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## Crash Course

*Under the guise of waging the "war on terror," the Navy is pushing hard to build an airstrip that will threaten not only endangered birds and wolves but its own pilots.*

**By Ted Williams**

Audubon, November/December 2006

I had heard the basic story dozens of times; I'd even lived it: NIMBYs (as developers call them) versus the public good. The Navy wants to build what it calls an "outlying landing field" (OLF) in eastern North Carolina so its carrier pilots, based at its Oceana Field near Norfolk, Virginia, can practice landing their F-18s. F-18s (a.k.a. Super Hornets) are the noisiest planes in the Navy's inventory, and local residents and environmentalists don't want them. What a surprise.

Then I started reading court documents and press clips and couldn't stop and couldn't believe. It wasn't a story about a landing field at all. It was a story about the lawlessness, profligacy, politicization, incompetence, and abject stupidity of the U.S. military as commanded by the Bush White House under the guise of the "global war on terror."

**Before September 2003, when** the Navy announced that the global war on terror required it to build the OLF on 30,000 acres on the Albemarle-Pamlico Peninsula in northeastern North Carolina, it had visited the site only in summer. It had heard that there was this wildlife refuge three miles to the northeast, but it hadn't seen many birds in the area. There was a good reason for this: The 113,000-acre Pocosin Lakes National Wildlife Refuge, identified by BirdLife International as a Globally Important Bird Area, is waterfowl wintering habitat, where about 24,000 tundra swans (25 percent of those in eastern North America) and 70,000 snow geese hang out between trips to and from their Arctic breeding grounds.

Challenges in district and appellate court to the Navy's environmental impact statement by Audubon (joined by Defenders of Wildlife, the North Carolina Wildlife Federation, and Washington and Beaufort counties) have stopped the project, but only until the Navy completes a supplemental EIS. And while that document may meet the technical requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act, the plaintiffs are not optimistic that it will accurately report the danger to wildlife or, for that matter, to pilots. Super Hornets will do 15,825 practice landings and 15,825 practice takeoffs annually, mostly at night when the birds are roosting, and often one of each every three minutes.

The Navy's interest in birds is no less keen than Audubon's, though for a different reason. When large birds enter engines or strike canopies, aircraft tend to crash. On December 7, 2005, the Navy conducted Super Hornet test flights over its proposed OLF site in Washington and Beaufort counties and on December 8 at an alternate site in nearby Hyde County, but now tundra swans and snow geese were fresh in from the Arctic, roosting at night on the refuge's Pungo Lake and, by day, billowing out into private cropland to feed. At both sites onlookers gasped as Super Hornets banked sharply to avoid "ingesting" waterfowl. The avian air traffic caused flights at Hyde County to be aborted.

Watching the first flyover at Washington and Beaufort counties was former Navy flight officer Brian Roth, now mayor of the nearby town of Plymouth. "The plane was very fortunate not to collide with the flock [of tundra swans]," he told the press. "That is clearly what we'd call a near miss."

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The two-day air show was just one of countless performances that seemed to have been lifted from the old TV sitcom *McHale's Navy*. In 2000, a year before the start of the global war on terror, the Navy explained that it needed the OLF because residents of Norfolk, Hampton, and Virginia Beach had been complaining about jet noise at its Oceana Field. At enormous public expense (\$58 million) it had bought up easements around that field so it could create a buffer. But it never enforced the easements, and the land got developed. Now it was politically inexpedient to evict the squatters.

"I was there from 1984 to 1988, and there were some real debacles we dealt with. But in my entire career I never saw worse public affairs from the military than this OLF fiasco."

In 2004 Rear Admiral Stephen Turcotte advised the public that the OLF site in Washington and Beaufort counties had been selected "because it is in the middle of essentially nowhere." That didn't sit well with the North Carolinians whose land the Navy has bought or condemned, also at enormous public expense (\$6.4 million), and whose homes it plans to flatten with bulldozers instead of enforcing its easements in Virginia.

Nor did the comment sit well with Mayor Roth, who had been under the impression that despite its meager population of 4,000, his historic town of Plymouth mattered. On the steamy afternoon of July 25, 2006, he proudly showed me Civil War artillery along the Roanoke River and a moored replica of that conflict's most successful ironclad, the *CSS Albemarle*. And he pointed out bullet holes left in grand old houses during the Battle of Plymouth in April of 1864, when 13,000 Rebels routed Union garrisons from three waterfront forts in the last victory for the Confederacy.

