

What must we do to save them?

LONG ISLAND'S DISAPPEARING WILD BIRD HABITATS

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South Shore Audubon has identified seven critical habitat areas currently at risk across Long Island. We must all do our parts to help save these vulnerable wild places for future generations and wildlife.

- 1) **Jamaica Bay.** An important stop-over on the Atlantic Flyway, with 20,000 acres of salt marsh, islands, coastal woodlands, shrublands, grasslands and wetlands in Queens and Brooklyn with headwaters in Nassau County, and 11 miles of barrier beach on the Rockaway peninsula. The ecology of Jamaica Bay is improving in some ways but deteriorating in others - and hangs in the balance. A coalition of over 15 prominent environmental groups has formed to offer expertise to the National Park Service (NPS) to help revitalize this urban estuary and wildlife refuge. Rather than an adversarial approach, these groups prefer to participate in a collaborative and congenial "working group" with the NPS and city and state agencies to implement specific restoration projects of high value. The group has compiled an advocacy action agenda of over thirty environmental restoration projects. While the health of Jamaica Bay remains a complex and ongoing challenge, these local environmental groups play a crucial role in advocating for and actively participating in conservation and restoration efforts.



Bill A3398/S1126: A much-needed bill which would authorize the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) to conduct a comprehensive 5-year study of Jamaica Bay's ecological restoration needs has been consistently vetoed by both current Governor Kathy Hochul and former Governor Andrew Cuomo. For 2026, all New Yorkers and Audubon members are encouraged to continue their efforts to contact their lawmakers in the Assembly and Senate and the Governor's office to advocate for this bill to be signed into law. DEC has not conducted a study of Jamaica Bay in over 20 years. Yet Jamaica Bay experiences severe amounts of disturbance and degradation, from a wide variety of sources, that should be fully studied now. By securing a 2026 signature, advocates can ensure the DEC replaces 20-year-old data with modern scientific findings which will unlock new funding streams necessary for resultant restoration projects to preserve Jamaica Bay as a vital urban wildlife refuge for New Yorkers and NYC's wildlife for the next 20 years.

- 2) **Woodmere Club.** Ten years of hold ups and litigation were settled in December 2025, clearing the way for the developers' plans to only develop 34 acres along Broadway, and approx. 100 low-lying acres to be preserved and restored to its more natural coastal landscape to better absorb more floodwaters, buffer storm surges, and to help protect residents, their property and community infrastructure from adverse climate conditions, while also sustaining a healthy ecosystem for needful native wildlife of Nassau County, like egg-laying Diamondback Terrapin, Horseshoe Crab, and nesting bay and marsh birds. Many environmental details still need to be ironed out in 2026, including having input during the nature preserve planning process from environmental groups like South Shore Audubon.
- 3) **Hempstead Plains.** In April 2025, Las Vegas Sands abandoned a large-scale casino development project at the Nassau Hub in Uniondale, that threatened ecological harm to the Hempstead Plains preserves adjacent to the proposed casino site. Nassau County Exec Bruce Blakeman has pivoted to a "Plan B" for the Nassau Hub, involving local developers for a mixed-use site with

entertainment, housing, shops, and hotels, focusing on general development rather than gaming, though details remain vague as of late 2025. (See: *LI Herald*, Oct 30, 2025).

Global Rarity: The Hempstead Plains is a unique, globally rare grassland ecosystem, with only 100 of its original 40,000 acres remaining. Regardless of what may or may not happen with Plan B, let's push to designate the remaining 100 acres to be set aside as a Nature Study Area for wildlife. Also, let's ensure the East Meadow Brook riparian corridor continues to flow to the bay for future generations of Long Islanders. Learn more: www.ssaudubon.org/pdfs/hempstead-plains-nature-study-area-2025.pdf.

