

Wetlands in the Spotlight – 10 Easy Steps!

By Leah Stetson, ASWM



Wisconsin's "Wetland Gems"

The nonprofit Wisconsin Wetlands Association (WWA) launched a popular program last year called Wetland Gems. Wisconsin Wetlands Association's purpose was to share with the public examples of wetlands and to showcase them as important places. The list of Wetland Gems built upon the results of existing planning documents produced by The Nature Conservancy, Wisconsin Bird Conservation Initiative, and Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. These planning documents addressed natural communities of all types, and Wisconsin Wetlands Association pulled out information specific to wetlands that was useful in developing a list of high quality wetlands and existing threats to wetlands.

Wisconsin Wetlands Association staff divided the state into ecologically-based regions (rather than political) and identified high-quality wetland sites within each region. Their goal was to select sites that represented each type of wetland community in each region of Wisconsin. Using strategic selection criteria, Wisconsin Wetlands Association gave priority to wetland sites that were recognized in more than one of the planning documents. They met with ecologists. They looked at interconnected mosaics of wetland systems. They organized the list of sites by eco-region and showed their general locations on a digital map. They called the sites "Wetland Gems." Each site has a fact sheet that describes the significance of the wetland type along with the threats, flora and fauna, for example, the Blue Swamp in Central Wisconsin http://www.wisconsinwetlands.org/Gems/C4_Blue_Swamp.pdf.

In addition to the 93 sites selected for their ecological value, Wisconsin Wetlands Association also highlighted seven "workhorse" wetlands to illustrate the functions or services those wetland types provide. These include Turtle Valley Wildlife Area as an example of a wetland that provides for wildlife habitat; Spoehr's Marsh for fishery habitat; the Greenseams Program as an example for flood attenuation; Halfway Creek Marsh for water quality protection; Oconto Marsh as an example for shoreline protection; Pheasant Branch for groundwater connections; and Mead Wildlife Area for providing recreation and education opportunities. Each site is shown on a map of the state. Carolyn Sandberg of Sandberg Cartography volunteered to provide the mapping services for the program. For more about the workhorse wetlands, go to: <http://www.wisconsinwetlands.org/gemsworkhorse.htm>



Grandma Lake. Gary Shackelford photo



The goal of the Wetland Gems program was outreach, not protection. There have been many benefits derived from the program and the publication of the book, *Wetland Gems*. Local conservation groups can use the Wetland Gems program to help further their mission in protecting those areas connected to or listed among the Wetland Gems sites. Wetland Gems can be used as a tool and a talking point. When Wisconsin Wetlands Association says, “wetlands are diverse,” they can point to the sites featured among the Wetland Gems and say, “Look at the photos of these places, or better yet, go see the sites yourselves,” according to Katie Beilfuss of Wisconsin Wetlands Association. The Wisconsin group used a classification system developed by Steve Eggers and Don Reed.

<http://www.npwr.usgs.gov/resource/plants/mnplant/index.htm>

Wisconsin Wetlands Association has received a lot of positive feedback about the Wetland Gems program. “The program emphasizes the positive and gives communities something to be excited about,” Beilfuss said. By collaborating with municipalities, “Friends of” groups, landowners, elected officials and Wisconsin DNR, they created a win-win for everyone. What people wanted, however, was a book.



Bibon Swamp in Wisconsin. *Photo by Drew Feldkirchner*

Although the Wetland Gems site information is available online (for free) many groups requested publication of the fact sheets in a spiral-bound book. Wisconsin Wetlands Association bound the glossy coffee-table style book themselves; it’s available for \$25 a copy. Local photographers donated wetland photos for the use of the Wetland Gems program. It is an attractive and interesting book. Public libraries have requested it. A conservation group purchased over a dozen copies. Conservancy groups that manage sites included in *Wetland Gems* can use the book as a fundraising tool for wetlands protection. For more information about the program and book, go to: <http://www.wisconsinwetlands.org/gems.htm>

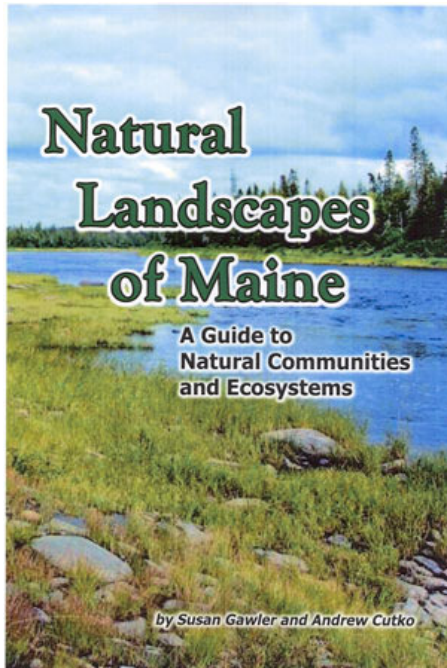


Kohler Andrae interdunal wetland.
Eric Epstein photo

The Wetland Gems program has brought national attention to the state’s wetlands. Wisconsin Wetlands Association has become involved with the U.S. National Ramsar Committee and also established a statewide Ramsar Committee in Wisconsin, which selected prioritized sites with international importance from the Wetland Gems list. This group is now working with landowners to nominate the sites identified as priorities. This is the first time a strategic process has been used to determine which wetland sites need to be considered for Ramsar designation within a geographic or political area. For more information about Ramsar, go to:

http://www.ramsar.org/cda/en/ramsar-ramsar-movie/main/ramsar/1%5E24724_4000_0

Maine's "Natural Landscapes"



Maine Natural Areas Program.

