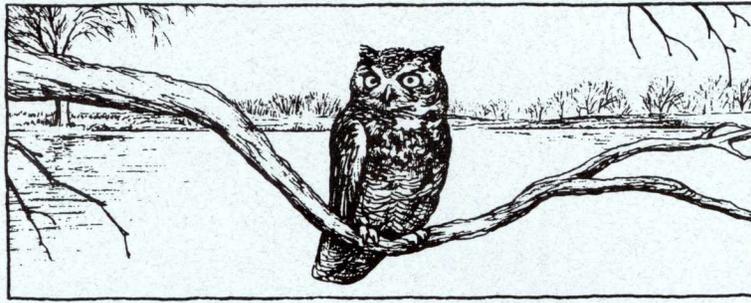


STILLMAN NEWSLETTER



©WINTER 2002

DOGS & CATTAILS

-- Mark Spreyer

Fourteen years ago, when I walked the dog by Stillman's frozen cattail marsh, an event would occur that doesn't anymore. If my husky investigated the smells on the cattails, he would inevitably flush up to a dozen pheasants. Even though the pheasants are gone, the cattails and the interesting odors remain.

Although this may seem obvious, cattails are aquatic. Unlike submerged plants, like those you see in an aquarium, cattails live both above and below the water. Of course, as the water level changes, the amount of the plant underwater also changes. In any event, the bulk of the cattails emerge from the water and, not surprisingly, they are cataloged as one of the "emergents." Others in this group include bulrushes and wild irises.

In northern Illinois, two species of cattail can be seen, broad-leaved or common cattail and narrow-leaved cattail. Besides the differing width of their leaves, the broad-leaved cattail lacks a gap between the uppermost male flower head and the female section below. With narrow-leaved cattail, there is a distinct gap between the male and female flowers.

Sounds easy to separate the two, doesn't it? Not so fast. The male flowers are often not visible as they do not persist as long as the female "cat's tail." Also, hybrids between the species can throw a wrench in the works.

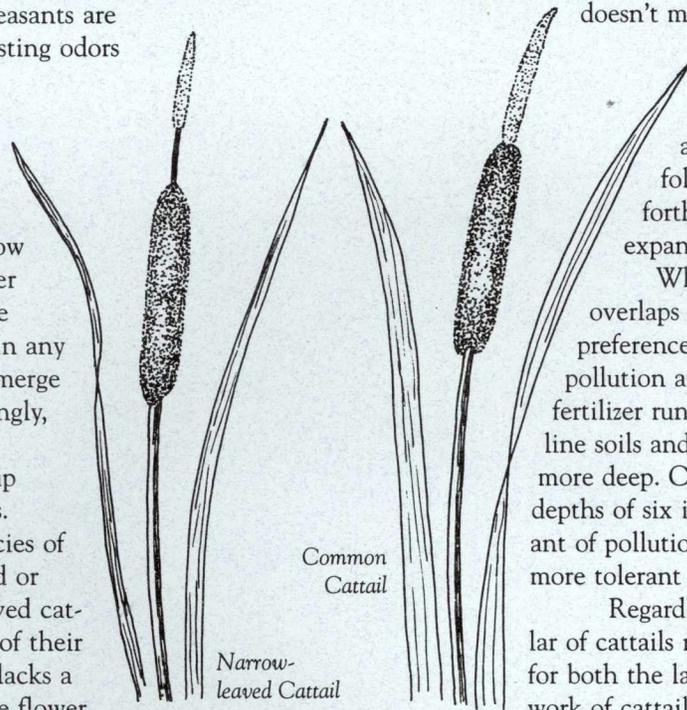
While narrow-leaved cattail reaches a height of six feet and common cattail can approach nine feet in height, the hybrid is often taller than either of the parents. Finally, the hybrid is sterile. This doesn't mean it can't spread, however.

Cattails grow underground horizontal stems called rhizomes. New shoots form along the rhizomes in fall. The following spring, the shoots sprout forth, and the colony of cattails expands.

While the ranges of both species overlaps considerably, they do have their preferences. Narrow-leaved cattail tolerates pollution and excessive nutrients such as fertilizer runoff. It will grow in highly alkaline soils and in water that is three feet or more deep. Common cattail grows in water depths of six inches to two feet. It is less tolerant of pollution than narrow-leaved cattail but more tolerant of soil acidity.

