

WHAT IS HABITAT?

So what do we really mean when we refer to “habitat”? And how can we learn to recognize it when we see it?

Habitat is the specific area or environment, usually defined by physical characteristics or dominant plant forms, in which an organism or population is normally found. It’s a place where a plant or animal naturally lives, grows, and reproduces—a location that features the food, water, shelter, and living space necessary for that organism to survive. **“Habitat can be what we typically think of as pristine wilderness, miles from civilization—yet it can also be a tiny green “pocket park” in the middle of a busy urban area.”**

The boundary between two habitat types is referred to as an “edge.” These transition areas (for example, the margin between a field and woodland) are rich in wildlife habitat. It’s worth noting that many wildlife species rely on multiple habitat types throughout their life history.

Some of the habitats found in the Southeastern U.S. include the following:

Temperate forests, which are characterized by dense stands of trees. Most forests in our region are deciduous, but there are also coniferous forests in the highest elevations of the Southern Appalachian Mountains. Forest habitats are layered: a canopy formed by mature trees that shade the forest floor, a shrub layer of woody vegetation, and an understory of grasses and other herbaceous plants. A variety of birds and animals use the trees for shelter, but most biodiversity is concentrated closer to the forest floor. Decaying litter and fallen leaves enrich the soil and provide nutrients for microorganisms. Forests are home to some of the Southeast’s largest mammals, including black bear and white-tailed deer.

Wetlands are areas, not surprisingly, where water is present at least part of the year. They feature soils that differ considerably from nearby or surrounding uplands and they support specialized plants that have adapted to living in saturated, oxygen-poor soils. They range in size from temporary vernal pools that may be as small as a child’s wading pool to expansive “rivers of grass” in places like the Everglades. Wetlands have suffered from a bad reputation; in the past, they were considered worthless, pestilent, and even dangerous. **“Modern science now recognizes wetlands as extraordinarily productive habitats, offering a specialized environment for an abundance of wildlife, birds and plants.”**

For example, the wetlands of the Congaree Bottomland Hardwood Swamp in South Carolina provide valuable water quality functions such as the removal of sediment, toxic substances, and excess nutrients. According to a 1994 report by the Floodplain Management Association, the least-cost substitute for those water quality services would be a water treatment plant costing \$5 million.

Rivers and streams play host to a wide variety of aquatic creatures, as well as a good many terrestrial and amphibious species that use their banks or “margins” as habitat. Another important component of this habitat type is “substrate,” the graveled or rocky bottom where fish spawn and where many aquatic insects live. People tend to think primarily of fish when they think of aquatic species, but that ignores the vast number of mussels, snails, crayfish, and other creatures that make their homes in rivers and streams throughout our region.

Lakes and reservoirs can be a source of either natural or created habitat. These “flat water” areas can be divided into vertical habitat zones—from the deepest, coldest water to the shallowest, warmest water. Fish and other aquatic creatures have adapted to live in the various zones. Resident and migratory waterfowl and wading birds are attracted to the shallow water areas around the shoreline, as well as seasonal mudflats.

Meadows, pastures and agricultural lands also provide habitat for wildlife. Privately owned farms dominate the rural landscape in the Southeast. In terms of sheer acreage, these open lands are a significant source of food, water, and shelter for wildlife in our region. Farmlands are often used by wildlife as “corridors” between fragmented habitats. For example, animals may travel through pastures or along fencerows to go from one woodland to another.

Meadows and open fields draw a variety of upland birds, including bobwhite quail and pheasant. Some farmers choose to set aside some of their least productive land specifically to benefit wildlife, planting nutrition plots or forage crops. Restorative agricultural practices such as rotational grazing, integrated pest management, and field borders that feature native vegetation are helping to make farmlands safer for and more attractive to wildlife. Coastal marshes and estuaries are vital marine and freshwater habitats. An estuary is the wide part of a river where it flows into the sea. Brackish water (a mixture of fresh and

salt water) is the result, and the river’s current is affected by the ocean’s tides.

Coastal marshes are a type of wetland often associated with estuaries; they are also found along waterways between barrier islands and the inner coast. Marshes differ from swamps, which are dominated by trees. The shallow waters of coastal marshes (which can be fresh, brackish, or saline) feature grasses, rushes, reeds, sedges, and other herbaceous plants. Estuaries and marshes typically attract a rich assemblage of wildlife and are biologically important nursery areas for many types of fish, shrimp, and other aquatic species.

“Although you may not live next to a wildlife refuge or a national forest, you can pretty much count on the fact that habitat—whether pristine, newly created or rapidly dwindling—is all around you.”

