

In Chesapeake Bay, Poplar Island is a man-made miracle

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Zippering across the Chesapeake Bay, I had a hard time spotting Poplar Island. Although one end of it rises 20 feet high, much of the small landmass is a mere eight feet above sea level — and parts of it are even lower. There is one significant stand of trees, but the island is covered mostly with low-growing shrubs and grasses or is nothing but uncultivated dirt.

The diminutive parcel may sound unimpressive, but it's nothing short of a man-made miracle that it's here at all.

That's why I headed there for a two-hour tour on a sunny September morning. When it was first surveyed, in 1847, it measured a robust 1,140 acres. The next survey in 1993 by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers revealed that wind, waves and current had shrunk it down to a mere five acres, spread out across four small blips of unconnected land. If something wasn't done quickly, it would disappear into the depths without leaving a trace.

Working with the Maryland Port Administration, the Corps started rebuilding Poplar Island in 1998. The project was instrumental in achieving two goals simultaneously. It created a place to safely dump dredged materials in a manner that wouldn't interfere with the bay's fragile ecosystem, and it restored a crucial wildlife habitat.

They began by outlining the 1847 parameters of the island with a rock wall. After that, they divided it into cells and began filling them in with soil dredged up from the floor of the bay, a natural byproduct of creating the 50-foot clearance required for large ships accessing Baltimore Harbor. To date, they've poured in 28 million cubic yards of mucky matter. They'll use 68 million to finish the job, so they're not even halfway finished. (The project is currently on track to be completed in 2043.)



The rebuilding project has created a vibrant wildlife preserve, where 203 species of birds and 155 species of insects (including 31 butterfly species) have been spotted. On top of that, it's a nesting ground for diamondback terrapins. So the public can appreciate this natural bounty, Maryland Environmental Services offers free tours on weekdays from spring through fall departing from Tilghman Island, a 25-minute boat ride away. It's the only way to access the emerging ecosystem, which is an active construction site.

After we moored on the island's south shore, I was presented with contrasting imagery. On one hand,

there were wild birds galore perched on the dock's railing, flying overhead and wading in the nearby wetlands. In juxtaposition, there was a plethora of yellow-and-black heavy-duty construction machinery and several clusters of squat buildings for the equipment and staff. No one lives on the island. Workers are shipped over daily for shifts that usually run from 7 a.m. until 5:30 p.m., unless they're receiving dredge materials during the winter months, which requires round-the-clock crews.

Thankfully, we were here to focus on the outdoorsy elements and learn a little local history. The small isle has an interesting past. In the early 17th century it was discovered by settlers and named Popeley's Island, which similarly eroded over the years to become "Poplar." The British used it as a staging area for troops during the War of 1812. By the late 19th century, there was a small settlement of approximately 100 people, a post office and a sawmill. All those inhabitants left by 1920. In 1931, it became a hunting and fishing preserve for prominent Democratic politicians; presidents Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman both visited.

After a short introductory talk, a dozen other sightseers and I boarded an air-conditioned bus for a tour of the boomerang-shaped island. Soon we passed a small sandy beach, a nesting ground for diamondback terrapins. Their nests were marked with small pink flags and will later be covered with enclosures to deter predators. Last year, approximately 1,000 turtles were born on the island. Two hundred and fifty of them ended up in a "head start" program of sorts. Each Oreo-size reptile was shipped off in the fall to a different classroom around the state. Six months later, in May, they came back to the island, "the size of a cheeseburger," according to tour coordinator Megan DiFatta. Their increased bulk helps them avoid herring gulls and laughing gulls, who usually devour many of the tiny youngsters

During a stop at a small visitors center, I checked out a tank full of week-old turtles. Several dozen bobbed or paddled through the slightly green water while a lone terrapin sunned itself in the rays of a heat lamp. Its head was halfway tucked in, probably catching a few Z's while it warmed up. The rough concentric circles on its shell looked like small topographical renderings of a cluster of hills; its tiny webbed feet displayed miniscule nails shorter than thumbtacks.

This is only a fraction of the wildlife I saw. During the tour, we passed a number of restored wetlands, home to many types of birds. One grassy, bushy section hosts a plethora of cattle egrets, snowy egrets and great blue herons; another, a bounty of least terns and common terns. Nearby there's a barren dirt mound inside a small pond, where 4,600 double crested cormorants lived during nesting season earlier this year. Their droppings are so acidic that they killed off almost every piece of greenery on the island-within-an-island. Now only a fraction remain, hanging out onshore and swimming in the surrounding waters.

In another restored cell, a series of barges were beached to help prevent the remaining land from washing away while crews worked to reconstruct the island. Now the rusting hulls are covered in fecal buckshot and home to a number of species, including osprey, which build giant prickly-looking nests of sticks and grasses on them. Assistant tour coordinator Chris Homeister calls the grounded ships "bird condominiums."



The boat the Terrapin brings students back to the mainland after releasing turtles on Poplar Island. (Sarah L. Voisin/THE WASHINGTON POST)

If birders are lucky during the winter, they might be able to see a rare snowy owl. Normally, there aren't tours at that time of year, but DiFatta tries to round up groups of ornithologists to come out if they're interested.

Nature lovers of all shades should take advantage of Poplar Island while they can. When its reconstruction is complete, all the roads, machinery and human traces will be removed. There will be no commercial development allowed. In fact, people might not even be permitted to set foot on it. Poplar Island will be wild and full of life once again.

