

CANADA AND THE RAMSAR CONVENTION



The Convention on the Conservation of Wetlands
of International Importance



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- 3 Introduction
- 5 Mary's Point Unit - Shepody National Wildlife Area
 - 6 Cap Tourmente National Wildlife Area
 - 7 Long Point National Wildlife Area
- 8 Last Mountain Lake Sanctuary and Wildlife Area
 - 9 Alaksen National Wildlife Area
- 10 Polar Bear Pass National Wildlife Area
 - 11 Ramsar Canada Sites



INTRODUCTION

Wetlands have great value as areas of very high biological productivity. This was officially acknowledged by the world when 18 countries signed the Convention on the Conservation of Wetlands of International Importance at Ramsar, Iran, in 1971. Canada became a signatory to the Ramsar Convention, as it is known, in 1981.

The designation of an area as a Ramsar site is not an attempt to prevent all environmental change. It is a way of ensuring that the potential hazards of development are thoroughly examined, and that possible remedies are fully explored and properly designed before the event, rather than having to be improvised at the construction stage.

The Convention does not override national legislation to protect wetlands, but helps to support that legislation by drawing international attention to threats of serious damage to listed wetlands. So far, no listed sites have been lost and a number have been saved, at least partially due to the strong international pressure that the Convention helps to create.

Environment Canada's Canadian Wildlife Service carries out the obligations of the Convention for Canada: to identify and to secure the designation of sites of international importance and to ensure that these are adequately protected, now and in the future. With the co-operation of provincial and territorial governments, Canada has so far designated 17 wetland areas. Several more will be added in 1987.

The majority of Canadian sites are in the North and most are very large. Large areas are often necessary in Canada because of the relatively low density of bird populations in the colder and drier northern latitudes.

Some of the designated sites seem to be free of the risk of imminent development or other man-made hazards. For these, designation as Ramsar sites is added protection, should unexpected development suddenly threaten. Other sites, most notably Mary's Point at the upper end of the Bay of Fundy, are potentially liable to massive change by projected development — in the case of Mary's Point, a tidal power scheme.

Other coastal sites in the south — Cap Tourmente National Wildlife Area (NWA) in Quebec, Long Point NWA in Ontario and Alaksen NWA in British Columbia — are also continually at risk from the hazards of pollution. However, the vulnerability of these sites increases rather than diminishes their importance, both as homes for large numbers and varieties of migratory birds and other estuarine animals and plants, and as places where the public can see and appreciate the full range of wetland values.

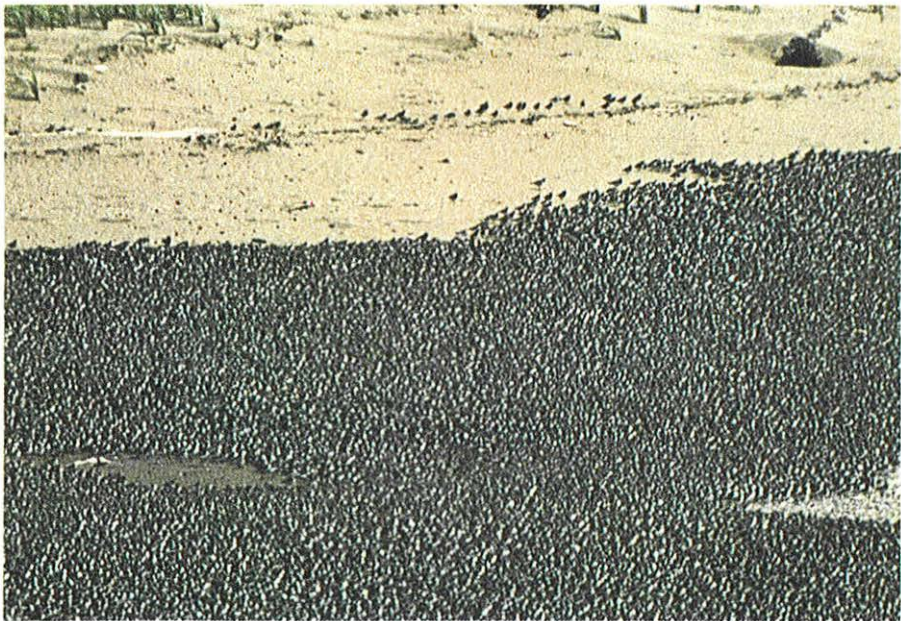
Since it has the longest coastline of any nation in the world and 15 per cent of the planet's fresh water, Canada not surprisingly has a vast and precious heritage of wetlands which must not be imperilled. It is, therefore, appropriate that the combined area of Canadian Ramsar sites exceeds the total area of all the sites so far designated by the other signatories to the Wetlands Convention. Though there may not be many more large areas to be designated as Ramsar sites, the Canadian Wildlife Service looks forward to the addition of more provincially-nominated and -controlled sites, as well as more sites on federal Crown land.

