



What are Wetlands?

Defining 'wetlands' and helping you define if you are in need of professional consultation.

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Wetlands are areas where water covers the soil, or is present either at or near the surface of the soil all year or for varying periods of time during the year, including during the growing season. Water saturation (hydrology) largely determines how the soil develops and the types of plant and animal communities living in and on the soil. Wetlands may support both aquatic and terrestrial species. The prolonged presence of water creates conditions that favor the growth of specially adapted plants (hydrophytes) and promote the development of characteristic wetland (hydric) soils.

Wetlands vary widely because of regional and local differences in soils, topography, climate, hydrology, water chemistry, vegetation, and other factors, including human disturbance. Indeed, wetlands are found from the tundra to the tropics and on every continent except Antarctica. Two general categories of wetlands are recognized: coastal or tidal wetlands and inland or non-tidal wetlands.

Coastal Wetlands

Coastal wetlands in the United States, as their name suggests, are found along the Atlantic, Pacific, Alaskan, and Gulf coasts. They are closely linked to our nation's estuaries, where sea water mixes with fresh water to form an environment of varying salinities. The salt water and the fluctuating water levels (due to tidal action) combine to create a rather difficult environment for most plants. Consequently, many shallow coastal areas are unvegetated mud flats or sand flats. Some plants, however, have successfully adapted to this environment. Certain grasses and grasslike plants that adapt to the saline conditions form the tidal salt marshes that are found along the Atlantic, Gulf, and Pacific coasts. Mangrove swamps, with salt-loving shrubs or trees, are common in tropical climates, such as in southern Florida and Puerto Rico. Some tidal freshwater wetlands form beyond the upper edges of tidal salt marshes where the influence of salt water ends.

Inland Wetlands

Inland wetlands are most common on floodplains along rivers and streams (riparian wetlands), in isolated depressions surrounded by dry land (for example, playas, basins, and "potholes"), along the margins of lakes and ponds, and in other low-lying areas where the groundwater intercepts the soil surface or where precipitation sufficiently saturates the soil (vernal pools and bogs). Inland wetlands include marshes and wet meadows dominated by herbaceous plants, swamps dominated by shrubs, and wooded swamps dominated by trees.

Certain types of inland wetlands are common to particular regions of the country:

- bogs and fens of the northeastern and north-central states and Alaska
- wet meadows or wet prairies in the Midwest

- inland saline and alkaline marshes and riparian wetlands of the arid and semiarid west
- prairie potholes of Iowa, Minnesota and the Dakotas
- alpine meadows of the west
- playa lakes of the southwest and Great Plains
- bottomland hardwood swamps of the south
- pocosins and Carolina Bays of the southeast coastal states
- tundra wetlands of Alaska.

Many of these wetlands are seasonal (they are dry one or more seasons every year), and, particularly in the arid and semiarid West, may be wet only periodically. The quantity of water present and the timing of its presence in part determine the functions of a wetland and its role in the environment. Even wetlands that appear dry at times for significant parts of the year -- such as vernal pools-- often provide critical habitat for wildlife adapted to breeding exclusively in these areas.

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