

Meet a Wonderful Wetland

HEADWATER FORESTS

Where in NC: Throughout NC - most are in Coastal Plain.

Description: Occur where streams & creeks begin in the upper portions or "headwaters" of watersheds. With thousands of streams and creeks in NC, this wetland is one of our most numerous—and least understood—types. Headwater Forest wetlands are saturated by rainfall and by water running slowly down the slopes from surrounding areas.

Wetland Plants: No rare or endangered species. Mast-bearing trees include red oak, white oak, beech and mockernut hickory. Other trees include red maple, sourwood, black gum, holly, tulip tree, and loblolly pine. Vines include poison ivy, greenbrier, and honeysuckle. Also ferns, atamasco lilies, & cane in low areas.

Adapted Animals: Common animals include: white-tailed deer, songbirds, gray squirrels, rabbits, raccoons, and opossums. Some amphibians breed in seasonal pools found here.

Why this wetland is wonderful: Headwater Forests serve as "water purifiers" because they filter out pollutants and sediment before they can enter larger streams and rivers downstream. These wetlands are threatened by development as it moves into the upper reaches of watersheds.

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BOTTOMLAND HARDWOOD FORESTS

Where in NC: Throughout NC - most are in Coastal Plain where river floodplains are broader.

Description: Rolling landscape of relatively dry ridges with oaks and other hardwood trees, and low, water-filled sloughs and swales with water-tolerant bald cypress and tupelo gum trees. Formed by flooding rivers with fluctuating water levels during the year.

Wetland Plants: Bald cypress and tupelo gum trees have spreading trunks to anchor them in water-logged soils. Bald cypress also has "knees" that permit gas exchange to the oxygen-deprived roots. Acorn-producing trees such as the water oak, willow oak, shumard oak and cherrybark oak grow on the drier ridges.

Adapted Animals: Species include white-tailed deer, flying squirrel, wild turkey, barred owl, bobcat, marsh rabbit, raccoon, red-shouldered hawk, waterfowl, cottonmouth, salamanders and turtles. Some floodplains provide black bear habitat, and Roanoke River bottomlands have the rare four-toed and mole salamanders.

Why this wetland is wonderful: Bottomland Hardwood Forests provide travel corridors for wildlife and temporary pools for amphibian breeding. They also protect estuaries by trapping sediment, slowing water during flood stage, and delivering organic matter to estuary food chains. They're threatened by development.

ANSWERS from "NC WILD Places" by NC Wildlife Resources Commission

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CAROLINA BAY (Seasonal Wetlands)

Where in NC: Carolina bay found only in NC's Coastal Plain. Other seasonal wetlands found across the state.

Description: A seasonally wet depression with longleaf pine-covered sandy ridges on the southeastern rim. Carolina bays are elliptical-shaped in a northwest-to-southeast orientation. There are several theories on their origin and formation. Carolina bays are one of the larger & more productive seasonal wetlands. Largest in NC is Lake Waccamaw with 9,000 acres and 14 miles of shoreline.

Wetland Plants: Some rare plants include awned meadow beauty and coastal beakrush. Others include red root, hat pins, pond pine, gallberry, red bay, pond cypress, plume grass, panic grass, longleaf pine, turkey oak, wire grass and creeping blueberry.

Adapted Animals: Common animals include Great blue heron, tiger salamander, Mabee's salamander, dragonflies, crayfish, spring peeper, gopher frog, and Eastern newts.

Why this wetland is wonderful: Carolina bays provide critical habitat for pond-breeding frogs and salamanders. Their water is fishless which reduces predation and increases survival. At least 1/2 of the Carolina bays and many other temporary wetlands have been drained over the years.

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TIDAL SALT MARSH

Where in NC: Found along the NC coast, bordering large, shallow sounds and estuaries where our inland rivers empty.

Description: A grassy, coastal wetland that is flooded and drained by salt water brought in by the tides. Tidal creeks rise & fall regularly twice a day (however the tides are caused by wind and are not regular north of Beaufort.) Soil is deep mud made of sediments deposited for many years by rivers from inland areas of the state.

Wetland Plants: Plants are highly adapted to salt & fluctuating water levels and include salt marsh cord grass (spartina) & when dead, becomes "detritus, base of the salt marsh food web.

Adapted Animals: Clapper rail (more often heard than seen!), Snowy egret, fiddler crabs, mud snails, lugworms, bivalves, shrimp, blue crabs, and juvenile fish such as flounder, mullet, croaker.

Why this wetland is wonderful: Tidal salt marshes buffer stormy seas, slow shoreline erosion, and absorb excess nutrients before they reach the oceans and estuaries. They also provide vital food & habitat for many species, critical nurseries for young fish, and shelter & nesting sites for migratory waterfowl. Tidal salt marshes are threatened by development and pollution from upstream.