

Horicon Marsh Canoe Trail

Welcome to Horicon Marsh, the largest, freshwater cattail marsh in the United States. To explore Horicon Marsh by canoe is one of the finest ways to experience the marsh and its wildlife. Although the marsh provides many opportunities, there are some necessary restrictions to protect the wildlife of the Marsh as well as you the visitor.

- Canoeing is only allowed in the state portion of the marsh only. **The National Wildlife Refuge is closed to all boating.**
- During the waterfowl hunting season some areas within the State Wildlife Area are maintained as refuges and are off limits. Please do not enter these areas during indicated closed period.
- Access to Fourmile and Cotton Island Heron Rookery is **prohibited to April 1–Sept. 15.**
- The dams in the City of Horicon and at the north boundary of the State Wildlife Area each contain a high-voltage electric fish barrier. **Do not go near these dams!**

Thank you for your cooperation and we hope you have a wonderful trip.



1 - Private Hunting Clubs

Historically, the primary waterfowl using the marsh were ducks, not the abundant Canada Geese we see today.

During the period of the 1870s to early 1900s waterfowl hunting was established on Horicon Marsh to take advantage of this seemingly infinite resource. One practice was the development of private hunting clubs comprised of either local hunters or businessmen from nearby towns, as well as Madison, Milwaukee, Fond du Lac and Chicago. Local hunting clubs included the Kaw-Kaw Club, Diana Club, Strooks Club, and the Greenhead Club which still remains today just east of the Greenhead Boat Landing. These organizations leased huge tracts of land on the marsh and in some cases hired their own wardens to keep non-members from entering their parts of the marsh. These private clubs did not allow hunting during the spring migration and also established the first bag limits on the marsh – at 25 ducks per day. This was the first form of hunting conservation practiced on the marsh.

Unfortunately, due to widespread, unregulated market hunting resulting in the harvest of thousands of ducks per day, the waterfowl population was decimated within 25 short years. Many hunters left the area, looking for other more productive hunting grounds and many of the hunting clubs closed their doors. Today, due to sound management and hunting regulations, waterfowl numbers have greatly recovered. The Greenhead Club, established in 1903 is the only one that still remains.



2 - Bird Diversity

Over the years, more than 290 species of birds have been recorded on the marsh. Of these a few threatened and endangered species can be spotted while canoeing through the river bends and among the backwaters of the marsh. The state endangered Forster's Tern and the Black Tern, a federal species of special concern, nest in colonies on the marsh. This is one of the best remaining nesting locations for both species in the state.

The state threatened Great Egret nests in trees restricted areas of the marsh, but can be seen throughout the entire marsh as they feed in the shallow waters. Another exciting sight is the White Pelican. These once scarce birds began to nest in Wisconsin in the late 1990's. The first nest records were from Green Bay, followed by Horicon Marsh, where they nest on islands in the northern part of the marsh. Non-breeding birds can be seen throughout the marsh in summer. With a wingspan of about 9 feet, these are the largest birds at Horicon Marsh and are an impressive sight to see.



3 - Four-Mile Island

The large island you see to the south is Fourmile Island, one of our State Natural Areas. Until recently, this and nearby Cotton Island supported the largest heron and egret rookery, or nesting colony, in Wisconsin. Four species of birds were found in this colony; the great blue heron, great egret, black-crowned night heron and the double-crested cormorant. Despite our best intentions to protect these birds, natural problems have occurred. The nesting population on Four-mile Island was so large for so long that they were having a serious effect on their own nesting site, due to guano accumulation (bird droppings).

At peak population, in the 1970's as many as 4,000 adults and young inhabiting the island. With a diet rich in fish and other aquatic food and so many birds nesting in so small an area, the accumulated guano was over-fertilizing the ground beneath. This resulted in changes to the soil chemistry which stressed the trees. These trees became susceptible to diseases, such as Dutch elm disease and oak wilt, which destroyed many of them. In the winter of 1992-'93 wildlife biologists erected artificial nesting platforms adjacent to Fourmile Island to provide additional nest sites.

The following spring, birds were seen using these sites for nesting, but with the loss of trees on the islands they moved most of their colony onto nearby Cotton Island. For several years, both Cotton and Fourmile Islands provided sufficient habitat to maintain this historical rookery. However, on May 31, 1998, a severe storm front swept across southern Wisconsin, creating winds over 90 miles per hour. At the peak of the nesting season these winds hit the islands broadside, toppling trees, tossing young from their nests and destroying most of the nests. The storm left nearly half of the trees toppled and almost all of the nests were destroyed.

With the loss of the trees these birds abandoned Cotton Island. Great blue herons still nest on Fourmile Island, both in the trees and on artificial platforms, but not in the numbers that it once held. The great egrets have moved and a new nesting colony is forming in Horicon Marsh.



4 - Wetland Habitat

Horicon Marsh is a vastly altered wetland system from what the early settlers found nearly 150 years ago. From the descriptions of waterfowl hunters of the late 1800s we understand that the original marsh was shaped by a braided stream system as the two branches of the Rock River spread out over this vast basin. With river channels and open water areas interspersed with oxbow lakes, peat lands and islands – this marsh was originally comprised of a series of wetland communities. Early naturalists describe the area as supporting open water with lily pads, cranberry bogs, floating bogs, cattail marsh and sedge meadows, lowland brush and forested areas. This mosaic of wetland types seemed to change and shift over time with drought and flood. Today, Horicon Marsh is a very monotypic wetland comprised primarily of open water and cattails. Remarkably there still exists a great diversity of bird, mammal and insect species as a result of the variety of structural habitats available among the cattails and open water.

5 - Ditch and Drain

In 1910, an effort to ditch and drain Horicon Marsh for agricultural production began. The dredge, a large steam shovel on a barge, was assembled at the north end of the marsh. It took four years to dig the main ditch: a 14 mile long scar cut down the middle of the marsh. At the same time, a series of lateral ditches were dug to gather water and draw it to the central drainage ditch. By 1916, all of the ditches were completed and it appeared the marsh would be converted into some of the richest farmland in the upper Midwest. However, by the early 1920s, farmers came to realize the marsh's limited potential for farming. The area often retained water into the late spring making it impossible to work the land. Even if crops grew, heavy fall rains prevented harvest. The marsh's peat soils were difficult to drain, and farming plans quickly faded.



The area you are currently canoeing on is the old main ditch created by the Dredge. While the marsh has been restored, and the basin re-flooded, many of the ditches still remain and channel water through Horicon Marsh.

6 - Glacial History

Horicon marsh was born as a by-product of the great glaciers of the last Ice Age about 12,000 years ago. As the ice moved forward, it heaped up the land into a series of elongated hills, known as drumlins, along its axis of movement. Fourmile Island and One Mile Island whose northern tip can be seen just on the south-west side of the ditch from this point are examples of this land feature. In fact the greatest concentration of drumlins in the world is found around the Horicon Marsh area .

Over time, as the climate warmed, the ice began to wane and retreat in stages. Each time it came to rest, rocks, sand, gravel and clay were deposited at its front, leaving behind a moraine to mark the spot. Two such recessional moraines were laid down across the southern and northern ends of the Horicon basin where the cities of Horicon and Waupun can be found today. The southern moraine acted as an earthen dam to impound the meltwaters creating a vast post-glacial lake. The waters eventually eroded through the southern moraine, creating the Rock River and draining the lake to become the marsh we see today.