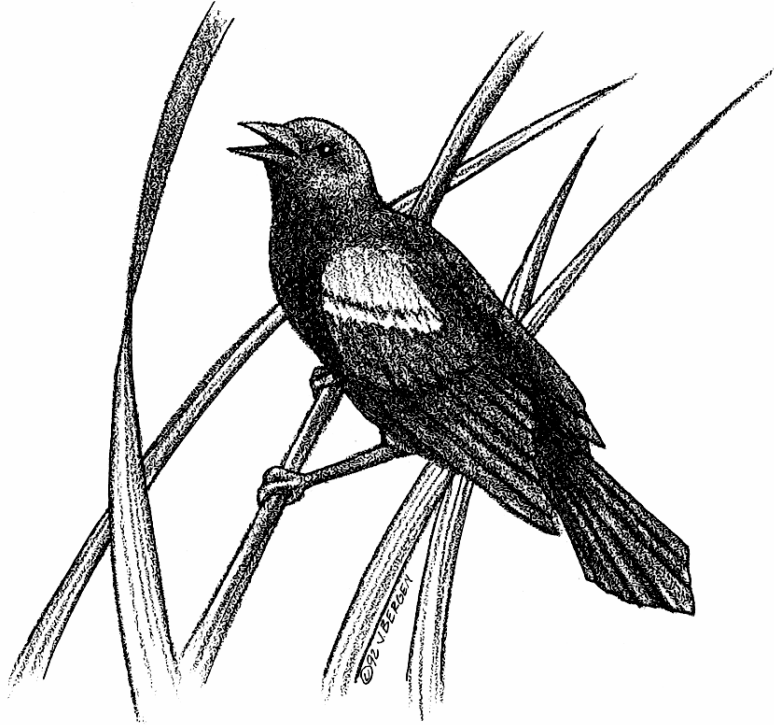


# Having a Wetland as a Neighbor

by Kenn Oberrecht

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*For too many years, Americans have labored under the misapprehension that they knew something about wetlands. What they thought they knew was that the word wetlands was synonymous with wastelands. They had no respect for wetlands and tried every feasible way to destroy them. They ditched, diked, dredged, drained, and filled any wetland that got in the way of what they saw as progress. Consequently, we have lost most of the nation's wetlands.*

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According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Wetlands Inventory Group, between the 1780's and 1980's, 53 percent of the original 221 million acres of wetlands in the contiguous states were destroyed. That works out to an astounding 60 acres an hour for 200 years.

In terms of percentages, California is the biggest loser, with its original five million acres of wetlands reduced to less than a half-million acres, representing a 91-percent loss. In terms of acreage, Florida is the worst of 50 states, having destroyed 9.3 million acres of wetlands.

Florida, Louisiana, Minnesota, and Texas are the states with the greatest acreage losses. Ten other states have destroyed at least 70 percent of their original wetlands. In fact, Alaska, New Hampshire, and Hawaii are the only states that have lost less than 20 percent of their original wetlands. Oregon and Washington have lost 38 and 31 percent, respectively.

Most urban areas have lost more than 90 percent of their wetlands, and what remains has been isolated and degraded. Most such areas probably don't perform many of their original functions.

The most sobering and unfathomable statistics of all are that despite federal, state, and local attempts to halt the plunder of one of the nation's most valuable assets, we continue to destroy 300,000 to 400,000 acres of wetlands every year.

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Wetlands exist in a variety of types. They include swamps, bogs, sloughs, freshwater marshes, salt marshes, vernal pools, wet meadows, and forested wetlands. Many exist as parts of complex ecosystems and function as highly productive habitat.

Too many people continue to wonder about all the fuss over a bunch of smelly swamps and marshes. Well, the fact is, wetlands are the best neighbors we can have.

They offer protection against erosion by anchoring shoreline soils. They trap sediments, filter pollution from air and water, and retain nutrients with which they support food chains and webs.

They provide critical habitat for fish, shellfish, amphibians, reptiles, birds, and mammals. Many are drinking-water sources for all sorts of wildlife.

Some store ground water and even recharge groundwater supplies. In times of excess, they store damaging flood waters, as well.

Wetlands foster tourism and many forms of recreation. Because of the tremendous variety of plant and animal life they support, they are natural laboratories for every level of inquiry and education, from grade-school studies to post-doctoral research.

So wetlands are good neighbors. Want to know how to be a good neighbor to wetlands? Just leave them alone.

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