

In Praise of Wetlands

by Kathy Schillemat, Nelson-based Naturalist

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Merrill Marsh in Hancock. photo © Brett Amy Thelen

As I wrote, the skies were getting lighter after a morning of heavy rain. I walked from my house on Murdough Hill Road in Nelson to survey the effects of the storm on the roads in my neighborhood. I came home drenched, but with a renewed appreciation for the wetlands that surround our little hill.

The previous evening, my husband and I tried to drive down to the trailhead for the Murdough Hill Meander – a local trail just down the road from us – to see how the footbridges over the outflow from Granite Lake were faring. We weren't able to cross Murdough Hill Road, as water had overwhelmed a culvert at one end and the bridge at the other.

The power of the water was impressive. In a short time, the sides of the road were cut away by the speed and volume of water flowing both under and over the road. But by the morning, the water had receded and was once again flowing smoothly through the culvert and under the bridge. The flow was still powerful, but the volume was greatly diminished.

I marveled at the good condition of Granite Lake Road from the north end of Murdough Hill Road to Nelson Road. According to one neighbor who lives nearby, the water had gone over the road there the previous night, but I found very little erosion along that mile-long stretch of pavement. In fact, unlike so many other roads in our region that flooded after last month's historic rainfall, the pavement was intact.

Why was this section of road – which is low-lying and adjacent to a stream – spared? What made the difference? The wetlands. The volume of water was absorbed by the porous soil and vegetation that surrounds the stream as it flows through this area. The velocity of the water was also reduced, as it was able to spread out and move freely.

The Value of Wetlands

The Environmental Protection Agency's website notes this specific value of wetlands for humans: "Wetlands function as natural sponges that trap and slowly release surface water, rain, snowmelt, groundwater and flood waters. Trees, root mats and other wetland vegetation also slow the speed of flood waters and distribute them more slowly over the floodplain. This combined water storage and braking action lowers flood heights and reduces erosion." (epa.gov, "Why are wetlands important?").

That article further states that "preserving and restoring wetlands together with other water retention can often provide the level of flood control otherwise provided by expensive dredge operations and levees. The bottomland hardwood-riparian wetlands along the Mississippi River once stored at least 60 days of floodwater. Now they store only 12 days because most have been filled or drained."

I have always loved this particular wetland because of its natural beauty and the habitat that it provides for beavers and otters, hooded and common mergansers, spring peepers, wood frogs and spotted salamanders, great blue herons, moose, deer, bear and many other species. As I watched water that raged as it left the lake and cascaded from the hill above us flowing calmly and quietly through the landscape, I felt a renewed sense of gratitude for this important feature of our natural world.

We need wetlands as much as the flora and fauna which inhabit them. We ought always to sing their praises, as loudly as the spring peepers in April. 🐾

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