

WATERWAYS, WETLANDS, WATER SUPPLIES, AND WILDLIFE

Because of Westchester and Putnam Counties' hilly terrain, railroads like the Putnam line were built in valleys and lowlands formed by north / south flowing waterways. Sewers, water lines, and highways that followed the railroads also were built to take advantage of these naturally occurring transport routes that include the Hudson River, the Saw Mill River, the Pocantico River, Tibbetts Brook, the Bronx River, and Long Island Sound.

Wetlands are vegetated aquatic ecosystems and include some of the most productive natural areas in the world. They are places where soils are saturated by water for varying periods during the year, favoring the growth of specially adapted water-loving plants and promoting the development of hydric soil properties.

Wetlands provide many irreplaceable environmental benefits. They act like sponges, slowing the rate of surface water flow, reducing the erosive forces of running water, and absorbing large volumes of potentially damaging flood waters. The roots of wetland plants and the soils surrounding them help to purify water by filtering out and processing nutrients, suspended materials, pesticides, toxins, chemicals, and other pollutants that might enter streams and subsurface drinking water supplies.

Water continues to play an important part in shaping the region's ecology. The impact of higher density development throughout the region has raised public awareness about the benefits of open space and wetlands.

Railroad construction altered wetlands. Massive amounts of fill were brought in to provide both a solid base and a moderate grade for the railroad bed. The built-up railroad beds filled in wetland areas and altered drainage patterns by

restricting the flow of water from one side of the railroad embankment to the other. The alteration of drainage patterns and resultant flooding of low-lying areas may have, in some cases, contributed to the creation or enlargement of wetland areas.

Along with railroad construction, acquisition of extensive watershed lands and the construction of a network of reservoirs and aqueducts for New York City's Water Supply System shaped the evolution of Westchester and Putnam Counties. The system involved construction of three aqueducts, six reservoirs, and seven major dams starting with the Old Croton Dam in the 1830s and continuing through the early 1950s. The Croton system drains a vast watershed area in northern Westchester and Putnam Counties and to this day has greatly influenced development patterns.

Common wetland plants you can spot along the trail include Cattails (*Typha* spp.), Reed (*Phragmites communis*), Tussock Sedge (*Carex stricta*) and the opportunistic but beautiful Purple Loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*). You might also be lucky enough to see a Red-Winged Blackbird (*Agelaius phoeniceus*) showing its red epaulets, Spotted Turtles (*Clemmys guttata*), dragonflies such as the Green Darner (*Anax junius*), and, perhaps, a tiny skipper butterfly (*Poanes* ssp.) feeding on the phragmites or sedges.

Wetlands provide unique habitat for a wide variety of plants and animals and they offer opportunities for recreational enjoyment. The region's streams, rivers, wetlands, lakes, ponds, and the Hudson River and Long Island Sound are natural treasures that add significantly to the quality of life. Enjoy our wetlands. Help protect them.