Regardless of the species, having a collar of cattails ringing a pond or lake is healthy for both the land and the water. A thick network of cattail stems and roots resists wind and wave action. By blocking waves, cattails can prevent shoreline erosion.

This same dense tangle of plants catches sediment in runoff from the land. Also, research suggests, cattails have some ability to remove heavy metals from water. In other words, cattails act as a natural filter and water purifier.



STILLMAN NATURE CENTER

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While cleaning the water, cattails provide a home for wildlife. The most common cattail cruncher is the muskrat. Unlike the beaver which chews on woody plants, the muskrat prefers the stems and roots of aquatic vegetation like cattails.

You might be wondering, how do you chew an underwater root? The muskrat's teeth project past its lips so it can gnaw and swallow underwater without choking. In addition, the muskrat's ears and nose have special flaps that seal out water when it dives.

In areas with shallow waters, like Stillman's marsh, the muskrat builds a 3 to 4 foot high, dome-shaped lodge or house. The house is made of mud plus the roots and stems of aquatic plants, primarily cattails.

The roof of the muskrat lodge provides a useful platform for other marsh inhabitants. Canada geese and blue-winged teal will nest on it and in spring, when the water is still chilly, turtles will crawl out on the house to bask in the sun.

Speaking of spring, some of my favorite bird calls, a descending whinny as well as a series of bell-like whistles, are made by the sora. The sora is a type of rail, a slender (as in "skinny as a rail"), wading bird that returns to the marsh in warm weather and lives among the cattails. Other birds to be seen among the cattails include red-winged and yellow-headed blackbirds, marsh wrens, pied-billed grebes, and swamp sparrows.

Sometimes birds are observed "eating" from cattail spikes. In fact, they could well be feeding on something else that is eating the spikes. For example, Henry's marsh moth and— I love this name— the shy cosmet, also a moth, love to munch on cattails.

It isn't just wildlife that enjoy cattail dining, humans have been doing the same for centuries. Almost all parts of the cattail are edible. The young spring shoots, mentioned earlier, can be eaten raw or cooked like asparagus. In early summer, the pollen can be collected, sifted and mixed with wheat flour to make an excellent protein-rich flour. During winter months, flour can be ground from the starchy rootstalks.

If you do choose to follow up on one of these culinary suggestions, I recommend you get more details on how to prepare your natural meal. A good starting point would be Lee Allen Peterson's *A Field Guide to Edible Wild Plants*.

Which brings me back to our frozen cattail marsh and the ghosts of pheasants past. They used to find cover from winter's bitter winds in the upright stalks of the dried cattail stems. Due to changes in the habitat surrounding the nature center, pheasants can't make a

living here any longer.

However, other prey species are on the increase, particularly rabbits. They, in turn, attract the attention of both my dog and the wild canines, such as our local red fox.

Judging by the tracks in the snow, the fox seems to enjoy the cover offered by the cattails. Perhaps, it makes it easier to sneak up on an unsuspecting rabbit or, perhaps, it is a good place to avoid an aging husky.

Whether it is teals and turtles in the spring, muskrats and moths in the summer, or pheasants and foxes in the winter, a cattail marsh has many wildlife stories to tell. Maybe, we should call it a **cattale** marsh.

With fondest memories of Glacier.

PROGRAMS

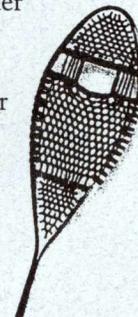
Program Basics: PLEASE CALL OR FAX US AT 428-OWLS(6957), OR EMAIL STILLMAN AT: stillnc@flash.net TO MAKE RESERVATIONS for programs. Remember to include your name, phone number, and the number of people that will be attending.

If less than 5 - 10 people (varying with the activity) have called two days prior to a program, the program could well be cancelled. So, don't forget to call the nature center in advance. If you discover that you are unable to attend, please call to cancel your reservations. This courtesy will be greatly appreciated.

SNOWSHOE SUNDAYS

Fresh snow can add a peaceful hush to the landscape and a surface that glitters in the bright winter sun. In order to help you sample the winter scenery in a novel way, we have 20 pairs of snowshoes. So, bring your own snowshoes or use ours and join us on a winter walk. Please, don't forget to call 428-OWLS to **make reservations**. If there isn't a thick layer of snow, the activity will be cancelled.