Addressing the first OLF study-group meeting convened by North Carolina Governor Michael Easley, Rear Admiral Turcotte, participating by speakerphone, explained that "South Carolina law" made it easy to move farms out of the project's path. When the committee chairman reminded him that the OLF was planned for North Carolina, Turcotte offered this (in jest, he went on to explain): "Driving up 95, they both look the same."

Equally pathetic, or more so, was the Navy's performance in court during its unsuccessful defense of the EIS. Drawing from anecdotal evidence and citing studies, the Navy had reported in that document that tundra swans and snow geese are highly tolerant of jet din. The "anecdotal evidence" issued from the Navy's designated wildlife expert, Greg Netti, who had repeated a comment made to him by someone (he couldn't remember who) that swans are difficult to disturb. The Navy then applied this incorrect information to snow geese. The cited studies, however, plainly show that snow geese *are* sensitive to manmade noise. Before plaintiffs' counsel could ask Netti about his bizarre interpretation of the studies, he volunteered that he hadn't read them.

When a Navy attorney argued that if air traffic was going to disturb the birds, the crop dusters that operate in the area would have done so, U.S. District Court Judge Terrence Boyle, a conservative Reagan appointee, looked at him sharply and asked when he thought the crop dusters flew. "Summer," replied the attorney, correctly, then cited heavy ground traffic on Highway 99. With that, Judge Boyle inquired if he knew from where to where Highway 99 went. The attorney allowed that he did not, at which point the courtroom erupted in laughter.

During the 10 minutes I was on that narrow road—en route to the refuge with conservation activist and PBS hunting-and-fishing-show producer Joe Albea, Audubon North Carolina Executive Director Chris Canfield, Mayor Roth, and Derb Carter of the Southern Environmental Law Center (Audubon's counsel in the OLF actions)—I counted a total of one other vehicle. As you turn onto Route 99 on your way out from Plymouth, the first thing you see is a sign that reads: "Danger. Falling birds and \$57 million jets."

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Canfield, a former Air Force and Pentagon public affairs officer, offered this: "I worked with the Secretary of Defense and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and rank-and-file members. I was there from 1984 to 1988, and there were some real debacles we dealt with. But in my entire career I never saw worse public affairs from the military than this OLF fiasco."

**In March 2005, Rear Admiral** Don Bullard, the Navy's director of readiness and training at Norfolk, Virginia, was quoted as follows by *The Wall Street Journal*: "Being a naval aviator we live and breathe and work in a maritime environment, and that environment includes birds." He went on to aver that all the Navy's bird experts agree that the risk of bird collisions near the refuge "is manageable."

But two years earlier the Navy's own bird consultant for the project—Ronald Merritt, former worldwide head of the Air Force's Bird Aircraft Strike Hazard programs (with the apt acronym BASH)—had complained to Secretary of the Navy Gordon England about the deep-sixing of his findings. "The bird strike issue was minimized in the Final Environmental Impact Statement," Merritt wrote. "There are very few places in the United States where this level of threat exists. The radar study at the proposed site near Pungo Lake was conducted late in the wintering season when bird populations would be declining. Even so, over a 12-day survey period, the vertical scanning radar detected over 450,000 birds moving through the 24-degree beam. . . . This represents a serious threat to aircraft safety. . . . The written decision suggests that the bird strike risk at the Washington County field site (Site C) is similar to other sites in the area and that a standard Bird Aircraft Strike Hazard Plan can be developed to mitigate this concern. This conclusion is erroneous. It completely ignores the data."

At this writing all the Navy's environmental review has been brazenly dishonest. In fact, once it learned that the winter sky would be full of large birds, it "reverse engineered" the EIS, to use its own words—that is, it unlawfully manipulated data to achieve desired results. In the discovery process the Southern Environmental Law Center unearthed the following September 29, 2002, e-mail from naval aviator Commander John A. Robusto, the OLF team's principal member on operations, in which he responded to a colleague who had an "uneasy feeling" about the project: "Very uneasy," agreed Robusto. "Up until the preferred OLF site was chosen, everything made sense and all decisions could be logically explained. Now we have to reverse engineer the whole process to justify the outcome."

Part of the Navy's reverse-engineering process was advancing the fraudulent claim that "split-siting" the Super Hornets—that is, moving two squadrons from Virginia to its base at Cherry Point, North Carolina—was militarily advantageous. Actually, split-siting is part of a clandestine deal in which the Navy promised to pump federal pork into North Carolina in exchange for acquiescence on the OLF from its congressional delegation. Commander Robusto understood this, and shot off this e-mail to his superiors on September 2, 2002: "We . . . are engaged in a dialogue with the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations and Secretary of the Navy staffs regarding the benefits of split-siting. In a nutshell, they want us to fabricate reasons why split-siting . . . [is] beneficial to operational readiness. I have explained several times that there is zero operational benefit to split-siting." Robusto went on to note that split-siting actually detracts from operational readiness.

