

# Between Land & Water

## Understanding the Role of Wetlands

Many people enjoy wetlands as places of beauty. These are places we can go to enjoy the experience of walking through nature, watching birds and other animals, as well as the bountiful plant life. As more people move into the cities, wetlands and other undeveloped areas become more valuable as places where we can experience and learn about the natural world.

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# Between Land & Water:

## UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF WETLANDS

Wetlands are the link between land and water. They are places where the land is wet enough for long enough that particular plants grow there. It is the water, the soils and the wetland plants that make a wetland different from the other places around it.

Wetlands are scattered across the landscape. They are often, but not always, found at water's edge – around lakes, in estuaries and beside rivers. Other wetlands are found in places where water can gather – in depressions in the land or in places where water cannot drain away because of hardpan layers.



Salamanders, frogs and toads are common wetland residents. These amphibians live part of their lives on land, the other part in water. They lay their eggs in water (ponds in wetlands) and live the early part of their lives there. As adults, they usually move out of the water. Even when living on land they need moist places because they breathe by absorbing oxygen from water on their skin. Ponds that dry up in late summer are especially favored by some salamanders and frogs, as these ponds do not have fish that prey on amphibian larvae.

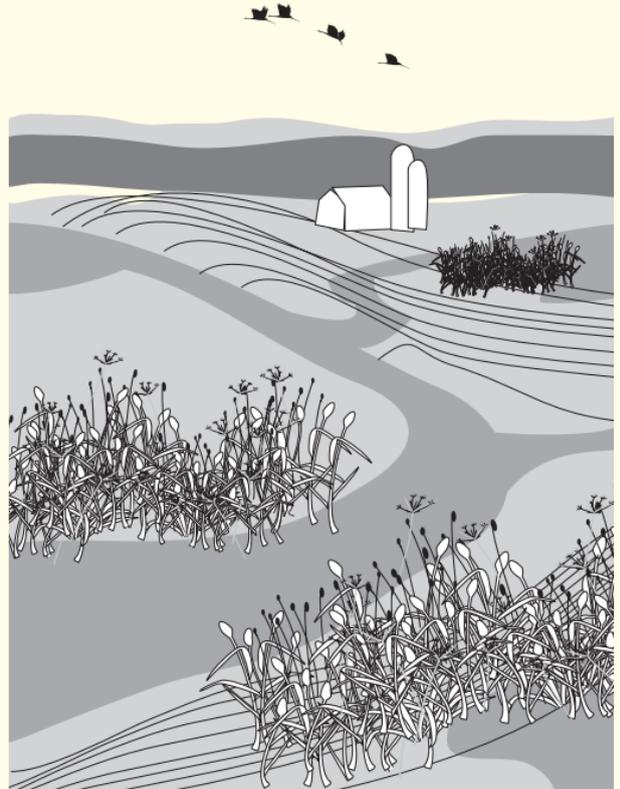


Many other animals live in wetlands for at least part of the time. Most of America's birds live in and around wetlands – not just ducks and geese, but songbirds too. Ducks and geese can be an important source of income from hunters for local economies. But people will also travel long distances to watch birds in wetlands.

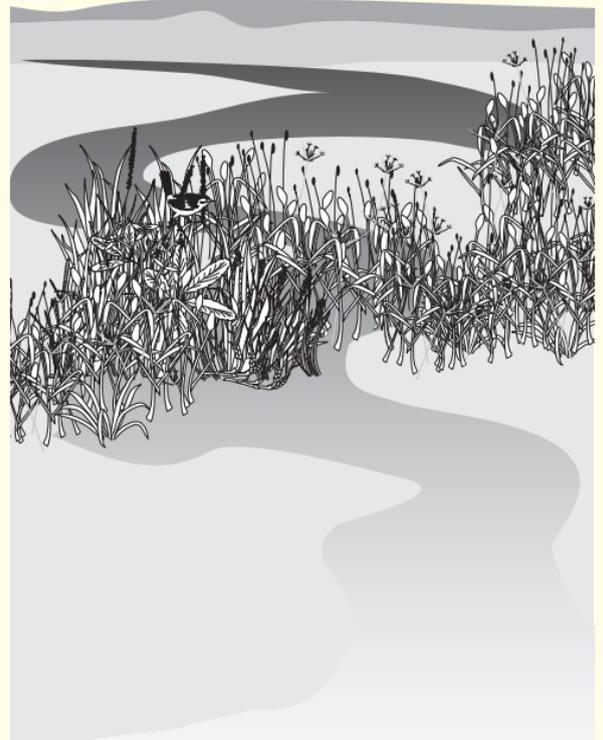
Wetlands are also important for fish. More than 95% of the fish and shellfish species that are harvested commercially in the U.S. live in wetlands. Many young saltwater fish depend on coastal wetlands for food and shelter. Even freshwater fish use wetlands near rivers for part of their life-cycle.



In rain-soaked Washington, flooding is never far from our minds. During storms, water can be held in wetlands; this slows the runoff into streams and rivers and lowers the flood peak. As the peak flow in a flood causes most damage, wetlands help to reduce the danger associated with flooding and the risk to crops, buildings and life. Along our coasts there are wetlands that shelter inland areas from the worst fury of ocean storms. These wetlands protect the land and its crops and livestock, as well as communities that live near the coast.



As water flows into a wetland, it slows down. Fine sediments can then settle out, so the water is cleaned before it enters our streams, rivers and lakes. Any toxic chemicals attached to these sediments will also settle into the wetland soil and be held there. Organic compounds, such as animal wastes, can also be cleaned through wetlands. Of course, every wetland has a limit to how much waste it can hold. When too much polluted runoff from houses, roads or farms goes into wetlands, it kills the plants, animals and, finally, the wetland.



Water may remain in a wetland for some time. Some of that water can make its way down to replenish stores of groundwater, which is a source of drinking water for many people in Washington. Or this water may make its way into a nearby stream. During summer droughts many of our streams begin to dry up. The water stored in wetlands, as it seeps through the ground, then becomes an important source of water for streams and rivers and helps to maintain fish populations.

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