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Wildlife refuge has never been open to the public but some are seeking to change that

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Woodbridge, Va. - A group of hikers stands along the gas line break in the woods as they prepare to enter the Featherstone National Wildlife Refuge in Woodbridge on Saturday.

Posted: Sunday, July 25, 2010 12:28 am

Keith Walker | 0 comments

Woodbridge, Va. - There's a skinny little piece of green property hidden away in plain sight in Woodbridge along Farm Creek and the Potomac River.

Its land-side border butts up against the CSX Rail line, and thousands of commuters probably see the Featherstone National Wildlife Refuge every day without giving it a second thought as they wait for their trains at the Virginia Railway Express Rippon Station.

The U.S. Department of Interior acquired 164 acres from the District of Columbia in 1979 and turned them into a wildlife refuge. In 1992, Prince William County donated another 161 acres, bringing the total at the refuge to 325 acres.

The refuge has never been opened to the public because of a lack of legal access across land owned by the railroad.

Now there's a move on to get it opened, said Daffny Hoskie of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which manages Featherstone along with the Occoquan Bay and the Elizabeth Hartwell Mason Neck refuges that make up the Potomac River National Wildlife Refuge Complex.

Hoskie said that until recently there wasn't much interest in having the refuge open to the public. In 2007 the service started its comprehensive conservation plan and that's when the sentiment to open the Featherstone refuge began to bubble up, she said.

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MANASSAS, VA

CURRENT CONDITIONS

☀ Clear Humidity: 34%
50° Winds: SSW at 6mph
Feels Like: 50°

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<p>Thursday ☀ High 49°/Low 24° Sunny</p>	<p>Tomorrow ☀ High 50°/Low 27° Sunny</p>
<p>Saturday ☁ High 51°/Low 27° Partly Cloudy</p>	<p>Sunday ☁ High 59°/Low 43° Light Rain</p>

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"That's when the Fish and Wildlife Service recognized that the public was interested in using this property," said Hoskie, the deputy refuge manager Potomac River National Wildlife Refuge Complex. "Now that there's interest, we're going to pursue it."

On Saturday, the Fish and Wildlife service briefly opened the refuge to the public with a guided tour. About 25 people showed up to go and see what they could see out there.

Bird experts would have recognized the call of various species along with the crickets and the occasional cicada, but the most readily seen wildlife were the butterflies that included silver-spotted skippers, black swallowtails, monarchs, duskywings, zabulon skippers and tiger swallowtails that fluttered around the purple flower spears of the pickerelweed growing in the water in Farm Creek.

Christina Forbes, a Washington attorney who lives in Alexandria, went on the tour and is in favor of opening the refuge under certain conditions.

"I believe the plan to leave it in its natural state is the best of all plans, because it provides those who do want to come with a real taste of nature in this stand of 80-year-old trees. And it also acts as a brake against rampant overuse," she said.

Caryn Stein and her husband, Marc Stein, who live very near the refuge at the Riverside Station Apartments, also went on the tour. They've been to the Occoquan and Mason neck refuges as well.

"We've been to all the places around here ... so it's interesting to see this missing piece," Caryn Stein said. "A lot of people probably don't know that there are so many nature areas preserves and refuges. People probably don't think of this area as being a rich place for wildlife and nature."

The Steins said they would be back to the refuge, which is situated between Leesylvania State Park and the Occoquan Bay National Wildlife Refuge, if it ever opens to the public.

"I think we would definitely use it," Caryn Stein said. "This has been really enjoy-able."

Chris Thacker was of another mind about the refuge.

"It's neat to be down here to come to a place that's hardly touched," said Thacker, a Manassas resident.

He said he's not necessarily in favor of opening it to the public on a regular basis.

"I personally kind of like the idea of it being closed and doing tours like this every now and then just because I don't think there's enough places like this left," said Thacker, an assistant body shop manager.

Kim Hosen of the Prince William Conservation Alliance said opening the land to the public would provide a certain amount of oversight.

"If it's open to the public, then people could be stewards at the site," Hosen said.

The public has little access to natural sites in Northern Virginia, she said.

"There are very few places that you can have access to water like this," she said of the refuge that includes upland forests and freshwater tidal marshes.

There are others who would like to see the refuge opened to the public.

Rep. Gerald E. "Gerry" Connolly, D-11th, recently asked the Fish and Wildlife Service about opening the refuge.

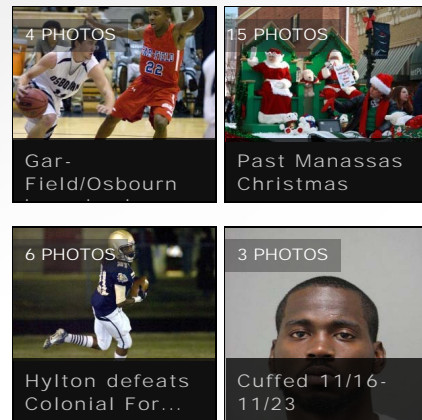
In response, Greg Siekaniec, the acting deputy director of the service, said that several things were holding up the opening, including safe access across the railroad tracks and ample parking.

"When the parking and access issues have been resolved, and a safe environment for refuge visitors can be provided, the Service's intent is to proceed with administrative procedures to open the refuge to compatible public uses," Siekaniec wrote.

Connolly replied in a letter dated July 15 saying, "The refuge is owned by all Americans and they should have access to it now."

Siekaniec also stated in his letter that the service had been working with Prince William County to try and iron out some of the problems.

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Hoskie said it is the Service's aim to open the refuge.

"We really are working at trying to get this place open," Hoskie said. "Now that there is interest, we're working diligently to see what we might be able to do to accommodate the pub-lic."

The Occoquan Bay and Elizabeth Hartwell Mason Neck refuges receive roughly 50,000 visitors a year, according to written information Hoskie provided to those who toured the refuge.

Senior Reporter Keith Walker can be reached at 703-369-6751.

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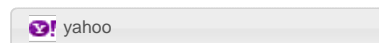
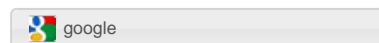
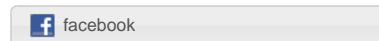
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