The Navy's public assurances that birds were no problem contrasted starkly with fears expressed by its pilots. Responding to an e-mail from Dan Cecchini, the EIS project manager, who had just had the epiphany that the proposed site "is smack dab in the middle" of the birds' flight path, Robusto had written: "I totally believe you that there are a bazillion swans in the area. I've seen them and had to pull off at low levels several times because of them. . . . Operator's perspective: This is a big problem."

**Robusto wasn't kidding.** Bird strikes commonly flame-out engines and implode canopies. You can even

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watch the takedown of a NATO CT-155 trainer by a red-tailed hawk, videotaped from inside the cockpit, at the Canadian Air Force's Flying Training School at Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, on May 14, 2004. (To watch this dramatic footage, [click here](#).) The hawk streaks across the screen and is sucked into the engine intake. Sirens. Labored breathing. "Lost the engine," calmly intones the flight instructor. "Okay." More labored breathing. More sirens. "Around the horn. Restart."

At this point the plane is stalling, and its computer thinks the crew is trying to land with the wheels up. "Gear not down. Gear not down," shouts a recording with a heavy British accent.

"Try to get a re-light going," continues the instructor. "You've got her from the front. I'm flying the plane. Okay. Ready to go?"

"I'm ready," replies the student.

"We're ejecting to the north; we have an engine failure," the instructor radios the tower. Then, as the plane plummets, he addresses his student in the same calm voice: "Okay. Prepare to abandon aircraft. Eject! Eject! Eject!" (Both men survived.)

**Ignorance got them here** and arrogance keeps them here," Carter remarked of the Navy, quoting the local shibboleth, as we sipped sweet ice tea at the Garden Spot Café in Plymouth. But it was obvious to me that something more than ignorance, arrogance, or even stupidity was at play here. Whatever the Navy's deficiencies may be, it isn't suicidal.

"Why isn't the Navy worried about these birds?" I inquired. Canfield answered, and his explanation made perfect sense. By its own admission, the Navy plans to get rid of them. It will do so in two ways. First, it will require farmers to replace grain the birds depend on with crops they can't eat—cotton, for example. Then, after pretending to implement "nonlethal control" (there is, of course, no such thing when it comes to keeping 100,000 wintering geese and swans out of the sky), it will implement "lethal control." "Any supposition that the Navy can control these birds without eradicating them from the area is ludicrous," said Canfield. This, then, is the trade-off the public is expected to accept and believe—i.e., that the global war on terror requires depopulating one of the planet's most significant waterfowl sanctuaries.

But with all the flap about waterfowl it's easy to lose sight of Pocosin Lakes National Wildlife Refuge's value to other wildlife. The refuge supports 200 bird species, 40 reptile and amphibian species, and 40 mammal species, including what may be the densest black bear population anywhere. Among the wildlife protected under the Endangered Species Act are red-cockaded woodpeckers and red wolves.

The refuge and the rest of the Albemarle- Pamlico Peninsula is the only place on earth where one has a chance to see and hear red wolves in the wild. There are fewer than 130, but finally they're doing well. "We're building territories from east to west," says Bud Fazio, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's team leader for red wolf recovery. "Our goal is to fill up the whole peninsula, and we're about two-thirds there."

Until the final EIS, the Fish and Wildlife Service had consistently and strongly stated that the OLF would devastate the refuge. Then, after talking to Washington, it shut up. Now it's an official "cooperating agency" on the court-ordered supplemental EIS. Still, the administration cannot prevent federal biologists from honestly answering questions from reporters. So I asked Fazio if he had concerns about the OLF. "Lots," he said. "Last year we had 12 wolves using the preferred site. This year a pair had pups there. . . . Most of the alternatives the Navy proposes—especially chemically intensive cotton monoculture—are just flat out not good for red wolves. I have told the Navy for five years now that anything they do that lowers diversity in the area

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also lowers prey base and therefore habitability for red wolves. And I've repeatedly told them that activities there will be so intensive that I firmly believe wolves will not even be able to communicate with each other. Vocalizations are really important in terms of territorial defense, communication with family members in the pack, finding mates, and on and on and on. There are going to be entire nights when these jets are roaring in one after the other and the wolves just won't be able to do what wolves do. Because of the experimental status of the red wolf under the Endangered Species Act, there is minimal protection, so the Navy is really not paying much attention. I've told them that if they build this field, I will be citing it as one of several impacts that are cumulatively affecting the species enough that we need to change its status under the act so it has more protection."