Yet, there is little point in taking expensive measures to conserve wetlands in Canada if the wetlands in other countries that sustain Canadian birds for more than half the year deteriorate to the point where they are unable to support migrants from North America. So, we must also be concerned about what is happening to wetlands in the Caribbean, Central and South America, and those parts of western Europe, northern Africa and eastern Asia that share North America's birds. Canada is encouraging other Western Hemisphere nations to sign the Ramsar Convention.

Ramsar sites in Canada are protected by legislation — the Canada Wildlife Act and Wildlife Area Regulations; the Migratory Birds Convention Act and Migratory Bird Sanctuary Regulations; and, where appropriate, provincial and territorial acts and regulations.

Canada will host the next meeting of the parties to the Convention in Regina in June, 1987.

MARY'S POINT UNIT SHEPODY NATIONAL WILDLIFE AREA



One of eastern North America's most important resting and feeding areas for shorebirds is found at the head of the Bay of Fundy in New Brunswick. Mary's Point, a unique section of the Bay of Fundy shoreline, is located 40 kilometers south of Moncton. The Shepody National Wildlife Area at Mary's Point covers an area of 1,200 hectares and includes a large tidal marsh, expanses of inter-tidal mudflats and a peninsula which protrudes into Shepody Bay.

The broad mudflats and gravel beach of Mary's Point attract more migrating shorebirds than any other single place in North America. Several million Semi-palmated Sandpipers feed and roost in the area from late July to early September, along with thousands of Least Sandpipers, Short-billed

Dowitchers, Black-bellied Plovers, Red Knots and several other species of shorebirds. These birds are attracted to the area by the presence of an amphipod crustacean, the *Corophium volutator*, on which they feed. A relative of the shrimp and the sand flea, the amphipod is found in North America only in the Bay of Fundy, where it occurs in densities that are the highest in the world. Several species of ducks, Canada Geese and other waterfowl also frequent the Shepody National Wildlife Area.

CAP TOURMENTE NATIONAL WILDLIFE AREA



The 2,200 hectares of tidal marsh and wet meadow just upstream of Cap Tourmente, 50 kilometers north-east of Quebec City, are famous as the principal migratory staging area, in spring and fall, of the Greater Snow Goose.

The Greater Snow Goose breeds in the eastern high Arctic islands of Canada, and winters on the coastal marshes of the U.S. Atlantic coast from New Jersey to North Carolina. The Greater Snow Goose declined in number to as few as 3,000 in the early years of the Twentieth Century. Now, however, they exceed 300,000 prior to their fall migration, thanks largely to the effective protection of the geese and their critical habitats.

Cap Tourmente National Wildlife Area was in private hands until purchased by the Government of Canada in 1972. It has since become a major attraction for naturalists, not only because of the geese, but also for its wide variety of fauna and flora, and for its great scenic beauty.

