MARSHES

MARSHES are the most productive of all our wetland types. They usually have open water in them up to 6 1/2 feet deep, and are predominated by lush vegetation growing in or out of the water. Common vegetation of the marsh includes emergent plants such as cattail and bulrush, floating-leaved plants such as water lily, and submerged plants such as coontail.

Freshwater marsh plants use sunlight to convert water and nutrients into living matter (biomass) more efficiently than most other ecosystems, including forests and farmlands. Because of this high productivity, marshes provide food for a remarkable variety and abundance of fish and wildlife.

In all ecosystems, plant life forms the base of the food chain. In marshes this base is exceptionally large, so more food is available for more insects, amphibians and reptiles, fish, birds, and mammals.

Marshes are important to our freshwater fisheries as they provide feeding and spawning grounds for many species. The warm shallow waters of marshes provide spawning grounds for minnows, sunfish, bass, pike, and muskellunge. Marshes are also important to the health of lakes as they filter silt and pollution from the water.

A diverse community of wildlife depends on marshland. Loons nest among the emergent vegetation beside open water. Osprey and kingfishers dive in the shallow waters for fish. Muskrat build lodges and channels among cattails, and create openings for ducks, rails and bitterns. Mink prey on the abundant frogs, young birds, and small mammals in the marsh.

In the autumn, marshes provide important feeding and gathering areas for migrating ducks and geese. Puddle ducks, such as mallards and blue-winged teal, feed on wild rice and shallow aquatic plants. Diving ducks, such as ringnecks and goldeneyes, feed on small aquatic animals and plants in deeper water.