Date: Sundays, Jan. 6, 20 & Feb. 17
Time: 2:00PM
Fee: None



MAKING TRACKS

Join Susan Allman as she shows you how to recognize the different types of tracks made by winter's active animals. After an indoor introduction, explore Stillman's trails for signs of rabbit, squirrel, deer and fox. If there is no snow on the ground, we'll try again at 2:00PM on Jan. 27. Bring your own snowshoes or borrow ours.

Date: Sunday, Jan. 13
Time: 2:00PM
Fee: None

OWL MOON WALK

Native Americans called January's full moon the "owl moon." In honor of the owl moon, Mark Spreyer will present an indoor presentation on owls. Afterwards, with the help of the almost full moon, we will walk the trails in search of Stillman's Great Horned Owls. Space is limited so call 428-OWLS to make reservations.

Date: Sunday, Jan. 27
Time: 6:00PM
Age: 10 years and up
Member's Fee: Free
Non-member's Fee: \$2.00

NAME THAT TREE or THIS BUD'S FOR YOU!

With the help of Stillman's naturalist, you'll learn how to identify cherry, maple, ash and other midwestern trees. Easy to remember tips and simple hand-outs will keep you from barking up the wrong tree! Come prepared for the weather and bring your questions. Teachers and garden club members are especially welcome.

Date: Sunday, Feb. 10
Time: 2:00PM
Age: 10 years and up
Fee: None



THANK YOU

As you probably know, Stillman has only one employee (yours truly). So, we are very grateful for the talented volunteers who help us teach classes here at the nature center.

In particular, I want to thank **Stella Heddon, Susan Hargreaves, Sandy Clark, Connie Bischof, Daria Sapp, and Gillian Stoettner**. Many of these experienced educators come from the ranks of the Nature Ladies, a program sponsored by The Garden Club and the Little Garden Club.

We are fortunate to have such well-versed outdoor enthusiasts to call upon. Stillman could not service as many schools as we do without these volunteers.

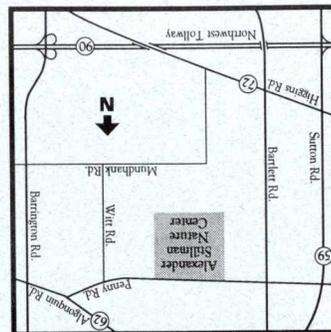
This past year, three **Eagle Scouts** have made our grounds much more user-friendly. **James Farley** built the foot bridge that connects the trail to the cattail marsh with a trail that leads back to our lake. Prior to the bridge construction, folks had to walk on sticks lined up in a wet area. As you can imagine, this often made for awkward and/or wet footing. The bridge is a huge and much appreciated improvement.

Nick Modesto designed and placed eleven "you are here" signs. Even though trail maps have been available for years, some visitors would get confused when hiking at the nature center. Since Nick finished his project, both visitors and some of Stillman's board members have commented on how nice it is to have "you are here" signs along our trails.

Last but not least is **Greg Thominet** who put up the bat, turtle, and poison ivy signs. Most schools that visit Stillman come for our pond study class. So, all of them walk by the poison ivy and many of them either see or catch one of the lake's turtles. His informative sign about our turtles will definitely enhance a group's educational experience. Our Sunday public visitors will also learn from Greg's bat and turtle signs.

Of course, the Eagle Scouts did not do these projects by themselves. They had help from other scouts, parents and siblings. Thanks to you all.

Renewal Reminder. If you see a 1 after your name, this will be your last newsletter until you renew. If you didn't receive our annual membership letter, just use the form on the back of this newsletter. Please remember, in order to keep Stillman a viable and diverse natural area, we need your support. Thank you.



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STILLMAN
 nature center



Open Sundays 11-4

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If you aren't already a member, please consider joining us.

- Yes, I'd like to become a member of the Stillman Nature Center. I enclose my tax deductible contribution of \$_____.
- I'd like to help as a volunteer with programs or land management at the Stillman Nature Center, please call me.
- Please send a gift membership from _____ to the name and address listed below.

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