

MONTEZUMA NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

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A few years back, while driving along the Maine coast, I stopped for a few hours of birding at Biddeford Pool during low tide. There, comfortably ensconced in their beach chairs on the mud flats, were two elderly ladies watching the shorebirds. Falling into a conversation with them I mentioned that I was from New York State.

"Oh, we've been to New York," one of them said, "and we found the most wonderful place to bird. It's called Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge."

Having lived near the Montezuma Refuge since it was created and having counted forty species visible at one time on the partially drained Main Pool, I could not help but agree with her assessment.

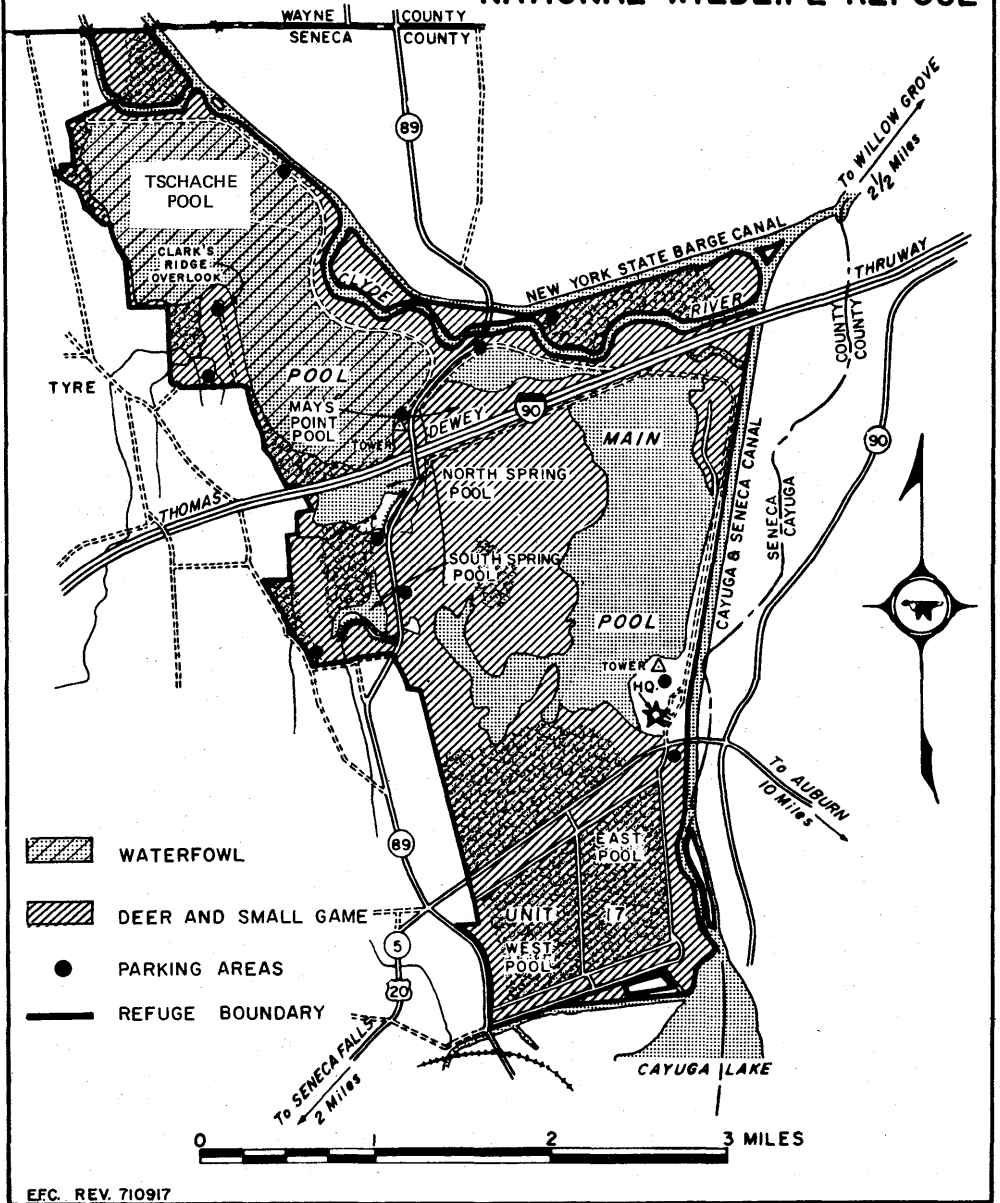
The headquarters is along Routes 5 & 20 four miles east of Seneca Falls. The refuge was established to encourage the local production of waterfowl and to provide a resting place for them during migration. A wide diversity of habitats, including large pools, cattail marshes, swampy and upland woods and brushy and open fields, attracts 240 species, according to the latest checklist, plus 38 more which are of casual or accidental occurrence.

