

Why wetlands?

Small wetlands make a big impact



You've likely heard of our region's largest wetlands such as Horicon Marsh, the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge, and Vernon Marsh. These large wetland complexes hold great ecological importance for Wisconsin and the surrounding regions. But smaller wetlands also have a tremendous collective impact on flooding, wildlife-population sustainability, water quality, and other factors that impact our landscape and quality of life.

Consider the one-acre seasonal wetland in your woods or the 10- or 20-acre lowland area dominated by reed canary grass. It is important that we steward these smaller wetlands with the same care that we do their larger relatives. In fact, smaller wetlands offer us a unique restoration advantage; when we collect and slow water from smaller wetlands in the upper reaches of a watershed—where water volume is often less—we protect the larger, lower wetlands from becoming overwhelmed.

"To date, Wisconsin has lost over 50% of its historical wetland ecosystems."

Smaller wetlands that experience seasonal water-level changes provide some of the highest quality food and habitat resources for wildlife, and a whopping eighty percent of all wildlife species depend on wetlands at some point in their lifecycles. For example, migratory waterbirds require wetlands for stopover habitat, breeding, and brood-rearing, all of which are essential to their survival. These wetlands also tend to have large vegetative-growth patterns, which support invertebrate populations with decomposing plant matter. These invertebrates, in-turn, supply high-calcium diets (via their exoskeletons) to female waterbirds during spring migration in preparation for egg-laying season. Smaller wetlands support different vegetation, which produces seeds that provide carbohydrate-rich nutrition to birds, preparing them for long migratory flights.



Small, two-acre wetland restoration completed by the Wisconsin Waterfowl Association. Photo: Peter Ziegler

To date, Wisconsin has lost over 50% of its historical wetland ecosystems. You might assume that we should tackle this issue by restoring our largest wetlands first—the 500 or 1,000-acre properties. No doubt, these wetlands need our time and attention, too, but it is more cost- and time-effective to start small. By prioritizing the restoration of 500 or more one- to 20-acre wetlands, we can achieve a large impact without the roadblocks of multiple potential landowner and land-use conflicts.

If you have wetlands or potentially restorable wetlands, ask a professional for assistance in evaluating your options and possibilities. For more information, read *My Healthy Wetland*, a handbook for wetland owners that outlines cost-share opportunities, technical-assistance specialists, and more: <https://wisconsinwetlands.org/for-landowners/handbook/>

Peter Ziegler, Project Director
Wisconsin Waterfowl Association
wwawetlands@gmail.com

Project Manager
EC3 Environmental Consulting