

## A Land Steward Commitment by the State of New Jersey



Keeping warm in red, Dr. Mamie Parker, Director of the Service's Northeast Region, Sherry Morgan, Assistant Regional Director for Ecological Services in blue, and Jaime Geiger, Assistant Regional Director for Fisheries in purple, tour Sawmill Creek with federal, State, and non-governmental colleagues, October 25, 2002



Director of the New Jersey Division of Fish and Wildlife Robert McDowell (left) and Director of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Steve Williams tour the Hackensack Meadowlands, August 27, 2002

### Laurie Pettigrew, Principal Biologist, New Jersey Division of Fish and Wildlife

The New Jersey Division of Fish and Wildlife manages the Sawmill Creek Wildlife Management Area (WMA) in the Hackensack Meadowlands as a land holding within its Wildlife Management Area System. Sawmill Creek is an area of startling contrasts. Glance to the east, and the Manhattan skyline breaks the horizon, but search the mudflats and vegetation around you, and you will soon discover egrets and herons actively foraging. Ducks, coots, and gallinules may take swift flight at your appearance. You may catch sight of raptors hovering overhead. Every once in a while, the sleek body of a swimming muskrat or the head of a turtle will break the surface of the water nearby.

New Jersey has some of the most diverse and complex ecosystems found in the United States. The New Jersey Division of Fish and Wildlife is committed to protecting the ecosystems of its 117 WMAs, comprising 270,000 acres—44 percent of New Jersey's open space. Managed under an agreement with the New Jersey Meadowlands Commission, the 727-acre Sawmill Creek is the only urban-based WMA.

Prior to European settlement, the Meadowlands covered about 20,000 acres of estuarine and freshwater marsh and Atlantic white-cedar swamp, but decades of neglect and abuse have reduced the Meadowlands to only about 7,700 acres of wetlands. Adjacent to the Hackensack River, the Sawmill Creek area was diked for mosquito control in the early 1900's. Over the ensuing decades, the ecological value of the area as a wetland was severely impaired. In 1950, a northeaster destroyed the dikes and reopened the Sawmill Creek area to tidal flow. Today, smooth cordgrass (*Spartina alterniflora*) is the predominant vegetation, and biological productivity has returned. Sawmill Creek WMA is home once again to a myriad of wildlife. It provides an important feeding, nesting, and resting spot for birds migrating along the Atlantic Flyway and serves as a nursery and foraging area for gamefish such as stripers, bluefish, weakfish and white perch.



The new Director for the New Jersey Division of Fish and Wildlife, Marty McHugh (white shirt, standing), helps lead an interagency tour of the Meadowlands



Sawmill Creek: two snowy egrets at water's edge

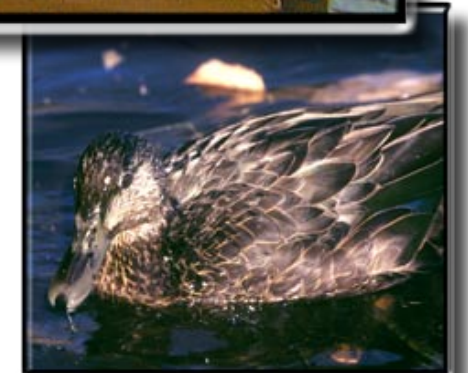


Sawmill Creek hunters proudly display their harvest

An explosion in wildlife-oriented recreation has occurred during the last 30 years. While demand continues to increase, the amount of land available for the pursuit of wildlife-oriented recreation declines. New Jersey loses roughly 45 square miles (29,000 acres) of wildlife habitat to development every year. In view of this reality, protecting critical ecosystems for wildlife and providing open space for New Jersey's citizens is particularly important. The abundance of wildlife and easy access to the New York / New Jersey metropolitan area make Sawmill Creek WMA especially attractive to outdoor enthusiasts.

As the environmental health of the Meadowlands gradually returns, so does the recreational use of the area. Anglers participate in a catch and release fishery in Sawmill Creek. Waterfowl hunting is said to be the best in northern New Jersey. Kayakers and canoeists paddle the quiet

creeks while hikers and birdwatchers stroll along the newly opened Sawmill Creek Trail that provides the best views of shorebirds and waders feeding on the mudflats. Boaters can access the WMA via a free boat ramp located in Hudson County's Laurel Hill Park. Entrance for pedestrians is from DeKorte State Park along the one-mile Sawmill Creek Trail, a segment of the Meadows Path, which will span the entire 21-mile length of the Meadowlands when completed. In the relatively short time that the Division has managed Sawmill Creek, the area has already become a model for what the whole of the Meadowlands may some day soon become.



An American black duck in Sawmill Creek