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Later one of my sources provided me with a copy of Fazio's July 18, 2006, memo to his superiors, in which he wrote: "During 2005 and early 2006, we suggested the Navy begin consulting or conferencing with our agency on red wolf issues [as required] under Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act. . . . To date, the Navy has not initiated any such conference with our agency, despite our attempts to convey red wolf concerns about proposed Navy OLF sites since 2002.

"In 2002, 2003, and 2004, we informed Navy staff and their contractors that red wolves are expanding into the immediate area," the memo continued. But the Navy's June 28, 2006, draft supplemental EIS stated that the OLF site doesn't contain red wolf habitat, an assertion Fazio describes as "completely false."

You have to be extraordinarily lucky to encounter a red wolf. Not so with much of the other refuge wildlife, especially waterfowl in winter. "I sure wish you had come when the birds are here," said Albea as we waited at the entrance of the refuge for its manager, Howard Phillips. I told Albea I preferred high summer, that I had seen wintering geese and swans at other refuges, and while they're certainly impressive, making the ground shake when they explode into the air, then blocking the sun, they tend to dominate and suppress.

Presently Phillips pulled up in his truck, delighted at the chance to get outside and show off the wildlife habitat he tends and loves. Canfield and I rode with him, while Carter, Roth, and Albea followed in Albea's van. We stopped at various points of interest: the moist-soil units where ribbon cane, sedges, smartweed, wild millet, and other annuals favored by waterfowl are encouraged; the ag units where cooperating farmers get to plant corn, paying for the privilege by leaving 20 percent for bears and waterfowl; Pungo Lake; the old fire tower . . .

The refuge was devoid of other human visitors and silent save for birdsong, the clacking of cricket frogs, and the hypnotic buzz of cicadas. This near-total absence of human-caused sound is a resource, too—and not just for wildlife.

Like Fazio, Phillips isn't afraid to talk about the risks the Navy plans to take with the public's wildlife. When I asked if he and his staff had any concerns about the OLF, he said: "We're concerned about noise. Will that cause the birds to make a shift? And if their off-refuge food source is removed [as per Navy plans], they'll have to find other places to go. The big question in my mind is what will the OLF do to Pungo Lake as a roosting site?"

A different, more subtle beauty emerges here in summer. It may manifest itself in the perky bobwhite quail that eyeball you, then lower their heads and dash; the spotted fawns that bound after their mothers, staying on the dirt roads for hundreds of yards because cover on each side is so thick; the sunbathing yellow-bellied

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sliders, three times the size of my Yankee basking turtles; the spectacular, yellow-banded Palamedes swallowtails (the signature butterfly of our southeastern swamps) that flit across your path at the rate of about one per minute.

On the shore of Pungo Lake, a shallow 2,800-acre depression thought to have been burned into the peaty soil by ancient wildfire, we encountered a swarm of broad-winged dragonflies. I'd never seen anything like it. There were hundreds. Derb Carter identified them as wandering gliders, a species that rarely touches down by day and that sometimes crosses to Europe.

From the top of the fire tower we gazed out over the refuge, gaining new appreciation for its size. *Pocosin* is Algonquin for "swamp on a hill." So dense is the endless, wet jungle of titi, red bay, sweet bay, loblolly bay, wax myrtle, and pond pine that humans can't walk through it for any distance. That's why wildlife is so prolific. Now the loblolly bay was festooned with white, magnolia-like blossoms. At all compass points and as far as we could see, the woods looked like they were clutching wet snow.

The silence of the refuge is even more dramatic from the fire tower. But as we stood there a pair of F-15 Strike Eagles thundered in from the Dare County Bombing Range, hugging the northern horizon, then banking over our heads. Jet flyovers are much quieter than takeoffs. Even so, the din was appalling.

### What You Can Do

For more information, log on to [http://www.southernenvironment.org/cases/navy\\_olf/casepage.htm](http://www.southernenvironment.org/cases/navy_olf/casepage.htm) and <http://ncaudubon.org>. Keep checking these sites for opportunities to comment on the draft supplemental EIS. Contact your legislators about the OLF. A local group that is making a difference in this fight is [North Carolinians Opposed to the Outlying Landing Field \(www.noolf.com\)](http://www.noolf.com). To see dramatic footage of a close encounter, go to the NOOLF site and click on Navy Vs Tundra Swans.