



A ribbon of green

From the mouth of Blackbird Creek on the Delaware Bay to the town of Millington in Maryland, the Blackbird-Millington Corridor stretches across the Delmarva Peninsula in a 50,000-acre ribbon of green. Shaded streams meander through forests filled with birdsong and croaking frogs. Waves of marsh grass ripple in the breeze as a hawk swoops low, hunting for breakfast. Well-tended farms cluster near historic rural settlements. For hundreds of species, including humans, this is home.

The Blackbird-Millington Corridor includes state and private forests, designated wildlife areas, a research reserve, two stream systems, tidal wetlands, and Delaware's highest concentration of coastal plain pond wetlands. These habitats support more than 200 rare plants and animals.

The beauty and ecological health of this area remain intact thanks largely to the good stewardship of farm families who have relied on this landscape for generations. However, property values continue to soar and development pressure threatens the rural countryside. Preserving agricultural and natural lands is increasingly challenging, as Middletown-Odessa-Townsend squeezes the Corridor from the north and the towns of Smyrna and Millington encroach from the south and west. It is easy to imagine a future where the opportunity to preserve the quality of life and viable wildlife habitats is lost.

The Blackbird-Millington Corridor has been identified by nonprofit organizations and government agencies as a conservation priority. It is one of the few areas left on the Delmarva Peninsula containing large swaths of open space and high quality forest. Shallow freshwater wetlands known as coastal plain ponds nestle in the forests. These unusual seasonal ponds, sometimes called Delmarva bays or whale wallows, support a vibrant array of amphibians, dragonflies, migratory birds and rare plants.

A Plan for Preservation

In 2004, with support from the Delaware Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control, the Conservancy conducted a yearlong community-based process exploring ways to protect the natural and rural heritage of the Blackbird-Millington Corridor. More than 60 experts from 30 organizations and 150 local residents participated in creating the *Blackbird-Millington Corridor Conservation Area Plan* of voluntary, incentive-based, and non-regulatory approaches to conservation. Scientists and residents reached the same conclusion: intact forests are the key to healthy communities of plants, animals and people.

The Executive Summary and the full technical report are available online at www.dnrec.state.de.us/cwcs

The plan maps out specific acreage goals for forests, for working lands such as farms and woodlots, and for streamside corridors. The goals are ambitious; to be successful, they will require an unprecedented level of collaboration. However, almost a third of the Corridor is already protected open space. Some of the most exciting conservation opportunities – especially expanding and connecting natural areas – exist on privately owned land.

To reach these goals, the plan suggests a series of realistic actions in five areas: land protection, habitat restoration, compatible economic uses, education, and research. The community effort that created this shared vision for the future of Blackbird-Millington Corridor is now acting as a catalyst for progress in each of these.

Action – land protection

The Delaware Forest Service and the Delaware National Estuarine Research Reserve have each purchased land in the Corridor in 2005. A Forest Service acquisition connects parcels in the state forest system. The new Research Reserve land along Blackbird Creek will be used for scientific research projects and provide opportunities for public recreation.

The Delaware Agricultural Lands Preservation Foundation has protected thousands of acres with conservation easements. Nonprofit land trusts are also offering easements to private landowners. The Nature Conservancy and the Eastern Shore Land Conservancy are promoting conservation options for landowners through individual consultations and public workshops. One workshop explained federal assistance programs available to conservation-minded landowners. Another workshop offered information on retirement and estate planning, and included a resource kit on incorporating land preservation into a family's long-term financial goals.

Action – habitat restoration

The Natural Resources Conservation Service, the New Castle Soil & Water Conservation District, and the Landowner Incentive Program all provide technical and financial assistance for people interested in reforesting their land and controlling invasive plants. The Nature Conservancy has published a fact sheet on reforestation with an extensive list of resources for landowners. Ducks Unlimited works with farmers in the Corridor on wetland habitat restoration.

Action – compatible economic uses

Chesapeake Fields, a nonprofit, is developing a farmers' co-operative to grow new crops, such as edible soy nuts, and then package them as value-added local products to distribute to niche markets and retail outlets.

Action – education

In 2005, the Delaware Forest Service opened a facility in Blackbird State Forest for community education and school groups. The Delaware National Estuarine Research Reserve also plans education programs on their Blackbird Creek property. The Delaware Nature Society is expanding its education efforts into the Corridor, with an emphasis on their popular Backyard Wildlife Habitat Program.

Action – research

New Jersey Audubon Society is using weather radar technology to study how migratory songbirds use forested areas like the Corridor to rest and replenish, as they travel through the Delmarva Peninsula.

Collaboration can succeed

Although the landscape in the Corridor is changing rapidly, this coalition of nonprofits, government agencies, and residents is creating a model of successful collaboration. Their shared vision of realistic strategies for conservation will protect core forests and surrounding farms. Their accomplishments are demonstrating what is possible.

Working together, we can still save this precious Delmarva gem for future generations of people, plants and animals.



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