In 1968, part of the refuge was opened to waterfowl hunting, which puts an added drain on the local breeding populations. This seems like a rather incongruous activity to conduct on a "refuge" which Webster defines as a "place where one is safe: a sanctuary."

In June 1972, the refuge became one large lake as a result of the flooding which followed the passage of Hurricane Agnes. The flooding came at the peak of the breeding season and lasted for several weeks, destroying many of the year's young ducks, Pied-billed Grebes, Black-crowned Night Herons, Virginia and Sora Rails, American Coots, Common Gallinules, American and Least Bitterns, Common and Black Terns and Long-billed Marsh Wrens. This drastically reduced the 1973 breeding populations of these species. They are now slowly recovering.

In late February or early March the first warm southerly winds bring in the geese. In twenty years their numbers have increased from 9,000 Canadas and two Snows to 80,000 Canadas and 8,000 Snows, the latter including both the blue and the white morphs. The flight of these thousands of geese out to their feeding grounds early

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in the morning or late in the afternoon and their subsequent return to rest on the ponds is Montezuma's greatest "spectacular." Brant appear occasionally and White-fronted Geese are accidental.

Thousands of migrating ducks use the refuge from early March to late May. All of the surface-feeding ducks common to New York occur. European Wigeon are casual and Eurasian Green-winged Teal and Cinnamon Teal are accidental. The Mallard, Black Duck, Gadwall, Green-winged and Blue-winged Teals and Wood Duck remain to nest in numbers. Nesting Gadwalls have increased dramatically in recent years. Small numbers of Pintails, American Wigeons and Northern Shovelers nest. Of the diving ducks only the Redhead, Canvasback and Ruddy Duck have been known to breed. Ring-necked Ducks, Greater and Lesser Scaups, Common Goldeneyes, Buffleheads and Common Mergansers are common migrants. Oldsquaws, the three scoters and Red-breasted Mergansers are less frequently seen, while Barrow's Goldeneye and the King Eider are accidental. Small numbers of Whistling Swans appear annually.

The pools are shallow and not well suited to deep-diving birds but an occasional Common Loon drops in and the Red-throated Loon has been seen. Pied-billed Grebes nest and Horned Grebes are fairly common in early spring. The Red-necked Grebe is casual while the Eared and Western Grebes have been accidental visitors.

Twelve species of herons have been recorded. The Green Heron, Black-crowned Night Heron, Least Bittern and American Bittern nest. The local colony of Black-crowned Night Herons is unusual in that they nest in the cattails just above the waterline rather than in trees. Great Blue Herons do not nest on the refuge but come in large numbers from the heronry in nearby Marengo Swamp to feed. Little Blue Herons, Great Egrets and Snowy Egrets wander in from the South. Cattle Egrets appear but are not known to breed. Louisiana Herons and Yellow-crowned Night Herons have been seen.

