



# HORICON MARSH

Property Owners: USFWS, WDNR

**Recognitions & Designations:** Ramsar Convention Wetland of International Importance, American Bird Conservancy Globally Important Bird Area, WI Land Legacy Place, The Nature Conservancy Priority Conservation Area, WI Bird Conservation Initiative Important Bird Area, Unit of the Ice Age National Scientific Reserve of Wisconsin

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**HORICON MARSH WETLAND TYPES**

Jack Bartholmai

Marsh, sedge meadow, shrub carr

## ECOLOGY & SIGNIFICANCE

Horicon Marsh is the largest freshwater cattail marsh in the United States, boasting more than 32,000 wetland acres. The site has garnered many superlatives and recognitions; it is designated as a Wetland of International Importance and as both a Globally and State Important Bird Area. Horicon Marsh is a shallow, peat-filled lake bed that was created by glacial scouring and impounding of the basin by a recessional moraine at the end of the last ice age. The northern two-thirds of the marsh is managed as a National Wildlife Refuge and the southern third is managed as a State Wildlife Area. The site provides stopover habitat for huge numbers of migratory waterfowl and supports a number of rare and endangered species.

## FLORA & FAUNA

The marsh has a long history of human alteration and impacts including ditching, draining and muck farming that occurred before the lands were bought and restored by public agencies. Restoration has had outstanding results, but the legacy of these historical alterations still influences current marsh habitats. An extensive system of dikes and ditches are used to manage the wetlands via water level manipulations in order to counteract the remaining ditches and maximize the value of wetlands for waterfowl and other wildlife. Vegetation at Horicon

is composed primarily of emergent marsh species, particularly cattails. The site is primarily deep-water marsh although other wetland types occur.

This Wetland Gem is a mecca for wildlife with 300 species of birds, snapping turtle, garter snake, white-tailed deer, red fox, river otter, muskrat and many other animal species. Horicon Marsh is best known for hosting tremendous numbers of waterfowl during migration, including more than 250,000 Canada geese and 100,000 ducks in the fall. Significant numbers of shorebirds also use Horicon as a migratory stopover during draw downs and low water levels. The site supports significant breeding populations of waterbirds such as least bittern, American bittern, black-crowned night-heron, American white pelican and great blue heron. Horicon also hosts the largest breeding population of redhead duck east of the Mississippi River. Other rare birds include black tern, Forster's tern, king rail and great egret.

## THREATS

Polluted runoff from agricultural practices on surrounding lands degrades water quality and accelerates sedimentation. Increasing watershed development and invasive species also threaten wetland habitat quality. Proximity to both Milwaukee and Madison means large numbers of visitors; recreational use may also impact site wetlands.



American white pelicans — Jack Bartholmai

## ACCESS

This site offers a variety of recreational opportunities, including the new Horicon Marsh International Education Center. For details, visit [www.horiconmarsh.org](http://www.horiconmarsh.org), the WDNR Horicon Marsh State Wildlife Area website: [www.dnr.state.wi.us/org/land/wildlife/wildlife\\_areas/horicon](http://www.dnr.state.wi.us/org/land/wildlife/wildlife_areas/horicon), and the USFWS National Wildlife Refuge website: [www.fws.gov/midwest/horicon](http://www.fws.gov/midwest/horicon).

## Sources:

Horicon National Wildlife Refuge (USFWS)  
 Horicon Marsh State Wildlife Area (WDNR)  
 Wisconsin Land Legacy Report (WDNR)  
 The Prairie-Forest Border: An Ecoregional Plan (TNC)  
 Wisconsin Important Bird Areas (WBCI)