



Common moorhen



Snowy egret



Wood ducks

conserving maine's significant wildlife habitat

WATERFOWL & WADING BIRDS

Maine Wetlands: Valuable to Humans and Birds Alike

There are over five million acres of fresh and saltwater wetlands in Maine, four times the wetland area of all other New England states combined! Recognized for their beauty and recreational opportunities, these wetlands are incredibly valuable to the state's economy as well as its wildlife.

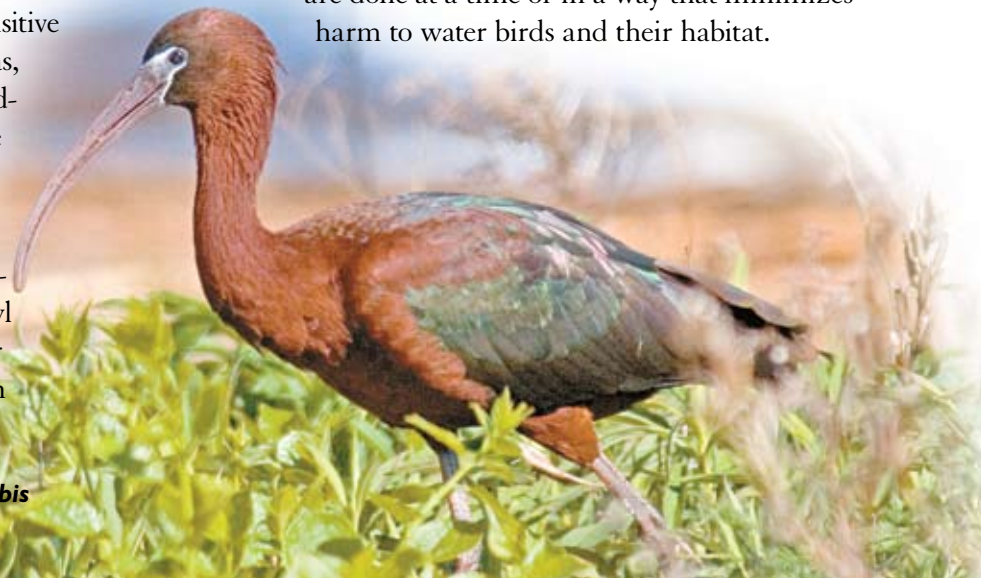
Performing critical functions in our environment, such as filtering pollutants, holding floodwater, recharging our drinking water supplies, and reducing shoreline erosion, wetlands also provide habitat for over 50 species of Maine's water birds. But development that is too close to sensitive waterfowl and wading bird nesting and feeding areas, or that happens at times that are critical to bird breeding activities, put these species at risk. Luckily, there are ways to balance appropriate development with wetland conservation.

The designation of moderate- and high-value wetlands as Significant Wildlife Habitat for waterfowl and wading birds is an important tool to keep our wetlands performing their vital functions for both people and wildlife.

What is Significant Wildlife Habitat?

Significant Wildlife Habitat is an area protected under Maine's Natural Resources Protection Act. The Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife (DIFW) has identified and mapped high-to moderate-value coastal and inland wetlands as Significant Wildlife Habitat for waterfowl and wading birds. Permits from the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) are required for regulated activities in Significant Wildlife Habitat, including but not limited to dredging, bulldozing, draining, filling, and construction or alterations of permanent structures.

The permit review process ensures that activities are done at a time or in a way that minimizes harm to water birds and their habitat.



Glossy ibis

About Maine's Unique Waterbirds

Waterfowl

Maine's location at the southern limit of some species' range and the northern limit of others gives it a unique mix of waterfowl, including ducks, geese, and even occasional migrant swans. Eighteen species breed in Maine each summer, and another 20 species spend the winter months off the coast or migrate through the state in spring or fall.

Most waterfowl species nest on the ground in the uplands next to wetlands, streams, or lakes, then move their young to open water after they hatch. Some species, like wood ducks and hooded mergansers, nest in tree cavities. They need forested habitat with fairly large dead or dying trees that have the holes they need for nesting. Cavity-nesting ducks will sometimes go more than 600 feet from a wetland in order to find a nesting tree.

Waterfowl eat a variety of food items. Some species are primarily vegetarian, feeding on leaves, roots, and seeds in and around shallow water. Others, like mergansers, forage in deeper waters for fish. Many species feed on aquatic invertebrates—small soft-bodied animals—that are abundant in healthy wetlands.

Wading Birds

Wading birds are a diverse group of birds that include herons, egrets, bitterns, ibises, coots, moorhens, and rails. Maine's wading birds include 21 species that either breed here or migrate through the state each year.

Most wading birds have relatively long legs and long necks, though two uncommon species—American coots and common moorhens—both look more like ducks than typical wading birds. There is a wide variation in size among wading birds, from the yellow rail at just nine inches tall to the great blue heron, which is about five times that size. While some secretive species like rails and soras are rarely seen, the larger egrets, ibises, and herons often feed visibly in open wetlands, sometimes close to human activity.

Wading birds nest in a variety of places. Some, like herons and egrets, nest in colonies that can number over 100 pairs. Building loose stick nests in the tops of tall trees, these birds reuse nests for up to several decades, long after the trees they are in die from the weight and stress of the nest. Other wading bird species nest closer to the ground, building nests of reeds and grasses among wetland plants.

