



Secrets of the Marsh



Marshland habitats support astounding biodiversity in addition to playing an important role maintaining water quality. Birds such as Common Yellowthroat and Marsh Wren are attracted to the marsh's abundant sources of food and cover. Insects are numerous here. Muddy waters thick with decaying vegetation, form a nutritious soup for water birds and the animals on which they prey.

The tall reed and marsh grasses serve as great hiding places for birds. Deeply camouflaged, birds will often be heard either singing or rustling amongst the reeds long before they are seen. The best approach to birding a marsh is to listen carefully for any noisy residents. Scan the edges of the reeds for anything that may be curious enough to step out into the open.

“Skinny as a Rail”

Rail's bodies are very narrow, and this adaptation enables them to slip easily through marsh reeds and dense swamp grasses. With narrow bodies, long legs, short stubby tails held upward, and camouflaged feathers to conceal them, rails are uniquely adapted for a life in their marsh habitat



The Marsh's Secret Residents

Rails are one group of marsh birds revered by birdwatchers since their secretive habits make seeing one a very rare treat. Although they may not venture into the open, their strange calls can often be heard, especially at dusk and dawn. In northern Alabama, the most common resident rail is

the Virginia Rail. This small gray-faced brown bird has a slightly decurved beak that is used to probe swallow waters and soft soil to catch small fish, crayfish, and insects. To identify the Virginia Rail, listen for their peculiar call similar to the grunting of a pig. During migration Sora, another species of rail, can also be found in the marsh.

Virginia Rail/Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Mike Hopiak



Common Yellowthroat/USFWS, Dave Menke

Wichety, Wichety, Wichety

Perhaps one of the most common sounds of the marsh in spring is the incessant call of the Common Yellowthroat. A male will sing from an exposed perch early in the morning, showing off his bright yellow under parts and dashing black mask. In spring, these males often court nearby females whose subdued coloration helps them blend into the reeds.



Swamp Sparrow/USFWS, John and Karen Hollingsworth

Winter Residents

As the weather cools in the Tennessee River Valley, birds that breed in marshes further north move here to their winter homes. The snappy little Swamp Sparrow will stay through the winter. During this time, two pugnacious species of wrens will also visit the marsh: the tiny Sedge Wren and the aptly named Marsh Wren.