



NEWSLETTER

Nov-Dec 2022

“To stand at the edge of the sea, to sense the ebb and flow of the tides, to feel the breath of a mist moving over a great salt marsh, to watch the flight of shore birds that have swept up and down the surf lines of the continents for untold thousands of years, to see the running of old eels and the young shad to the sea, is to have knowledge of things that are nearly as eternal as any earthly life can be.” Rachel Carson

Fall and Winter in a Salt Marsh

We are fortunate to live in a region that is ecologically diverse and beautiful in all seasons of the year. But have you ever wondered what happens to the myriad creatures and plants that inhabit the Great Marsh over the fall and winter months? The detailed and beautifully illustrated *Seasons of the Salt Marsh* written by David Alan Gates is a highly recommended read for anyone interested in learning more about the flora and fauna of this tremendous natural resource.



Life in the marsh slows as November progresses and marsh grasses become dormant. A variety of bird, duck and fish species as well as our resident arthropod, the horseshoe crab, migrate south in search of food and warmer water. White-tailed deer and birds that overwinter locally move to the shelter of the woods. The metabolism of most crab species slows and they stop feeding during the cold months. The many shellfish living in the marsh handle winter differently. Clams burrow, while oysters and mussels have almost no movement. Some species of predatory snails continue to feed. Winter is a time of rest for the marsh, although life continues beneath the grassy quilt of faded marsh grasses. Decomposition builds the fertility and mass of the marsh foundation while mud algae continue photosynthesis, adding to the nutrient layer. Racoons, who mate during the winter, can be seen out on the marsh seeking mussels, clams, or the occasional dead animal. Muskrats feed all winter off the roots of brackish water plants, and in the evenings, weasels move from their dens and explore the marsh in search of food. Hardy northern duck and geese species feed on water plants and remains of spartina grasses. Stormy nor'east winds may bring seabirds such as auks, puffins, murre, and kittiwakes close to shore. The winter's quieter months thus continue to be an important time for the marsh's ecology.



David Gates forewarns the reader of the impact of mankind on the coastal zone ecosystem when he writes, “The real danger to the delicate wetlands stems from humanity’s compulsive drive to ‘improve’ and conquer nature and acquire its wealth.” So true. His book was published in 1975—well before the impact of global warming and overfishing transformed the ocean and marsh around us to the extent

it now has. Warming waters have brought in invasive species that prey on native ones. A *Gloucester Daily Times* article on shutdowns in the fishing industry due to the impacts of warming waters and overfishing (10/28/22) notes the declines in the shrimp, winter flounder, and Atlantic cod populations due to warming waters and overfishing.

SEL is committed to our mission of protecting the Great Marsh and thereby ensuring its integrity for generations to come. We urge you, our supporters, to continue with us in this endeavor. Have a safe, happy season and get out to enjoy the winter coastline!



Photos by Chrissie Twombly

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