island supports a variety of mammals, birds, amphibians and reptiles. Mammals common to the island include white-tailed deer, beaver, muskrat, raccoon and red fox, and small mammals such as voles and mice.

Close to 200 species of birds have been documented on the island. The largest proportion of these species are songbirds and other passerines. Other bird groups common to the island include waterfowl, wading birds, shorebirds and raptors. Amphibians and reptiles are mostly restricted to more aquatic groups, such as frogs and turtles. Also, more than 30 species of freshwater mussels and more than 100 species of warmwater fishes have been identified around the island.

The Division of Natural Resources Wildlife Resources Section has been monitoring deer populations on the island since the early 1990s. This is done by conducting drive counts in which deer are routed from one end of the island to the other and counted. This process yields an accurate estimate of the number of deer on the island. Wildlife personnel

conduct these counts once in the spring and once in the fall each year. Since the DNR has been monitoring populations on the island, numbers of deer have been as high as 559 individuals.

Deer populations that are too high can lead to problems with overpopulation including an insufficient amount of food and a decrease in the overall health of the herd. In order to maintain a healthy deer herd on the island, the DNR initiated the first managed deer hunt in 2001. This one-day hunt was very beneficial as it provided participants the opportunity to harvest one deer either with a bow, muzzleloader, or shotgun and allowed for management of the number of deer on the island. Hunters harvested 185 deer. Due to its success, managed hunts were conducted in 2002, 2007 and 2010, harvesting 87, 50 and 52 deer respectively. Managed hunts on Blennerhassett Island will continue in the future as the need for population control continues.

Due to its unique habitat and natural history, the island is an excellent location for wildlife research. Between 1989 and 1995, representatives from the DuPont Wildlife Habitat Enhancement Committee (DWHEC) partnered with the DNR and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to reintroduce osprey



Jeff McCrady, WV DNR



David Raleigh, WV Dept. of Commerce



Jeff McCrady, WV DNR

to the mid-Ohio River Valley. In the mid 20th century, osprey populations had suffered significantly from the misuse of the pesticide DDT, which caused thinning of eggs and subsequent crushing during incubation. Since DDT was banned from use in the United States in 1972, the chemical has slowly disappeared from the environment and osprey chick survival has greatly increased.

Biologists took 62 osprey chicks from the Chesapeake Bay region to the Blennerhassett Island slough, kept them in a special “hacking box” constructed by DuPont employees, and released them when they were able to fly. It was hoped that they would identify the Ohio River as home and return to nest in future years. Upon release, these birds eventually migrated to Central and South America where they spent the first four years of their lives, only to return north as adults to the mid-Ohio River Valley to nest. Due to this successful reintroduction program on the island, there are now at least seven active osprey nests in the mid-Ohio River Valley that are colonized by the offspring of birds released on Blennerhassett Island.

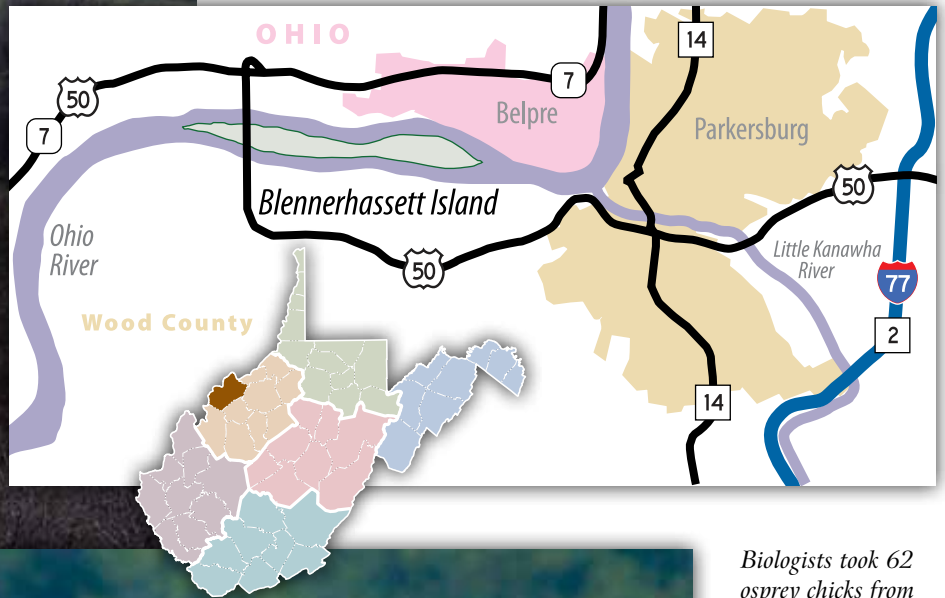
Wood ducks are another species that have historically suffered great declines. At the turn of the 20th century, wood duck populations were on the brink of extinction due to unregulated hunting and destruction of woodland and wetland habitat. Conservation efforts, such as regulated hunting and installation of nest boxes, were undertaken in the 20th century to increase wood duck populations and protect this species from extinction.

Wood duck conservation on Blennerhassett Island has been conducted as well. In 1993, representatives from DWHEC partnered with the DNR and USFWS to band wood ducks in the slough on Blennerhassett Island in support of the Wood Duck Population Monitoring Initiative. They trapped, banded and released 22 wood ducks on Blennerhassett Island. The project was discontinued in subsequent years due to



an overabundance of wood duck predators, but the information collected proved to be valuable. Band returns from hunters showed that the wood ducks banded on Blennerhassett Island were harvested in North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee, Ohio, Alabama and Louisiana. This data provided information on the migration of wood ducks hatched in West Virginia and allowed wildlife biologists a means to better manage this species. Because of conservation efforts directed at wood ducks, they have become a highly sought-after game bird with no fear of decline.

Lastly, Blennerhassett Island is a bird watcher’s dream with close to 200 species documented on the island. Diversity of birds is high due to the multiple habitat types and its location on a river. Diversity is especially high during spring and fall migration in May and September when large flocks of songbirds can be seen and heard on the island. On a visit in the spring, one can easily encounter many species of warblers, vireos, flycatchers, swallows and cavity nesters, such as chickadees, titmice, woodpeckers and bluebirds that are nesting on the island. Red-tailed hawks, osprey, and kestrels can be seen soaring over the island in search of



Above, an early spring view of Blennerhassett Island from the U.S. 50 bridge that crosses the Ohio River above the island. The island's slough is in the foreground. Blennerhassett Island is owned by the DuPont corporation. DuPont's Washington Works is the only U.S. plant site having a state park reside on plant property.
 Jeff McCrady / WV DNR



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 Steve Shaluta

food, while Canada geese, wood ducks, mallards, belted kingfishers and great blue herons all forage regularly in or around the slough. In addition, the slough on the island is one of the few reliable places in the state to see prothonotary warblers. Prothonotary warblers are bright yellow cavity-nesting songbirds that frequent hardwood swamps in the southeastern United States and are uncommon in West Virginia.

The DuPont corporation owns Blennerhassett Island and leases it to the state of West Virginia for use as a recreational area and a historical interpretation site associated with the Blennerhassett Island

Historical State Park. The DNR is the lead agency with administrative responsibility over the park. Blennerhassett Island is open to the public and can be accessed from May through October by sternwheeler departing from Civitan Park in Belpre, Ohio. More information on a visit to Blennerhassett Island can be obtained at the Blennerhassett Museum of Regional History in downtown Parkersburg or by calling 304-420-4800.

Josh Vance is a Wildlife Manager stationed at Shannondale Springs Wildlife Management Area.