

Friends of Cherokee Marsh

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Why Are Wetland Buffers Important?

Cherokee Marsh is Dane County's largest remaining wetland. Located upstream of Lake Mendota, Cherokee Marsh affects the health of the entire Yahara chain of lakes. The marsh tempers flood events, provides clean groundwater from springs, and filters stormwater. In recognition that the area is an outstanding example of a native, natural community, a portion of Cherokee Marsh is a designated State Natural Area.

But a wetland is only as good as the buffers that surround it.

What is a wetland buffer?

Wetland buffers are vegetated areas of higher ground, or upland, that protect adjacent wetlands from the impacts of human activities. Buffers work with the wetlands to form an integrated, functioning, and complete ecosystem.

Buffers protect the wetlands.

Stormwater that runs off roads, sidewalks, roofs, and lawns carries with it fertilizer, heavy metals, chemicals, and sediments such as soil and road sand. Wetlands are known for their ability to filter stormwater, but the pollution in urban and farm runoff can overwhelm a wetland's filtering capacity. Sediments reduce the ability of the wetland's peat soil to absorb water, and nutrient-rich stormwater encourages the spread of invasive plants that are of little use to wildlife.

Even when a development follows good stormwater management practices, in times of heavy or prolonged rain or melting, detention ponds overflow and runoff occurs. A wide wetland buffer can capture stormwater before it reaches the wetlands.

Buffers replenish groundwater.

Increased population near Cherokee Marsh will result in increased use of groundwater for drinking and other uses. Wetland buffers, especially if planted with a diverse mix of plants, allow the soil to absorb rain and snow and replenish the groundwater with the clean water that is vital for wetland health and our water supply.

Wildlife is attracted to areas that contain both wetlands and upland buffers.

A generous, vegetated buffer provides food and shelter for mammals, birds, frogs, and other creatures. Both wetland and upland animals are attracted to the rich variety of food and shelter found where wetlands and uplands meet.

Some species, like the Blanding's turtle, require both upland and wetland habitat to complete their life cycle. Blanding's turtle, a state threatened species, has been documented at Cherokee Marsh.

To protect, preserve, and restore the beauty, value, and health of the Cherokee Marsh and upper Yahara River watershed.

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Buffers enable residents to experience and enjoy the wetlands.

Open spaces are treasured locations to explore, reflect, and enjoy nature. Upland buffers make it possible for people to experience wetlands that would otherwise be difficult to access.

How wide should a wetland buffer be?

Dane County requires minimum 75-ft wetland buffers. However, other municipalities have recognized that the minimum isn't enough to protect their wetlands. For example, the City of Fitchburg's Comprehensive Plan includes a policy to provide 300-ft wetland buffers for new land brought into the urban service area.

Based on the needs of wildlife species in Wisconsin, the minimum core habitat buffer width is about 400 ft, and the optimal width for sustaining the majority of wildlife species is about 900 ft. (Source: *Managing the Waters Edge*, Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission.)

Please support adequate buffers for Cherokee Marsh's eastern wetland.

The City of Madison recently purchased hundreds of acres of wetlands, called the eastern wetland in the Cherokee Special Area Plan, located east of N. Sherman Ave. and north of Wheeler Rd. Just a few decades ago, these wetlands contained a healthy sedge meadow (Source: *Wetlands of Dane County Wisconsin*, prepared for the Dane County Regional Planning Commission, 1974.) Sedge meadows are a wetland type that is especially effective in protecting water quality. In recent years, stormwater runoff has damaged the wetlands in this area.

Sub-area 1 in the Cherokee Special Area Plan lies just south and uphill of the eastern wetland. A 75-ft buffer is grossly inadequate to protect this crucial piece of Cherokee Marsh. A buffer of at least 12 acres (300-400 ft), along with management efforts by Parks staff, has the potential to turn around the damage and restore the wetland to health. Please support the upland buffers these wetlands need.

To learn more about why wetland buffers are important and how wide buffers should be, please see:

Managing the Water's Edge: Making Natural Connections

a publication of the Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission

<http://www.sewrpc.org/SEWRPCFiles/Environment/RecentPublications/ManagingtheWatersEdge-brochure.pdf>

<http://tinyurl.com/managing-the-waters-edge>