



What Is A Marsh?

To anyone brought up in the country a marsh may be a familiar place. But to city dwellers it is probably an unknown land. A marsh is a place of shallow waters, muddy bottoms thick with decayed vegetation. Mounds of soft ooze rise here and there, sometimes surrounded by small stagnant pools. The waters are usually calm, for they are in low places where they cannot run off. Marshes may be found on an open prairie or deep in the woods. They are common on the edges of lakes and near the shores of the ocean.

At first sight, a marsh may seem to be a very lonely place; nothing but quiet water and tall grasses. It is, however, full of life of many varieties, especially bird life.

Here breezes scatter the furry seeds of cattails. The sword-like eel grass stands tall in the shallow waters; its tender shoots the food of many birds. The vicious saw grass stands guard over birds' nests, ready to tear the clothing and skin of anyone who tries to push through. Musk grass, duckweed, and wild rice form fences of shelter for the marsh birds.

In the shallow waters tiny fish that seem never to grow up dart here and there. Small green snakes wriggle through the rushes, trying to escape the stabbing bills of hungry cranes and

herons. Where small clumps of grass form more solid ground, small turtles doze in the sun. Purple dragonflies dash restlessly here and there.

In the warm, muddy bottoms, shrimp-like crayfish dodge the diving ducks and loons. Tadpoles huddle under the water lily pads while bigger frogs sit atop the leaves, snapping at flies and water spiders.

This is not a waste land, as it is so often called. Rather it is a storage shed for surplus water and a home for many birds and animals. Without the marshes many of these creatures would die for they know no other way of life. In many places, where the marshes have been drained, the water birds have disappeared completely.

A marsh is a resting place for many birds on their long migrations in the spring and fall. Then the marshes teem with life. Geese and swans, terns and soras stop for brief visits to feed and rest. Then the air is full of bird cries and flapping wings.

A marsh is no place for play; neither is it an easy place to explore. The shallow water with its thick, muddy bottom makes a poor place for wading, unless one wears boots. The small pools surrounded by thick rushes make it hard to use a boat. And always there are mosquitoes. The birds, the fish, and the frogs eat great quantities of the mosquito larvae, but hordes still hatch and buzz around the marsh. Sometimes during the months of July and August, even the birds leave to escape these bloodthirsty insects.

But, all things considered, the marsh seems a place made by Nature for the special use and protection of the birds.