

THE MONTEZUMA NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

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When my wife and I relocated to New York State after years in western states, we began the tedious process of house hunting. We found an old home for sale in Seneca Falls and while she spoke to the real estate agent about the pros and cons of the local school district, I mentally calculated the probable flight paths of birds from Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge (MNWR) directly over the abandoned farm fields that were part of the property. And as the sun set to the west and we watched wave after wave of geese appear out of that reddening sky to seek shelter for the night at the Refuge, I knew we had found our new home.

At 8,196 acres, Montezuma is a magnet for birds and birders alike. 315 of the 460 species of birds (or 68%) on the official "Checklist of the Birds of New York State" have been recorded at MNWR. Nearly every shorebird and waterfowl species that has been recorded in the state has been found at the Refuge at one time or another. Recent rarities include White-faced Ibis, Purple Gallinule and Curlew Sandpiper. In addition to the wide variety of birds, the sheer numbers of them, especially the migrants, are staggering. A quick check of Bull's Birds of New York State shows that MNWR holds the record for numerous maxima, either inland or statewide, with peak numbers occurring in the spring (April) and the fall (September and October). Certainly part of the credit for these outstanding statistics is due to the wealth of dedicated birders that diligently seek to identify each and every bird encountered. The rest of the credit goes to the high quality habitat and the staff that manages it year-round.

In 1938, MNWR was first dedicated to the public and like all Refuges, was established for the benefit of wildlife, specifically migratory birds. For nearly six decades its size remained unchanged at about 6,400 acres. With recent acquisitions fueled by federal funds and Nature Conservancy dollars that number is now over 8,000 acres with no immediate end to growth. With the new lands come new management responsibilities with the vast majority of lands within MNWR treated as wetlands.

Many folks refer to the area as the "Montezuma Swamps" but few true swamps actually exist. Most of the wetlands are dominated by emergent vegetation and therefore classified as marshes. Refuge staffers often have to recreate marshes through the placement of dikes, complete with water control devices providing the ability to raise and lower water levels. The amount of vegetative cover is a factor influencing both nesting birds and those using the Refuge as a migratory stopover. Ideally, there should be about a 70/30 split of cover and open water respectively. To accomplish this,

some of the pools are on a regular drawdown schedule to mimic natural drought conditions. These dry years when the water levels are purposely lowered allow the soils to reoxygenate and stimulate the growth of plants such as cattails. Regular visitors to the Refuge may have noticed the dramatic change in the Main Pool in the last few years after such a drawdown was implemented in 1999. Additional benefits of these dry periods include the control of invasive species of plants such as purple loosestrife and phragmites.

Two areas of the Refuge are specifically managed for shorebirds. Benning Marsh along the Wildlife Drive is the smaller of the two, but is much more labor intensive. Water levels are kept low throughout the summer to keep the loosestrife germination at bay. Before water levels are raised in the late summer, the area is plowed under to provide bare soil that quickly becomes a mudflat. The area sprouts with plants such as smartweed and a host of macroinvertebrates to feed the shorebirds, waterfowl and gulls that flock to this location. To the delight of birders, a new viewing area was added just a year ago to Benning Marsh. The larger May's Point is managed in a slightly different way. The lay of this area allows for a deeper flooding during the summer, which prevents plant growth from becoming established before the end of summer drawdowns. Early morning birders have a short window of prime viewing before the sun rises over the Thruway and turns birds into silhouettes. Evening birders are treated to exceptional lighting conditions and the added treat of waterfowl and passerines such as swallows and blackbirds coming to roost by the thousands.

Traditionally, the spring migration of shorebirds is not as spectacular as the fall flight. Although the first birds appear in July, the peak of shorebird migration is the last part of August through September. Birds linger well into November, with Pectoral Sandpipers and Dunlins reliable at that time, but with most species and numbers of individuals greatly reduced.

Two ways to measure the success of waterfowl management at MNWR are through the waterfowl banding records kept each year and the duck harvest records from the limited hunting that is allowed on the Refuge. Duck banding has been a regular Refuge activity since 1985. Banding usually takes place from the first week of August until the first week of October. Over 17,000 ducks have been banded in that 18 year period, Mallards accounting for 75% of the total with Wood Ducks and American Black Ducks making up about 23% more. Although the 18-year average for number of birds caught is only 949, the average over the last four years is 1,300.

Waterfowl hunting is allowed in Tschache Pool on a limited basis. Hunting is allowed only three days a week and only 40 parties (one or two to a party) are allowed per day. Further restrictions include a 15-shell maximum and a hunt that ends at noon. Since these restrictions have not been consistent over the years, the best way to compare years is by measuring the average number of birds shot per hunter per visit. From 1966 to 1986, hunters averaged less than one bird per visit. From 1995 to 2002, hunters averaged over 2.5 birds per visit. Total ducks harvested each year average

about 1,000.

A relatively new management practice within the Refuge is the creation of warm-season grasslands. Over 1,100 acres of land are now classified as grass or brush, with more to come. A recent purchase of 140 acres along Route 89 has been prepared for seeding in the spring of 2004. A mixture of grass species is planted including big and little blue stem, Indian grass, Eastern grama, switchgrass and others. A forb or wildflower mix is added to provide diversity and perhaps increase insect availability as well. An aggressive and well-orchestrated fire management plan is in place to stimulate the grassland growth and keep the areas in this early successional stage. Prescribed burns usually take place in April and require careful planning and specialized training.

In many practical ways, it is no longer proper to just refer to the Refuge alone, but rather to the Montezuma Wetlands Complex as a whole. The NYSDEC now owns about 8,000 acres of land to the north of the Refuge. Management efforts and acquisitions are coordinated between the two agencies. State lands compliment the federal lands well as they are generally completely open to hiking, biking and canoeing. In addition, money and expertise from Ducks Unlimited, The Nature Conservancy and The Friends of the Montezuma Wetlands Complex combine to create a unified effort in restoring and preserving this impressive area.

For further reading you are referred to three previous articles in *The Kingbird* as follows:

Kingbird 4 (2): 34-37

Kingbird 25 (4): 197-201

Kingbird 33 (2): 82-88



Montezuma Wetlands Complex