LONG POINT NATIONAL WILDLIFE AREA



Long Point is the longest and, in many ways, the most unusual of the three peninsulas that jut out into Lake Erie from its Ontario shore. Wildlife is abundant and remarkably diverse in the area. Rare and uncommon species of plants, mammals, reptiles and amphibians can be found at Long Point, which is located 15 kilometers southeast of Port Rowan, Ontario, and occupies an area of 13,730 hectares.

Extending towards Lake Erie's southeastern shore, Long Point serves as a "funnel" for migrating birds, and provides them with an important resting place. It is renowned for the abundance and diversity of the waterfowl it supports during spring and fall migrations. Up to 30,000 Tundra Swans pass through Long Point marshes in the spring. During spring and fall migra-

tion significant portions of the North American populations of Redhead, Canvasback and many other species of ducks concentrate in this area. Migration studies on territorial birds, done by members of the Long Point Bird Observatory now provide an important means of monitoring population changes among boreal species.

Long Point is important as one of the few undisturbed refuges for amphibian and reptile species in southern Canada. Six species of turtles nest on Long Point, three of which are considered rare in Ontario and Canada: the Spotted, Blanding's and the Eastern Spiny Soft-shelled. The Eastern Fox Snake, a threatened species whose range is limited and diminishing in southwestern Ontario, is found in the area.

LAST MOUNTAIN LAKE SANCTUARY AND WILDLIFE AREA



Last Mountain Lake, established in 1887, is the oldest waterfowl refuge in North America. It is located 150 kilometers southeast of Saskatoon and occupies an area of 15,600 hectares.

The area, situated at the north end of Last Mountain Lake, consists of a series of shallow marshy bays, inlets and wet fields which border the lake. It supports, particularly during the fall, hundreds of thousands of migrating waterfowl, especially Lesser Snow and White-fronted Geese, Sandhill Cranes, many species of ducks and a variety of shorebirds. The endangered Whooping Crane has been sighted regularly during spring and fall migrations. The endangered Piping Plover has bred along the lake shore.

Colonial nesting birds which breed on the islands and marshes include Common and Caspian Terns, the Double-crested Cormorant, Western Grebe, Franklin's, Ring-billed and California Gulls. Large numbers of White Pelicans use the area each summer. Although between 1956 and 1983 the pelicans nested only once in the area, they began nesting again in 1984 and 1985.

ALAKSEN NATIONAL WILDLIFE AREA



British Columbia's Fraser River estuary is the most important stretch of shoreline for wildlife, particularly birds, on Canada's west coast. It is used by large numbers of birds as a migration stop-over or wintering area. Alaksen National Wildlife area, 35 kilometers south of Vancouver, plays a key role in the protection of the Fraser estuary. Although the Alaksen area itself consists of only 300 hectares of upland, it controls access to a large inter-tidal zone which is protected as a provincial game sanctuary.

Up to 30,000 of the Lesser Snow Geese that breed on Wrangel Island, east of Siberia, roost and feed on the estuary for much of the winter. During high tides or periods of bad weather most of these geese can be found on the uplands of Alaksen. In addition,

10,000 to 20,000 dabbling ducks, mainly American Wigeon, use the protected area, along with about 2,000 Canada Geese, which are mostly the progeny of recently-reintroduced birds. Shorebirds are present at various times of the year in much larger numbers, although most one-day bird counts tend to underestimate greatly the number of shorebirds visiting the site.