Red-tailed Hawks, Marsh Hawks and American Kestrels are breeding birds. Bald Eagles, though no longer nesters, are observed occasionally. Turkey Vultures are common. Ospreys show up during migration. In winter Rough-legged Hawks use the broad expanse of the cattail marshes as hunting grounds. Sharp-shinned Hawks, Cooper's Hawks, Goshawks, Red-shouldered Hawks, Broad-winged Hawks and Merlins occur in small numbers. Even an occasional Peregrine Falcon is seen.

Montezuma Refuge is one of the best places for shorebirds in upstate New York. The spring migration begins about April 1 and lasts until mid-June. Following a ten day lull, when only the nesting Killdeer and Spotted Sandpipers are seen, the fall migration begins almost imperceptibly during the last days of June and quickly assumes sizeable proportions if sufficient mudflats are exposed, and continues until freeze-up. The checklist shows 26 shorebird species, and two more, the Ruff and the Long-billed Dowitcher, probably should be added as they have been seen regularly over the past decade. Six additional species have been found one or more times. These 34 species include all the shorebirds normally found in upstate New York except the Purple Sandpiper. Among the rarer species are Piping Plover, Whimbrel, Willet, Red Knot, White-rumped and Baird's Sandpipers, Long-billed Dowitcher, Western and Buff-breasted Sandpipers, Marbled and Hudsonian Godwits, American Avocet and all three phalaropes. Montezuma muck can hardly be considered proper habitat for Ruddy Turnstones or Sanderlings but both occur annually in small numbers.

Wintertime freezing of the pools kills many of the carp and the springtime thaw brings in many Herring and Ring-billed Gulls and a few Great Black-backed Gulls to feed on these dead fish. Bonaparte's Gulls occur and rarely a Glaucous or Little Gull or a Parasitic Jaeger is sighted. A few Common Terns and many Black Terns nested until the 1972 flooding almost wiped them out. Fortunately they are now recovering. Among the accidentals are Forster's, Arctic and Least Terns.

Great Horned, Screech and Barred Owls nest. Barn, Long-eared and Saw-whet Owls have been recorded. Snowy and Short-eared Owls use the marshes as hunting grounds in winter.

The wooded areas provide nesting grounds for six species of woodpeckers including the Pileated, Red-bellied and Red-headed. The dead trees, killed by flooding when the Tschache and Spring pools were formed, furnish nesting holes for many Tree Swallows. The martin houses at the headquarters are occupied by Purple Martins and House Sparrows.

The upland areas at Clark's Ridge, along the new Esker Brook Trail, the Route 89 overlook and around the headquarters and picnic areas provide nesting sites for many passerines and are visited by many more during migration. Seven species of flycatchers nest and seven species of thrushes occur. Yellow-throated, Red-eyed and

Warbling Vireos breed while Solitary and Philadelphia Vireos pass through in migration.

In all, 32 species of warblers have been recorded. Birders come each spring to find Prothonotary and Cerulean Warblers. These two nest at the refuge along with Yellow Warbler, Ovenbird, Common Yellowthroat, American Redstart, and Yellow-breasted Chat. Gray Catbirds, Brown Thrashers, Cardinals, Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, Indigo Buntings, American Goldfinches, Rufous-sided Towhees and others frequent the woods and brushy fields. Fourteen species of sparrows have been found in the grassy and brushy spots.

Thousands of blackbirds use the cattails marsh as a roost. Mostly they are Red-winged Blackbirds with large numbers of Common Grackles and Starlings and some Brown-headed Cowbirds.

As the woman in Maine said, "We found the most wonderful place to bird. It's Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge."

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A graduate of Cornell University, Mr. Benning operated a farm and insurance bureau before retiring to devote himself to a lifetime love, birds. He lives on a farm near the Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge, and is known to some as "Mr. Montezuma."

He is a member of the Eaton Ornithological Society, the Cayuga Bird Club and the Federation of New York State Bird Clubs. He presently serves as the Regional Editor of *The Kingbird* for Region 3.