

# History of Horicon Marsh: A Wetland of International Importance

*Bill Volkert, WDNR Natural Resources Educator, Horicon Marsh*

Horicon Marsh was created by glaciers of the last Ice Age. As the massive ice sheets entered eastern Wisconsin, they scoured the soft bedrock, creating the basins that support Green Bay, Lake Winnebago and Horicon Marsh. Horicon Marsh began as a post-glacial lake; over time, the Rock River eroded the outlet to this early lake to create the marsh. Due to its abundant natural resources, Horicon Marsh was an important hunting ground for prehistoric human inhabitants. Nearly every major Indian culture known to Wisconsin is represented in the archeological record at Horicon. While these early people were drawn to the marsh for its wildlife and fish, they had little impact on the marsh itself.

Major changes to Horicon Marsh have been made in the past 150 years. In 1846, the marsh was dammed and flooded. The vast lake supported steamboat traffic and was claimed to have been the largest man-made lake in the world for its time. After the dam was removed in 1869 until the turn of the century, marsh waterfowl were over-hunted during a period of market hunting, which devastated the most important wildlife of the marsh. Beginning in 1910, Horicon Marsh was ditched and drained for agriculture. The hope was that the peat soil would grow abundant crops such as onions, carrots and potatoes. However, failure led to abandonment of farming on much of the marsh and the decomposing peat resulted in a series of peat fires that caused further destruction of the marsh.

It was the hunters of the area who fought to bring this marsh back to life, beginning with a campaign to rally support in 1921. The success of this campaign led to passage of the Horicon Marsh Wildlife Refuge Bill, which provided state funds to purchase the land and construct a dam beginning in 1927. This established the first state wildlife area in Wisconsin, but after 10 years of land acquisition and after having acquired only 1/3 of the marsh, the state ran out of money. In 1941, the federal government began to purchase remaining marsh land. Today, Horicon Marsh is a jointly managed wetland with two units – a State Wildlife Area and a National Wildlife Refuge.

Horicon Marsh has recovered to a point of being vital to wildlife today. Over the years, a total of 295 species

of birds have been recorded at Horicon. Because of its geological importance, the marsh has been included as one of nine units of the Ice Age National Scientific Reserve. Hori-

con is Wisconsin's first designated *Globally Important Bird Area* and is Wisconsin's first and only designated *Wetland of International Importance* (see article p. 4).

The recovered marsh is not without human-caused problems and threats. The greatest ongoing threat is the inflow of non-point pollution. Each year, as much as 21 million pounds of sediment wash into the marsh along with up to 135,000 pounds of phosphorous. Early warning signs indicate that this cannot continue without adverse impacts to the wildlife. We now know that Horicon Marsh is not an island of habitat unto itself, but rather is inextricably linked to its 500 square-mile watershed. Protecting the marsh in the long run will require that we become better stewards of surrounding lands and waters.

Today, Horicon Marsh has many values. It is important as a lesson in history and our changing relationship to wetlands, it is vital to the conservation of wildlife, and it has tremendous recreational and educational value due to the vast number of visitors – more than 500,000 each year. In 1984, WDNR began a wildlife education program at Horicon Marsh. Over the years, more than 3,500 education programs have been conducted for more than 200,000 people, including 62 delegations of scientists from 39 foreign countries. An effort is currently underway to develop the Horicon Marsh International Education Center as a world-class visitor center at Wisconsin's most famous and celebrated wetland. *To learn more about Horicon Marsh, join us on our July 21 field trip (see [wisconsinwetlands.org](http://wisconsinwetlands.org) for details) or visit [www.dnr.state.wi.us/org/land/wildlife/reclands/horicon](http://www.dnr.state.wi.us/org/land/wildlife/reclands/horicon).*