Wading birds feed on fish, amphibians, invertebrates, and plants found in shallow wetlands. Clean water that supports healthy populations of their prey is vital to their survival.



Black-crowned night-heron



Blue-winged teal



Hooded mergansers

Wetland Habitats at Risk

Both the Atlantic Northern Forest Bird Conservation Plan and the North American Waterfowl Management Plan have identified the loss of wetlands from draining, dredging and filling as the primary threat to water birds in our region.

Development near a wetland can degrade wildlife habitat by increasing disturbance, stormwater runoff, sedimentation, and pollution. Changes in water chemistry as a result of development can lower the abundance of invertebrates, reduce plant diversity, and increase the presence of invasive, non-native species. These changes can make the habitat unsuitable for water birds.



Mallard ducklings



Ring-necked duck

The designation of moderate- and high-value wetlands as Significant Wildlife Habitat for waterfowl and wading birds is an important tool balancing development with conservation. By managing regulated activities in these habitats we can maintain or even improve habitat and water quality while minimizing impacts to both migratory and breeding water birds.

Why Protect Wetlands?

Healthy wetlands maintain property values. Wetlands store excess water, providing flood control during times of heavy rain. They buffer shorelines from waves and hold soil in place, preventing loss of shoreline from erosion. Wetlands also filter sediments and pollutants from surface run off, which keeps water clean and clear. If we had to build man-made structures and systems to provide these services, they would be *extremely* expensive and not nearly as effective at protecting property values.

Wetlands provide valuable wildlife habitat. Water birds are not the only species that depend on wetland habitat. Coastal wetlands provide critical habitat for shellfish like clams and mussels. Many mammals, including furbearers like mink, beaver and muskrat, live in or near wetlands. Other birds like ospreys, herons and bald eagles feed in both freshwater and saltwater wetlands. Finally, healthy populations of fish, an important recreational resource, depend on food sources that grow in wetland habitat.

Hunting and fishing are important to Maine's economy.

By protecting the quality of our wetlands, we improve nesting success for breeding waterfowl and attract migratory waterbirds in spring and fall. Waterfowl hunters in Maine take an average of 50,000 freshwater ducks and another 20,000 sea ducks each year, generating critical license revenue for DIFW as well as spending additional money in local communities where they hunt. Wetlands ultimately drain into our favorite brook trout streams and coastal bays, providing a source of clean water far beyond the wetland boundary.

Heron colonies are under threat. Great blue herons are a treasured species in Maine, but anecdotal reports of long-standing heron colonies indicate declining numbers. Repeated human disturbance from building, industrial development, water recreation, and highway construction are known causes of colony failure.





Green-winged teal

Which Areas Qualify as Significant Wildlife Habitat?

All wetlands are not created equal, and not all wetlands qualify as Significant Wildlife Habitat (SWH). Wetlands that do qualify have habitat characteristics that make them valuable for wildlife like large size, complex shape, and for tidal wetlands, large areas of mudflats or eelgrass beds. Maps of SWH for waterfowl and wading birds

can be found at the Maine DEP website (www.maine.gov/dep, search “bird habitat”). Inland SWH includes a 250-foot buffer around the wetland complex. Tidal SWH includes only the identified tidal wetland habitat. Shoreland zoning rules and other DEP protections apply to coastal upland buffers.

What You Can Do:

- If you think you have a high-or moderate-value wetland on your property that might qualify as Significant Wildlife Habitat, documentation by a regional biologist from DIFW may be required. Call (207) 287-8000 to request a visit.
- If you are planning to build or conduct other regulated activities in Significant Wildlife Habitat, contact your local DEP office for more information about the permit process so you can efficiently plan your activities and get advice about steps you can take to avoid impacts.
- If you live near Significant Wildlife Habitat, avoid using chemicals that may run into the wetland, harming food sources for waterfowl and wading birds.
- If you are working on local land conservation efforts in your town or region, learn more about Significant Wildlife Habitats in your community by looking at SWH maps from the Maine DEP website (www.umaine.gov/dep) or by consulting your town’s High Value Plant and Animal Habitat map from Beginning With Habitat (www.beginningwithhabitat.org).
- If you are paddling, or walking in and around wetlands, beware of ground-nesting ducks. If you have a dog with you, keep it leashed. Watch migratory waterfowl with binoculars to avoid disturbing feeding or resting flocks.
- If you are near a nesting colony of wading birds, watch them with binoculars and keep your distance. Repeated human disturbance can cause nest abandonment.

For More Information:

Department of Environmental Protection
www.maine.gov/dep, search for “bird habitat”

Bureau of Land and Water Quality (*Augusta*)
(207)287-3901 or 1-800-452-1942

Southern Maine Regional Office (*Portland*)
(207)822-6300 or 1-888-769-1036

Eastern Maine Regional Office (*Bangor*)
(207)941-4570 or 1-888-769-1137

Northern Maine Regional Office (*Presque Isle*)
(207)764-0477 or 1-888-769-1053

Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife
www.mefishwildlife.com

For questions about SWH regulations, please contact the Environmental Coordinator (207) 287-5258

For questions about wildlife and habitats, please contact staff at Beginning with Habitat (207) 287-5254 or visit www.beginningwithhabitat.org

Maine Audubon
(207)781-2330, www.maineaudubon.org/swh

BIRD PHOTOS COURTESY OF RAY SPENCER

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