



The Essex County Countryside Alliance

Story and Photos by Karin Andrews

For thousands of years, Native Americans made their home along the shores of the Rappahannock River. Since that time, portions of our rural landscape have remained relatively unspoiled thanks to the stewardship of Essex County's great founding families, many of whom continue to work the land and do their part to feed the world. Others have chosen to make Essex their home and have become vital stewards also of her pristine rural lands and grand historic homes.

Breathtaking landscapes, serene

waterscapes, panoramic vistas, pristine marshes, and wave upon wave of fertile farmland are some of the amazing attributes that make Essex County one of the most notable and unspoiled places in all of Tidewater. Conservation efforts underway in Essex are vital to ensure that water quality and abundant rural habits remain intact for future generations of mankind and wildlife.

Characteristics of the County

Essex County is located on the upper Middle Peninsula and has two

distinct divisions in topography that are dictated by their locations on the Rappahannock River. These are known as Upper and Lower Essex.

Lower Essex begins at the Middlesex county line and is also bordered by the Rappahannock, which runs the entire length of the county. Here the beaches are sandy and the river is wide—almost a mile across as it winds eastward toward Urbanna and the Chesapeake Bay. Dragon Run in Lower Essex is one of the most important tidal waterways in the entire Chesapeake Bay watershed.



Looking out to the Drakes Marsh at Otterburn in Lower Essex

Darnley Adamson (L) and Steve Chick (R) with Beau the yellow Lab on goose-hunt weekend at Occupacia Creek in Upper Essex



Upper Essex begins north of Tappahannock and extends to the Caroline County line. The topography takes on a pastoral quality that is more Piedmont-like in nature. As the Rappahannock narrows and winds toward Fredericksburg, the freshwater marshes become more pronounced, making this one of the most scenic and ecologically diverse places on

the river. Every year the marshes are filled with migrating tundra swans and a host of other birds that are often so dense that they appear as clouds moving through the sky.

With all of this natural beauty, abundant wildlife and species of every sort, Essex County is also home to a passionate sporting community. Without question, conservation and the sporting life are

mutually dependent in a world that faces increasing population pressures from every side.

The Essex County Countryside Alliance

In response to the inevitable wave of development that was headed its way, the Essex County Countryside Alliance (ECCA) was formed in 2006. President Peter C. Bance sought out like-minded individuals for board positions and specific efforts. Outreach efforts employ a three-part strategy that has evolved from the need to address misconceptions and questions about land conservation. A landowner list was created as a way to identify the target audience and personally introduce the ECCA. This began a dialogue with friends and neighbors and established a relationship county-wide.

A biannual newsletter full of informative articles, profiles and resources for landowners is also published. This vehicle for sharing the message has been more successful in generating support and opening doors than anyone anticipated. Generous supporters include a broad cross-section of individuals, landowners, public officials, farmers and conservation professionals.

Each year two special meetings are held, which combine outstanding social events with captivating speakers including:

- Former Virginia Governor and U.S. Senator Mark Warner
- Virginia's Speaker of the House, William Howell
- Charles Lane of Charleston, South Carolina, who helped established South Carolina's ACE (Ashepoo, Combahee and South Edisto Rivers) Basin.

These much-anticipated events are a vital part of ECCA's success and a great place to celebrate what binds them together. Past events have been hosted at properties such as Brooke's Bank, Wheatland, Rose Hill, Elmwood, Kendale and Blandfield.

To date there are almost 10,000 acres of land protected by conservation

easements in Essex County with an additional 2,300-plus in the works for 2009. This does not include the thousands of acres that are maintained as preserves and refuges. Although there are always a few exceptions, the stewardship of rural lands is a philosophy that runs deep in this neck of the woods.

Bance, ECCA president, describes the need for timely action: “Essex County is unique in Tidewater Virginia, as many of the indigenous families continue to prosper off the river and land. By and large, we have been spared the development that has occurred in King George, Caroline and other counties closer to Richmond. We are taking advantage of a window in time with our education and outreach efforts that will dictate our landscape forever. The Virginia tax credits and federal tax deductions currently available can make putting your land into conservation easements one of the easiest decisions you’ll ever make.”

The Bairds of Otterburn

The Baird family of Otterburn Farm entered the easement process as a way to ensure that the family farm would remain so. Situated along the banks of the Rappahannock, Otterburn was once part of neighboring Brooke’s Bank. Home to generations of Bairds, it is currently owned by Samuel Barron and Gazelle Baird, who will pass the farm on to their daughters Beth and Lili. Four generations of Bairds currently live and continue farming at Otterburn.

Beth and Lili fondly remember milking the family cows and dove hunting with their father, who is still active and spry into his mid-eighties. Beth recalls, “As young girls, we always wanted to be out on the farm with daddy . . . but mother would not always allow that! Having such wonderful memories here, we don’t want to ever sell it or borrow money to keep it this way. The conservation easement will perfect that, prevent development and help mitigate any tax consequences,” Sister Lili



The Old Glebe House at Cloverfield in Champlain is located in a vast area bordered by the Rappahannock River on one side and pristine marshes and duck ponds on the other.

concur: “I can’t imagine this gorgeous scenery looking any other way than it does right now and will do everything in my power to help keep it this way.”

A Treasure Without Equal

No article on Essex County could

be complete without mentioning Blandfield, the former seat of the Beverleys. Purchased by the Wheat family of Richmond in 1983, Blandfield underwent an extensive restoration, which returned the manor house to its former 18th-century glory. The sheer grandeur of



Annual spring meeting at Kendale

Sandy beaches along the Rappahannock offer enjoyment for families.



the manor house, combined with the astounding 3,500 contiguous acres, makes it a wonderful treasure without equal! Under the watchful stewardship of Jimmy Wheat, it continues as a true working plantation with commercial upland and waterfowl hunting operations and a special-event venue.

Wheat describes Blandfield's underlying philosophy: "Traditional rural lifestyles and land uses are a window into Virginia's past and its environmental future. In the last few decades, the drastic decrease in rural lands has been largely the result of inefficient land use in satisfying population growth. Shortsighted planning has led to such things as the proliferation of golf courses and sprawling planned communities that increase driving times and further the decline of water quality in the Chesapeake Bay. Maintaining the rural character of counties like Essex is critical to maintaining the quality of life for the Commonwealth as a whole."

There is so much about Essex County and its richly diverse architectural, agrarian, cultural and sporting heritage that volumes could not contain it all. From the great equestrian and hunting events of ages past to the present, Essex County has been blessed to remain a time capsule of sorts, in an ever-changing, fast-paced world.

For more information about the Essex County Countryside Alliance, rural lands, historic homes and most notable places, see www.essexcca.com.

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