Another example of a state project to identify important habitats was undertaken by the Maine Natural Areas Program (MNAP), which is housed within the state's Department of Conservation. MNAP conducts inventories of lands that support rare and endangered plants, such as lady slippers, as well as rare and uncommon ecosystems, such as wetlands. MNAP is part of an international network of Natural Area Programs called NatureServe <http://www.natureserve.org/>, which provides scientific information for effective conservation.

MNAP recently published a new book, Natural Landscapes of Maine—a Guide to Natural Communities and Ecosystems by Susan Gawler and Andy Cutko (2010). The Maine guide is organized by ecological type, rather than by site or eco-region. Examples of conservation lands that the public can visit are provided for each type. For instance, there are several conservation lands listed for Brackish Tidal Marsh, including Acadia National Park and the Rachel Carson National Wildlife Refuge. Another example, the public can visit Sears Island to experience a

Hardwood Seepage Forest or go to Saco Heath Preserve to see an Atlantic White Cedar Bog, two rare types of ecosystems in Maine. The publication includes wetlands and upland plant communities.

The authors developed a classification system based on an earlier version of the publication and revised it with new data, adding new ecosystem types. The book divides the state into 104 natural communities and ecosystems, giving a 2 page description and photos for each type, for example, Balsam Poplar Floodplain Forest, Open Cedar Fen, Alpine Bog, Grassy Shrub Marsh, Riverside Seep. There are substantial sections in the book for wooded wetlands and open wetlands. The guide explains the differences between various peatland ecosystems, for example, describing coastal plateau bogs, domed bog, eccentric bogs, Kettle-hole bog ponds and so forth. It covers freshwater shoreline and tidal ecosystems, too. For more information about the guide, go to:

http://www.maine.gov/doc/nrimc/mnap/publications/community_classification.htm



Saco Heath. *Jeanne Christie photo*

Using GIS to Identify and Classify Wetland Types

Advances in wetland mapping have encouraged a number of states to work on creating and updating digital maps that identify wetlands and other natural resources. The concept of using GIS to support identification of functionally significant wetlands has been around for over ten years. State and federal partners along with nonprofit organizations and consultants are currently working separately and collaboratively toward mapping wetlands throughout the Nation. A new web tool being developed by the USGS is the Wetlands Classification Image Gallery, where wetland professionals and the general public can submit pictures:

http://aswm.org/swp/mapping/wetlands_classification_image_gallery_factsheet_060710.pdf

How to Launch a Similar Program in 10 Steps

Wisconsin's *Wetland Gems* program used a process to identify important wetlands that can be readily duplicated in other states.

1. **Identify potential partners and decide on a purpose.** Potential partners might be state agency staff in the environment or conservation department; local/city planners and municipalities, conservation commissions; land trusts or other nonprofit organizations that deal with wetlands; the state's Natural Areas Program or other wetland initiatives; universities and high schools; wildlife or nature preserves; national organizations like Association of State Wetland Managers, federal agencies such as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), state and national park authorities, etc. The purpose of the project might be educating the public about wetlands, identification of threatened sites that need protection, or some other goal. Be clear about the goals early in the process.
2. **Determine if there is an ongoing project that is accomplishing the same goal,** e.g. outreach and education about the importance of wetlands, identifying priority wetland types or sites in the state. If no other project is in the works, talk with partners to gather information about existing analyses of natural resources with a focus on wetlands, threats to specific wetland sites, important wetland types, etc. At this stage, identify the suite of materials needed to promote the program, e.g. webpage, fact sheets, brochures, a book, video. This will aid in determining what data to gather (and in what format.)



Jeanne Christie photo

3. **Assemble existing planning documents,** any available analyses of wetland threats, inventories of rare and endangered plants and draft an analysis of threats to wetlands. Also outline the important functions of wetlands that should be included, e.g. flood attenuation, shoreline protection, wildlife habitat.
4. **Develop selection criteria.** Use a science-based selection process. Decide which wetlands get priority and how many wetlands will be included in the program. This may include a focus on watersheds using 'wholeplace planning,' or prioritizing wetlands that face immediate threats from development, climate change and other impacts.
5. **Consult ecologists.** Talk with planners and state agency staff (from the wetlands, water quality program or related office). Meet with other partners to discuss possible wetland types and sites to be included. Before finalizing the list, **talk with the landowners** for the proposed/selected sites. Some sites might not be open to the public. Consider whether the

list will include a mix of privately-owned and public lands. Some landowners will not want their sites promoted or identified on a map because of access issues or sensitive lands, rare & threatened species present, or other factors. Make sure to get the landowners' support for the program before announcing or identifying sites publicly.

6. **Choose a classification system—site-based or type-based**, or a combination of these. If using a combination of systems, be sure to describe how the classification system was developed. For example, the project might use a type-based system developed by state ecologists, or the Cowardin standard.
7. **Gather data about the selected wetlands.** Take photographs, or ask local photographers if they would be willing to donate digital images of the wetlands for the project. Landowners may also provide photos and data about their site.
8. **Map the selected wetlands.** Alternatively, work with a cartographer to identify the general locations of the selected wetland sites or conservation / public lands to be used as examples of wetland types. Private property concerns over public access and other issues need to be weighed in decisions about identifying specific sites on a map.
9. **Promote the new program** (webpage, press releases, brochure, etc.). Work with partners to spread the word about the “special wetland places” or “important wetland types” in the state. Make fact sheets or a brochure to be distributed to local conservation groups and other partners throughout the state.
10. If desired, **bind the materials together in a book.** This could be sold to conservation groups, local schools and libraries, distributed to the wider public (if made available in bookstores or online). Use the materials, web and print, as a talking tool to inform and educate the public, industries and other interest groups, elected officials and planners, when discussing the value of wetlands in the state.



Jeanne Christie photo

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