POLAR BEAR PASS NATIONAL WILDLIFE AREA

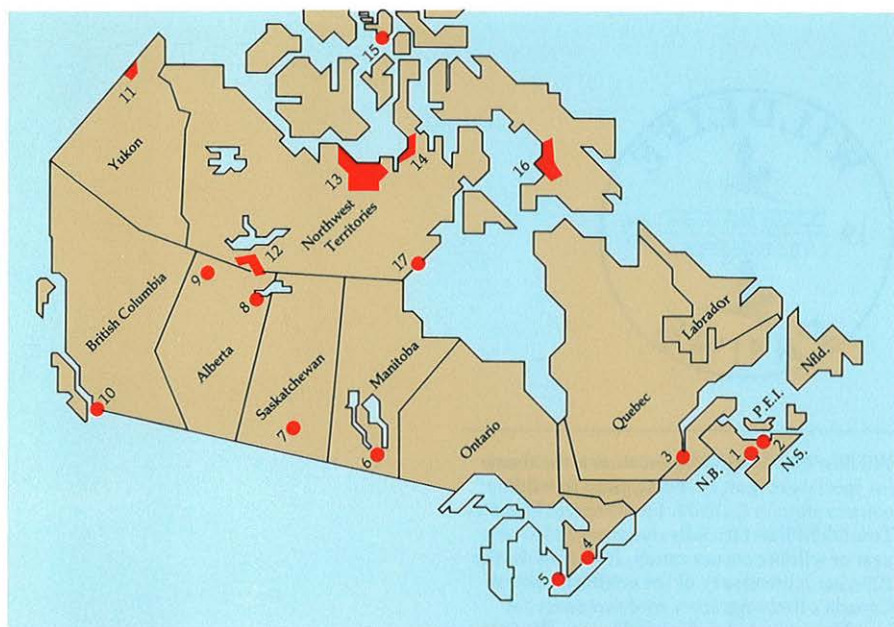


Polar Bear Pass is Canada's northernmost and largest National Wildlife Area. Located on Bathurst Island adjacent to the Northwest Passage, it occupies an area of 2,624 square kilometers. Polar Bear Pass is a wetland oasis in the surprisingly dry high Arctic. It provides an abundance of ponds and wetlands that support a bird population which is uniquely diversified for a site as far north as 73 degrees of latitude.

Migratory birds from both North American and Europe breed in Polar Bear Pass; many of them at the northern limits of their range. The area is important for the populations of King Eiders, Greater Snow Geese, gulls, jaegers and shorebirds it supports. Atlantic Brant that nest in Polar Bear Pass migrate through Iceland to winter in Ireland.

The area also provides habitat for muskoxen and Peary caribou, the latter a threatened species. The adjacent coastal waters are important to marine mammals and waterfowl, staging for their fall migration. Polar bears migrate through the pass during summer and walrus use several "haul out" areas along the Brooman Peninsula.

RAMSAR CANADA SITES



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- 1 Mary's Point (N.B.)
 - 2 Chignecto NWA (N.S.)
 - 3 Cap Tourmente NWA (Que.)
 - 4 Long Point NWA (Ont.)
 - 5 St. Clair NWA (Ont.)
 - 6 Delta Marsh (Man.)
 - 7 Last Mountain Lake (Sask.)
 - 8 Peace-Athabasca Delta (Alta.)
 - 9 Hay Zama Lakes (Alta.)
 - 10 Alaksen NWA (B.C.)
 - 11 Old Crow Flats (Yukon)
 - 12 Whooping Crane Summer Range (Alta., N.W.T.)
 - 13 Queen Maud Gulf MBS (N.W.T.)
 - 14 Rasmussen Lowlands (N.W.T.)
 - 15 Polar Bear Pass NWA (N.W.T.)
 - 16 Dewey Soper MBS (N.W.T.)
 - 17 McConnell River MBS (N.W.T.)
-



Wildlife '87: Gaining Momentum is the theme for special recognition being given to wildlife conservation in Canada. Environment Minister Tom McMillan officially designated 1987 as a year of wildlife conservation. It also marks the 100-year anniversary of the establishment of Canada's first migratory bird sanctuary, at Last Mountain Lake, Saskatchewan. The logo, featuring the whooping crane, has been formally adopted as symbolic of the many accomplishments and continuing efforts for wildlife in Canada and internationally.

Further information and additional copies of this brochure are available from:

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