great lakes marsh

Plants and animals have always thrived in and around wetlands, but people have only recently realized the tremendous value these water resources give us. They regulate floods, filter water, and provide breeding grounds for numerous species. Michigan is home to a special kind of wetland unique to our region, known as the Great Lakes marsh. By protecting Great Lakes marshes, we are protecting the very waters that lead into our precious Great Lakes and the world's largest freshwater ecosystem.

Definition & Ecological Importance

Heavily flooded wetlands mixed with vegetation such as cattails and reeds are known as marshes. A Great Lakes marsh is an herbaceous wetland community which only occurs along the shoreline of the Great Lakes and their connecting rivers. If you see a wetland in a coastal area of Michigan, you are probably looking at a Great Lakes marsh.

Marshes have been said to be home to the most biodiversity of any habitat system because of their various components. Contrary to typical marshes, the water level in Great Lakes marshes fluctuates dramatically over many years with the Great Lakes' water level. This hydrological change greatly influences the Great Lakes marshes, giving them distinctive species composition, high in biodiversity.

Native plants found in Great Lakes marshes range from sedges and rushes to grasses and lillies. Wild rice grows here beside rose mallow and water marigold. Birds like the American bittern and black-crowned night-heron swoop down to find food between the cattails and pondweeds. Creatures like the Blanding's turtle swim next to ducks, geese, and swans.

Swamps, streams and marshes create a mosaic of wetlands that feed and drain Skegemog Lake in Kalkaska County.

Location

Located along the mouths of many rivers and shoreline lakes along the coasts of all the Great Lakes, including Lake Michigan. Great Lakes marshes also occur around the rivers that feed into the Great Lakes, including the Detroit, St. Clair, St. Lawrence, St. Mary's and Niagara.

Traditionally, sandhill cranes select remote, inaccessible wetlands such as Great Lakes marshes for nesting since they prefer to be far from humans. As more cities spread beyond their original borders, however, more roads run alongside Great Lakes marshes, threatening these fragile habitats.

Critical Habitat

Great Lakes marshes provide important habitat for insects, fish, waterfowl, water birds and mammals. Fish utilize coastal wetlands in all parts of their life cycle, from egg to adult. A broad range of invertebrates occupy this habitat, providing food for fish and birds.

Coastal wetlands have long been recognized as critical habitat for the migration, feeding and nesting of waterfowl. The Great Lakes and connecting rivers are part of several major flyways. Many other shore birds also feed, nest and migrate in and through these wetlands. During spring migration, when few alternative sources of nutrients are available, terrestrial migratory songbirds feed on midges from the Great Lakes marshes.

Threats

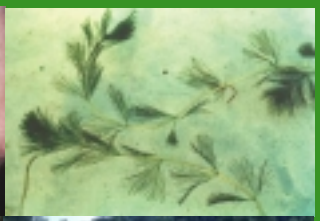
Coastal wetlands have been degraded as the result of numerous forms of damage, from filling and modifying them to pollution and sedimentation. Other threats to Great Lakes marshes include:

- Armoring of the shoreline and dredging channels to create harbors;
- Shipping traffic that erodes shoreline vegetation;
- Agricultural drainage that eliminates large marshes;
- Dumping waste, such as sawdust and various chemicals, which alters the marsh by increasing turbidity, lowering levels of oxygen, and changing the chemistry of the water; and
- Introduction of exotic or invasive species that outcompete native species for sun and other essential nutrients. Plants of particular concern to Great Lakes marshes are seen below.

Invasive Plants Threaten Wetlands

Curly leaf pondweed

Eurasian water milfoil



Phragmites

Purple loosestrife

What can YOU do to help save our Great Lakes marshes?

Michigan's coastal system has been here for thousands of years, but that does not necessarily mean they will last through the next millennium, or even this century, without our help. You can make a difference by following any or all of these suggestions.

- When visiting a park or nature preserve, stay on the path.
- Take only pictures, leave only footprints.
- Wash your shoes after a hike to avoid spreading invasive species.
- Volunteer for beach clean-up, piping plover patrol and/or stewardship work days.
- If you own property on or near the shore, consider placing a conservation easement on your land to restrict future development in perpetuity.
- Donate land or money to your favorite conservation organization!
- Participate in Sand Dune Day every May!
- Learn more and tell others about the importance of Michigan's dunes and shoreline.

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