

News Release



Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge
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Main Pool Drawdown at Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge will Improve Wildlife Habitat and Offer Fabulous Wildlife Watching!

Starting after the spring waterfowl migration, the Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge began draining its Main Pool—for three good reasons. The Main Pool is the Refuge’s largest pool and significant habitat for migratory waterfowl, shorebirds, wading birds and birds of prey like osprey, harriers, and bald eagles. As an emergent marsh, plant-life is diverse and includes rushes, sedges, cattail, wildflowers and others. Mixed emergent marshes, in general, often have plants which are highly resilient and can survive flooding and other harsh conditions as seeds, tubers, rhizome fragments, and other dormant parts of the plant. Opportunistic species, such as monkey-flower, spike rushes, umbrella sedges, and others germinate quickly on exposed or eroded soils. However, when water levels remain constant, and muskrats do their work taking down cattails and other emergent plants, the water opens up and resembles more a lake than a marsh. While this type of habitat is valuable to some, it is not the most valuable to the waterfowl and other waterbirds Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge works to protect. This open water stage is the end of the emergent marsh cycle, and at Montezuma, managers must lend a hand to Nature to keep the cycle going.

“When an emergent marsh becomes mainly open water, it is no longer suitable habitat for many waterbirds and other wildlife dependent on the marsh for resting and nesting cover and food,” says Refuge Biologist Linda Ziembra. “In order to keep the cycle going, we periodically drain our marshes, exposing the soil, thereby allowing the seeds in the muck soil to germinate.” These plants will grow throughout the spring and summer, and, if possible, managers will begin refilling the Main Pool to accommodate the fall waterfowl migrants.

You may remember that the Main Pool was drawn down two years ago. A two-year drawdown cycle is short for this marsh, but because of the drought two years ago, plants did not grow back to the point where they offered the best habitat for the refuge’s wildlife. Refuge Managers feel very comfortable draining the pool again this year in order to allow the plants another chance to germinate and better mimic the emergent marsh cycle.

This drawdown is also timed to coincide with the spring shorebird migration. Many species of shorebirds travel long distances from their wintering grounds in South America to their breeding grounds in the Arctic. They require very shallow water and mudflats along the way to stop and refuel on their long journey. The shallow water and exposed mud in the Main Pool are providing excellent habitat for these long distance migrants.

But that’s not the only reason for this year’s drawdown. Work will begin in June to open pools of water in the cattail marsh, which occupies the section of the Wildlife Drive that parallels the NYS Thruway. This cattail

marsh is connected to the Main Pool; draining the Main Pool will dry out the cattail marsh enough to get planned work done here. Opening up a series of small pools near the Drive will do two things. One, it will provide more diverse habitat for the refuge's wildlife. Diversity is a key to healthy ecosystems, and a mix of open water and emergent plants is what refuge managers strive for to provide the best habitat for the wildlife that use the refuge's pools. Two, constructing the pools within viewing distance of the Wildlife Drive will provide fabulous wildlife watching opportunities along a portion of the Drive that, to many, lacked exciting prospects to see wildlife.

Work on the cattail marsh will continue throughout the summer, so the Wildlife Drive will undergo some temporary changes, as well. Typically a one-way route, the Wildlife Drive will become open to two-way traffic for the duration of the cattail marsh work. The Drive will be closed beyond the Seneca Spillway (where you can periodically see the carp pile up), so the spillway will be a turn-round point for visitors on the Wildlife Drive.

In addition, May's Point Pool water levels will be adjusted throughout the summer to accommodate work in the Main Pool cattail marsh. Before the Thruway came through the refuge in the 1950s, May's Point was a part of the Main Pool. Although the Thruway cut May's from the Main Pool, they are still connected hydrologically and water levels in May's Point can affect the "dryness" of the Main Pool enough to deter the digging planned to create the series of small pools in the cattail marsh.

Meanwhile, what happens to the wildlife living in the Main Pool? They seek more suitable habitat elsewhere. Other areas on the refuge, such as Tschache Pool and May's Point Pool off NYS Route 89, as well as the Knox-Marsellus Marsh on East Road, and the recently restored Sandhill Crane Unit on VanDyne Spoor Road in Savannah, offer good habitat at alternate locations. These marshes are at varying stages in the marsh cycle and offer the food and cover so necessary to the refuge's wildlife. And remember, the refuge is managed as part of the Montezuma Wetlands Complex, so New York State DEC lands also offer habitat alternatives while the Main Pool is drawn down. All of these areas also offer wildlife watching alternatives for you!

For more information on the Main Pool drawdown and work being done in the cattail marsh, call 315/568-5987.

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