- 4) **Stillwell Woods Preserve.** Efforts to transfer this 270-acre nature preserve from Nassau County to the Town of Oyster Bay (TOB) have sparked significant environmental advocacy for its perpetual protection. The Nassau County Legislature approved the transfer agreement in early 2025. However, the transfer cannot be finalized until the New York State Legislature passes parkland alienation legislation, which must be signed by the Governor. A much-needed land survey of the preserve is currently in progress. This survey is intended to clearly delineate the boundaries between the existing athletic fields and the protected preserve area to prevent future development encroachment. A comprehensive 10-year habitat management plan is required for TOB to manage the ecological health of the preserve's oak barrens, wildflower meadows and native wildlife. And an unbreakable legal covenant to safeguard the land from any future infrastructure development. The South Shore Audubon Society, alongside the Sierra Club and other local groups, has championed a petition with over 2,800 signatures to ensure the preserve's future as a protected habitat. You can sign and share the ongoing petition at [Change.org/p/save-our-stillwell-woods-preserve](https://change.org/p/save-our-stillwell-woods-preserve).

- 5) **Nissequogue River.** While many critical wild habitats risk disappearing from Long Island, the Nissequogue River is one that's incredibly reappearing in Blydenburgh County Park in Smithtown. A torrential rainstorm in August 2024 destroyed the Stump Pond dam, draining this manmade warmwater impoundment. Since then, the uncovered Nissequogue riverbed has been flowing picturesquely through the park, and its native coldwater ecology has been rapidly regenerating. The area has succeeded into a wetland. The exposed impoundment basin has succeeded into a native riparian meadow ecology. We're witnessing a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to have native habitat advantages returned to obligate wildlife, brook trout, herring and eel runs, and other Long Island native flora and fauna that may soon be able to reestablish a population here as part of such a natural community restoration.

The Free the Nissequogue River Coalition has been formed to advocate for this rare opportunity to preserve the free-flowing Nissequogue River. They propose installing pedestrian bridges and boardwalks to allow access to the new wetlands, offering stunning river views with spectacular wildlife-viewing and nature education opportunities for visitors - instead of a costly dam rebuild. Learn more: www.seatuck.org/nissequogue/.

- 6) The 1,050-acre **EPCAL grassland** in Riverhead is the largest grassland in downstate NY. EPCAL supports one of the highest diversities of rare plant and animal species in NY state. Yet it has constantly faced risk of random and ill-planned development. Now's the time to get EPCAL grassland under stewardship with a habitat management plan so this rare habitat and the rare species here won't ever be threatened again.

In January 2024, developer Calverton Aviation Technology (CAT) filed a lawsuit and a notice of pendency that prevents the town of Riverhead from selling or leasing the EPCAL property until the lawsuit is resolved. This is a rare chance to focus on advocating for EPCAL preservation without the huge distraction of any development project plans right now. A new Riverhead Supervisor, Jerry Halpin, was sworn in on January 1, 2026, representing a fresh opportunity to appeal to the new Town Supervisor and his staff.

- 7) Off Orient Point, 840-acre **Plum Island** includes rocky shoreline, sandy beaches, wetlands, upland shrub, grassland and maritime forest habitats. It's future is uncertain, but ever hopeful thanks to the advocacy of the Preserve Plum Island Coalition (PIPC) of 200 member organizations. In September 2025, the media reported that the federal government, which owns the island, approached Suffolk County to explore the possibility of the county taking ownership of Plum Island and that County Exec. Edward Romaine has been in touch with Rep. Nick LaLota (R-Amityville), who has been the driving force in Washington to ensure Plum Island's preservation. Also, Sen. Chuck Schumer's office confirmed they've been in communication between the federal administration and Long Island municipalities and environmental organizations. Source: *Newsday*, Sept. 3, 2025.

Relentless Development: The United States has 3,144 counties. Nassau and Suffolk are two of the most populous; right up top with Brooklyn, Queens, and the Bronx. The future for Nassau and Suffolk only portends higher density development Long Island wide.

Let's work together while we still have the chance to save these disappearing wild bird habitats. Gone forever or saved forever? Let's strike some balance between relentless development and critical habitat preservation. Thank you.