

## Ripple Effect #23

### **Wetlands Overview**

Is there a wetland in your neighborhood? Could it be a wetland if you were standing in it but you didn't get wet? Specific information on wetland definitions, as well as laws, regulations, functions and values can be found on the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) website at <http://www.epa.gov/wetlands/>.

Although wetlands are often wet, a wetland might not be wet year-round. In fact, some of the most important wetlands are only seasonally wet. Wetlands are the link between the land and the water. They are transition zones where the flow of water, the cycling of nutrients, and the energy of the sun meet to produce a unique ecosystem characterized by hydrology, soils, and vegetation - making these areas very important features of a watershed.

Wetlands fall into four general categories—marshes, swamps, bogs, and fens. Marshes are wetlands dominated by soft-stemmed vegetation, while swamps have mostly woody plants. Bogs are freshwater wetlands, often formed in old glacial lakes, characterized by spongy peat deposits, evergreen trees and shrubs, and a floor covered by a thick carpet of sphagnum moss. Fens are freshwater peat-forming wetlands covered mostly by grasses, sedges, reeds and wildflowers.

**Wetland Benefits** - Often called “nurseries of life,” wetlands provide habitat for thousands of species of aquatic and terrestrial plants and animals. Although wetlands are best known for being home to turtles, frogs and snakes, they also provide important habitat for waterfowl, fish and mammals. Migrating birds use wetlands to rest and feed during their cross-continental journeys and as nesting sites when they are at home. Wetland loss has a serious impact on these species.

Wetlands do more than provide habitat for plants and animals in the watershed. When rivers overflow, wetlands help to absorb and slow floodwaters. This ability to control floods can alleviate property damage and loss and can even save lives. Wetlands also absorb excess nutrients, sediment and other pollutants before they reach rivers, lakes and other water bodies. They are great spots for fishing, canoeing, hiking and bird-watching and they make wonderful outdoor classrooms for people of all ages.

Despite all the benefits provided by wetlands, many acres are lost each year. To prevent wetland loss or degradation, follow these simple guidelines:

- Instead of draining or filling wetlands, find more compatible uses, such as waterfowl and wildlife habitat.
- When developing your landscaping plan, keep wetlands in mind. Plant native grasses or forested buffer strips along wetlands on your property to protect water quality.
- Participate in a volunteer wetland monitoring program.
- Plan to avoid wetlands when developing or improving a site. Get technical assistance from your state environmental agency before you alter a wetland.

- Maintain wetlands and adjacent buffer strips as open space.
- Support your local watershed district.
- Invite a wetland expert to speak at your school, club, youth group or professional organization.

The next time you see a wetland; remember that they contribute to flood control, bank stabilization, pollution control, the recharge and discharge of ground water, and habitat for plants and animals in every watershed!

Until the next Ripple Effect,

The Red River Basin Commission (RRBC)