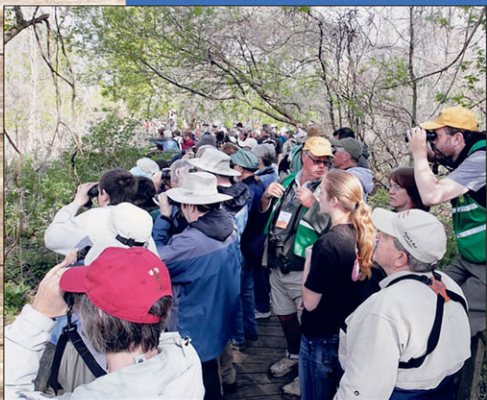


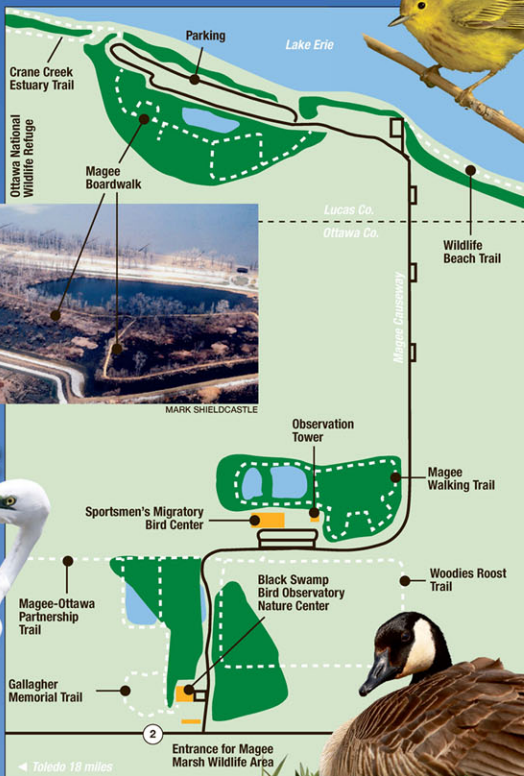
THE OUTDOORS PAGE



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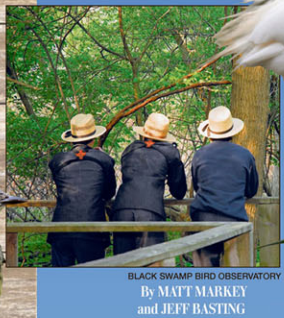


MARK SHIELDCASTLE



A birding paradise

A walk through the history of Magee Marsh



BLACK SWAMP BIRD OBSERVATORY
BY MATT MARKEY
and JEFF BASTING

OAK HARBOR, Ohio — It's not just the spring influx of migratory warblers that makes Magee Marsh Wildlife Area such an unusual place. And it's not that wide boardwalk through the swampy patch of forest that puts birders within arm's length of these tiny long-distance travelers, whose array of melodies create a chaotically pleasing musical arrangement.

What makes Magee Marsh so rare and so valuable is really its history. It has been what it is, essentially, for millennia.

"Of all the public areas, Magee is unique," said Mark Shieldcastle, a retired wildlife biologist who spent his career at the site along Lake Erie, about 18 miles east of Toledo. "Most of the other marsh areas were farmed at some time, but Magee has always been a wetland."

Magee's rich story is tied to John N. Magee of Elmore, who in a contradictory twist, made his fame and fortune draining marshland so it could be used for agriculture.

In 1903, he acquired the property that makes up Magee Marsh today, getting 1,000 acres of marshland that had belonged to the Crane Creek Shooting Club, and another 1,700 acres from the Cleveland Hunting Club.

Mr. Magee intended to use pumps and a series of dikes to draw out the water, but the lake refused to surrender the marsh. Repeated periods of high water made any attempt at farming the property a fool's errand, and the marsh remained a haven for muskrat trapping and waterfowl hunting.

After Mr. Magee passed away in 1925, his daughters Julia and Ruth managed the marsh property, and a group of men from Detroit held an exclusive lease to hunt ducks on the Magee Marsh site. The women kept the trapping rights, turning those into a very productive fur operation called the John N. Magee Muskrat Farm and selling their prized furs, which were dyed to make Hudson seal coats.

When the Magee family sold the property in 1940 to the Magee Marsh Hunt Club, that group harvested about 2,500 ducks a year from the site. The muskrat harvest was about 15,000 per year, which produced about \$30,000 of income, but as lake levels continued to trend higher, the channels and dikes on the property needed constant costly maintenance.

In 1951, the Ohio Department of Natural Resources acquired more than 1,000 acres of marshland at the site, and split the jurisdiction of the prized property between the Division of Wildlife and the Division of Parks and Recreation.

"It was saved, since it wasn't drained off like so many other places along the lake," said Sandy

Burris, president of the Friends of Magee Marsh conservation group. "This is such a great place. The birds have always been here, but the number of birders has increased substantially in recent years."

The current Biggest Week in American Birding festival brings thousands of tourists to the region, and for them Magee Marsh is holy ground. It is also a place where the partnership of hunters and birders creates a symbiotic union of conservationists.

"Besides the wonderful birding opportunities, there's hunting, trapping, ice fishing — all of these things happen here," Ms. Burris said. "When we create or protect great habitat, everyone wins."

The marsh and adjacent area went through numerous management changes and organizational revisions over the years. For a period of time, Crane Creek State Park and beach were a separate entity, along with the much larger Magee Marsh Wildlife Area, and what was then the Crane Creek Experimental Station.

Now wetland research is coordinated from the Olenyok Research Station, but wetland research still takes place at Magee out of the Sportsmen's Migratory Bird Center, which along with the Black Swamp Bird Observatory, sit on the main causeway through the marsh.

The biologists with the ODNR Division of Wildlife focus on the management of wetland dependent wildlife — waterfowl, burbearers, endangered wetland species, and bald eagles. The Magee Marsh site has long been a hub for waterfowl research, and it distributes some of the most sought-after waterfowl hunting permits in the state.

"The Magee model was looked at as an example of how to do a quality hunt," said Mr. Shieldcastle. "It was very unique, and the idea was to create a hunting atmosphere like what the big private clubs had, for Ohio hunters. That was really what Magee was known for."

Eventually, the beach closed and the state park became part of the Magee Marsh Wildlife Area complex. The world famous Magee Marsh boardwalk is located very close to the lake, next to what was the beach parking lot. Though its controlled waterfowl hunts are still very popular, the profile of Magee Marsh has changed.

"Magee has been a microcosm of how the shifting of wildlife lands has gone from strictly consumptive use, to the broader base," said Mr. Shieldcastle, who was an early proponent of adding a boardwalk to minimize the environmental impact of foot traffic on the marsh. "Birding has exploded — not just here but around the world. And with that comes different types of attitudes and demands."



FRIENDS OF MAGEE MARSH



The marsh has long provided exceptional waterfowl hunting.

The state of Ohio acquired the Magee Marsh site in 1951 from a private hunting club.



THE BLADE/ANDY MORRISON

An extensive renovation project is upgrading the iconic Magee Marsh boardwalk.



THE BLADE/ANDY MORRISON

The Magee Marsh wetlands are home to waterfowl and wildlife.