

“What Is This Swamp Doing In My Back Yard?”

Wetlands In Your Neighborhood

If your house is located next to a wetland, consider yourself lucky. You are living next to a botanical garden and wildlife refuge! By learning some facts about the wetland, you can be a better neighbor to it and to the creatures who live or feed there.

While subdivision developers are required to preserve wetlands and to inform new residents of restrictions regarding their actions in and adjacent to wetlands, it is up to you, as an owner of a home adjacent to a wetland, to protect the wetlands. You are the caretaker of a dwindling resource and can play a critical role in preserving irreplaceable wetland ecosystems.

A Little History Lesson

Before Europeans settled Florida and began altering the natural environment to suit their needs, the natural landscape in our area consisted mostly of pine flatwoods — palmettos, grasses, herbs, with scattered pine trees. In low areas lay wetlands, vegetated with plants specifically adapted to wet conditions. Much of the wildlife lived in uplands and used wetlands for food sources, water and cover.

Europeans came and began “developing” the state.



They regarded wetlands as problem areas and started draining or filling them. Large scale wetland destruction progressed at a rapid rate, beginning in the 1880s and lasting until the early 1970s when public, scientific, and governmental perception of wetlands began to change. Wetlands that were once seen as dismal, unpleasant places were now seen as water quality treatment areas and floodwater holding areas. Laws were enacted to protect the wetlands for these purposes.

An unexpected bonus of protecting wetlands for water quality and quantity is that we can also preserve some of the last remaining natural areas in our state. Uplands are not regulated to the extent wetlands are so the only areas protected are wetlands, sometimes with a narrow upland buffer adjacent to them.

Why Wetlands Are Wonderful

Wetlands are becoming the last remaining wildlife refuges in Florida. In urbanized areas, they are especially important because they serve as sanctuaries that have not been transformed into housing developments, shopping centers or roads. All kinds of birds,

amphibians, and mammals live in or use wetlands for food and/or shelter. Some may even be threatened or endangered, like the graceful wood stork, or shy indigo snake.

Wetlands also attract colorful and sweetly-singing birds, and they in turn help control mosquitoes and gnats.



You can detect the subtle turning of the seasons in wetlands that might otherwise be missed by observing the progression of blooming wildflowers, or the change of color in vegetation. Maples turn red, willows turn yellow, ashes turn yellow, and cypress trees lose their leaves in the fall. There are often wild blackberries to eat, usually growing at the edge, and wild blueberries.

Moreover, wetlands can temper climate by releasing water-heated air on cold winter days, and by releasing water-cooled breezes on sultry summer days.

How To Know A Wetland

If the “woods” or “field” in your back yard gets wet during the rainy season, there’s a good chance you have a wetland back there. Wetlands are fairly easy to recognize once you know what to look for. They can be forested swamps or grassy marshes, vegetated lake

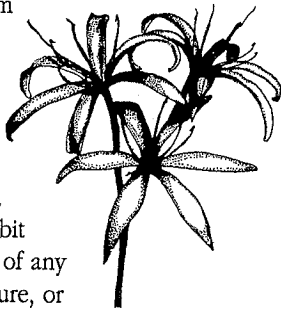
shorelines, forested river floodplains, or wet prairies. Wetlands are usually flooded or saturated for some period of time during the year, long enough to support a dominance of wetland vegetation. Typical wetland vegetation includes cypress, maple, willow, bay, elm, and laurel and water oak trees, pickerelweed, cattails, water lilies, sedges and rushes. There are many books available at libraries and bookstores to help you identify plants.

Take a close look at your property survey for wetland limits. Newer subdivisions are required to show the limits on the overall subdivision plats, and the limits are in turn shown on the individual lot surveys. Often, a protected upland buffer is preserved adjacent to the wetland, however, the limit of the buffer is not usually shown on surveys.

What Can You Do With A Wetland?

Before you do any work in or near a wetland, it is best to check with the District. Some actions, such as clearing, filling or excavating without the proper permits, may actually constitute violations of the law. You cannot dump trash, build in, fill, or excavate in a wetland, use chemicals (herbicides or insecticides), or remove or add vegetation. The best policy is to leave wetlands alone; however, with guidance from the District or other regulatory agencies, you can make them more appealing.

If you live in a relatively new subdivision, check your deed restrictions to see if your plans need District approval or a permit. Some deed restrictions prohibit construction or maintenance of any building, residence, or structure, or any activity in the wetlands, buffer areas, and upland conservation areas unless prior written approval is received from the District. Not all of the newer subdivisions that contain preserved wetlands have deed restrictions governing activities in wetlands. The best policy is to check with the District if you have any doubts.



With guidance from District environmental staff, it may be permissible to selectively trim, plant, or remove undesirable species in order to enhance the looks and the wildlife habitat value of the wetland. Don't forget, though, that the "messiest" wetlands are often the best homes for wildlife.

If the wetland is unsightly, you might want to plant a screen of native shrubs. The screen could also serve to feed birds, provide cover for rabbits and other wildlife. Convert part of your back yard adjacent to a wetland into a wildlife sanctuary by restricting your pets to the landscaped portion. Plant the sanctuary portion thickly with native, food-producing plants like wax myrtle, dahoon holly, and other berry or seed-producing plants.

There are other simple things you can do to protect the wildlife inhabiting your wetland, including being careful not to direct light into the wetlands at night and trying to limit the amount of noise coming from your home. And remember to drive cautiously along roads that cut through border wetlands or preserved, natural uplands. Wildlife do not know to yield to traffic and the effort we take in preserving their habitat is wasted if the animals are killed on the roadways.

A Thousand Thanks

Thank you for taking the time to read this pamphlet! This is the first step you have taken toward understanding Florida's wonderful wetlands and toward living in harmony with the plants and animals that depend on your cooperation for their continued survival.



Where To Go For Help

For information about native plants:

Florida Native Plant Society
P.O. Box 6116
Spring Hill, Florida 34611
(813) 856-8202

For information about wildlife:

Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission
3900 Drane Field Road
Lakeland, Florida 33811
(941) 648-3205

To contact the District:

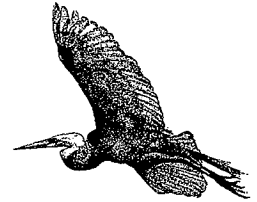
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Protecting Your Water Resources

Anyone requiring reasonable accommodation as provided for in the Americans With Disabilities Act should contact the Public Communications Department at (352) 796-7211 or 1-800-423-1476 (Florida), extension 4757; TDD ONLY 1-800-231-6103 (Florida); fax (352) 754-6883/SUNCOM 663-6883.

Revised September 1998

