

Backgrounder

HEALTHY WETLANDS MAKE HEALTHY COMMUNITIES

RIDEAU VALLEY, March 19, 2009 — A summer stroll along the cattail fringe of your local river might get you a glimpse of a dabbling duck, the industrious beaver or the adaptable muskrat (or at least signs of their work). Just as a minute's observation of a small swamp or inland marsh will bring a world of wetland creatures to life that you probably never even imagined living nearby.

Your family can make such discoveries at the Perth Wildlife Reserve, Chapman Mills, Baxter, Mill Pond, Purdon, Mill of Kintail or any other natural Conservation Area in Eastern Ontario because wetlands and river flood plains are a big part of the scenery in our area.

These special types of landscapes provide all the right ingredients for a huge number and assortment of plants and animals: heat, light, shelter, water, food and nest materials. Scientists tell us that fully 90% of the plants and animals in a lake or river NEED wetlands or flood plain at some critical point in their life cycle. That's why this unique and sensitive area along the edge of the river is often called the "Ribbon of Life". Without those special areas, the numbers and diversity of our wild plants, fish and animals would go down.

Wetlands also clean the water. The reduced speed of water through a wetland gives time for most of the sediment to settle out and the increasingly thick plant life filters and absorbs large amounts of pollutants from the water. By "residing" in the wetland for some time, the water can infiltrate downwards into the underground aquifers cleaning and restoring water supplies for the towns and families who draw their drinking water from wells.

And as if free recreational opportunities and water purification wasn't enough, we know too that wetlands reduce flooding in communities farther down the watershed by storing water during floods or high rain and snowmelt periods. Thanks to recent studies by the Rideau Valley Conservation Authority (to be finished in early April), they are putting numbers to this flood reduction value and finding out just how important wetlands are in reducing flood risk in the Rideau Valley watershed. The stored water is released slowly back into the surface streams or down into the aquifers throughout the summer/fall season.

This is important for municipalities and property owners to know. Natural wetlands of all shapes, sizes and characteristics provide some very cost-effective flood and drought protection to downstream neighbours. Less flood damage during high water and less drought during low water periods- one more reason to take care of these valuable wetlands. Next thing you know, they'll be telling us cattails are edible or some crazy thing like that! Will the miracle of wetlands ever cease?

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