

The Yellow Breeches Watershed

Wildlife and Wilderness Diversity

Located in Southcentral Pennsylvania, the Yellow Breeches watershed offers an array of wilderness terrain from meadow and marsh to upland forest environment.

The Watershed plays as host for a multitude of unique species. The animals constituting the loosely used term "invertebrates," comprise the large majority of watershed animals. It's been estimated that when all the planaria, snails, spiders, millipedes, moths, beetles and other insects are added, the total would be a staggering 70 percent.

Aside from their sheer numbers, these no-backbone animals are a key foundation block upon which all ecological systems depend. Hundreds of different birds and mammals depend upon invertebrate populations as food sources, and many of the higher plants rely on invertebrate pollinators and seed dispersers.



The result of the loss of our invertebrates, to which many call our watershed home, would be devastating.

Wetland alteration and destruction are the primary reasons for a species decline or loss. The Yellow Breeches Watershed is home for several rare species. These include a globally rare plant, the glade spurge which thrives in the forested swamp of the watershed, and the bog turtle which is considered an endangered species.

The Yellow Breeches Watershed is perhaps best known for its trout fishing. Trout, while being great fun to catch, are also indicators of the quality of our cold water streams. Wild trout demand the very best from their surroundings and will not settle for less. When water quality is poor they disappear. Their disappearance is a warning that all is not well in the natural world that supports all life, including us. When we work to preserve clean streams and wild trout, we also improve the quality of our own lives. Both the rainbow and brook trout are commonly found throughout the Yellow Breeches.

The wetland is also home to spotted, painted, wood, snapping, and stinkpot turtles. A number of indigenous snakes are common to the watershed including water snakes, black snakes and more rarely the poisonous timber rattler and copperhead snakes.

Waterfowl such as Canada geese, mallards, wood ducks, great blue herons, belted



Kingfishers, green-backed heron and American woodcocks thrive within the watershed. Above, red-tailed hawks, broad-winged hawks and sharp-shinned hawks

abound, with occasional visits from golden and bald eagles, peregrine falcons and ospreys.

The ring necked pheasant is found in the marshes and meadows. Woodpeckers and king fishers hug the tree lined shores. Also, a great many songbirds call the watershed home including the eastern bluebird, northern mocking bird and numerous others.

Owls are birds of prey, occupying by night the hunting and feeding niches which the hawks hold by day. Several species of owl can be found within the watershed; barn, screech and great horned.

Ground hogs and eastern cottontails, grey squirrels and muskrat abound. Larger watershed mammals include the striped skunk, raccoon, Virginia opossum, red fox, beaver, mink and weasel.

The largest of the watershed mammals is a subspecies of Whitetail deer, the northern woodland whitetail found commonly throughout the Yellow Breeches Watershed.

Whitetail food preferences are largely dependent on plant species occurring in an area and the time of year.

Green leaves, herbaceous plants and new growth on woody plants are eaten in the spring and summer. In late summer, fall and early winter, both hard and soft fruits



such as apples, pears and acorns are a major component of their diet. In winter, evergreen leaves, hard browse and dry leaves are eaten. Good supplies of a variety of natural foods at all times of the year are essential if an area is to continue to carry a healthy deer population.

Perhaps the most significant residents of the watershed are the insect population. Insects play an important role in the food chain. Black Fly larvae are a favored food of trout and other fishes. As are also the mayfly, stonefly



and caddis fly both in their nymph stage and as adults. Aquatic insects are also a food source of many birds like the Spotted Sandpiper who is commonly seen prowling the banks.

The forested wetlands of the Yellow Breeches Watershed resemble the surrounding upland forest, but they occur in the lowlands on often poorly drained soils in areas of high flooding. Characteristic trees of these wetlands would include cottonwoods, willows, locusts and Silver Maples. These trees have adapted to withstand frequent flooding.

Wild grapes, blueberry and elderberry shrubs are common and provide important food sources. Even the infamous and all too common Poison Ivy plant provides berries in the spring which are eaten by many varieties of bird.

At the waters edge you will find ferns and skunk cabbage, along with the flowering trout lily, cardinal flower, yellow flag. Water lilies are frequently found in areas of standing water.



Fragmentation of habitat is another serious threat to turtles as it is to hundreds of other species world wide. Fragmentation is the process in which habitats are divided by roads, trails, dams, canals, fences, housing and anything else that divides a habitat into smaller sections. Fragmentation prevents species from moving from one section of habitat to another, reduces the size of the habitat, reduces the size of the population within the given habitat, reduces genetic diversity, and reduces the number of turtles available for reproduction and the number of choices among those that remain. The smaller population is affected more by collection and predation. Several studies show that predation, particularly by raccoons, can be a major factor, up to 100 percent, in extirpation of box turtles. If the cause of fragmentation is a highway, the likelihood of road kills increases dramatically.

The Yellow Breeches watershed provides something for everyone. Wetlands protect us all in many ways -- they filter pollutants from our drinking water, protect our homes by storing floodwater, and provide homes for fish, shellfish, and wildlife. Wetlands are crucial for clean water, serving as a natural filter absorbing water-borne pollutants and damaging contaminants before the water enters our rivers, lakes, and streams.