



MINK RIVER ESTUARY WETLAND TYPES

Clint Farlinger

Coniferous swamp, fen, marsh, sedge meadow

DOOR COUNTY



MINK RIVER ESTUARY

Property Owner: The Nature Conservancy  
 Recognitions & Designations: WI State Natural Area, WI Coastal Wetland Inventory Primary Site, WI Wildlife Action Plan Reference Site, The Nature Conservancy Priority Conservation Area, WI Bird Conservation Initiative Important Bird Area

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ECOLOGY & SIGNIFICANCE

Mink River Estuary, located in northeastern Door County near the town of Ellison Bay, is considered by many to be the most intact and least disturbed coastal wetland site in the Wisconsin waters of Lake Michigan. Headwaters of the Mink River form from alkaline springs and seasonally flooded hardwood swamps, and the river flows through coniferous swamp for a short distance until it enters a large marsh and ultimately empties into Lake Michigan at Rowley's Bay. The Mink River Estuary is a dynamic system formed by the mixing and flushing of Lake Michigan and Mink River waters. The changing lake levels help to create and maintain the diversity of habitats by alternately exposing mud flats and flooding large areas of vegetation. Many mammals, reptiles, amphibians and invertebrates inhabit the estuary and take advantage of these changing conditions. Excellent quality wetland habitats at this site support a variety of rare plant and animal species, provide critical spawning habitat for Lake Michigan fish, and provide stopover habitat for migratory birds.

FLORA & FAUNA

Wetland communities, and associated vegetation, in the estuary vary with water depth. Water lilies and water milfoil inhabit the deepest marsh areas while other deep areas are dominated by bulrushes. Wild rice, cattails and

common bur-reed dominate intermediate depths of the marsh and shallower areas host sedge meadow habitat with bluejoint grass and various sedges. A narrow band of shrubs, including willows, red osier dogwood and alder, surrounds the marsh and grades into coniferous swamp dominated by northern white cedar along the Mink River corridor. Several rare plant species are found here.

More than 200 bird species use the estuary as stopover habitat during spring and fall migration each year, including a wide variety of ducks, herons, gulls, bitterns, cormorants and loons. Birds that breed in these wetlands include osprey, American bittern, Virginia rail, sedge wren, and the state threatened yellow rail. Other rare and uncommon birds documented at the site include black duck, black tern, black-crowned night heron and northern harrier. Mammals using the site include coyote, porcupine and other species associated with northern hardwood and conifer swamps. Various Lake Michigan fish species use the estuary during different seasons, including steelhead, brown trout, bass and northern pike.

THREATS

Increasing watershed land use pressure threatens the site. Heavy deer browsing pressure threatens the regeneration of the site's conifers. Invasive species, such as Phragmites (common reed grass), may be the most serious threat to wetland habitats on site.

ACCESS

These wetlands are best accessed and enjoyed by canoe. For details, visit the State Natural Areas Program website: [dnr.wi.gov/org/land/er/sna](http://dnr.wi.gov/org/land/er/sna).

Sources:

- Wisconsin State Natural Areas Program (WDNR)
- Coastal Wetlands of Wisconsin's Great Lakes (WDNR)
- Wisconsin Land Legacy Report (WDNR)
- Great Lakes Ecoregional Plan (TNC)
- Wisconsin Important Bird Areas (WBCI)



Black-crowned night herons — Brian Hansen



Dwarf lake iris — Kitty Kohout