

## **Protect Our Drinking Water? It's a No-Brainer**

**By Alyssa Procaccino, Edison Wetlands Association**  
**For the Raritan Basin Newsletter**

Every day thousands of residents from Milltown, New Brunswick, North Brunswick, and Franklin Township drink water that comes from the 20-mile long Lawrence Brook. As a major tributary of the Raritan River, the longest river solely in New Jersey, the Lawrence Brook has been used as public drinking water since the 1860s. The Lawrence Brook is an essential part of the drinking water supply for Central New Jerseyans. Unfortunately, however, its protection has become compromised.

Edison Wetlands Association, the Milltowners for a Sensible Ford Avenue Redevelopment, and the Lawrence Brook Watershed Partnership are working to ensure that this dangerous situation is rectified. They are urging the Department of Environmental Protection to finally upgrade the Lawrence Brook's classification to a strongly protected Category One waterway.

"It is crucial that the Lawrence Brook is fully protected if we are to feel confident about the health of the thousands of families who drink this water in Central New Jersey," said David Wheeler, Director of Operations for EWA. "The Lawrence Brook is ecologically sensitive, a significant recreational resource in a densely populated area, and a tremendous fishing resource. Families depend on this water being clean enough to drink, and as such, the Lawrence Brook deserves full protection from the state."

A Category One status for a New Jersey waterway forces new development to move at least 150 to 300 feet away from the water line instead of the usual 50 foot buffer.

"The Lawrence Brook is one of the cleanest tributaries of the Lower Raritan River, but it won't be for long without this protection," said Robert Spiegel, Executive Director of EWA. "In addition, with the Mary Murray ferry being removed after decades in place, many more people will be using the Lawrence Brook for canoeing, boating and other recreational use. It is vital that NJDEP protects the waterway for them and the thousands who drink its water."

According to NJDEP, "Category One classification targets water bodies that provide drinking water, habitat for Endangered and Threatened species, and popular recreational and/or commercial species, such as trout or shellfish. Waterways can be designated Category One because of ecological significance, water supply significance, recreational significance, shellfish resource or fisheries resource. The Category One designation provides additional protections to water bodies that help prevent water quality degradation and discourage development where it would impair or destroy natural resources and environmental quality."

Over 200 birds have been sighted in the Lawrence Brook Watershed, including a number of threatened and endangered species such as the bald eagle, peregrine falcon and sandhill crane. A wide range of fish, mammal, reptile and amphibian species also utilize this endangered waterway.

Unfortunately, despite repeated requests, the NJDEP has provided no clear rationale for its refusal to institute this protection to this point. Yet continuing threats of overdevelopment and pollution from sites such as the Ford Avenue Redevelopment in Milltown risk impacting the Lawrence Brook and the safety of its drinking water.

To help protect this waterway and the safety of its drinking water, e-mail [ewainfo@edisonwetlands.org](mailto:ewainfo@edisonwetlands.org) or call 732-287-5111.

## Saving the Everglades of Central Jersey

by David Wheeler (725 words)

*First of three parts.*

Northern Middlesex County is home to nearly 400,000 people. In many ways, it is the prototype of suburban sprawl: strip malls, chain stores, highways, condos, and endless miles of asphalt. But the region also has a hidden natural oasis that feels like it should be anywhere but here—the Dismal Swamp Conservation Area.

Despite its foreboding name, “the Diz,” as it’s called by its many visitors, is truly an outdoor wonderland. Over 660 acres of wetlands, meadows and hardwood forests in South Plainfield, Edison and Metuchen offer area families their only local opportunity to experience nature.

For birders, the Diz is a suburban paradise. Over 175 species of birds have already been sighted here—from the magnificent peregrine falcon, soaring at speeds over 180 miles per hour, to the tiny ruby-throated hummingbird, which is lighter than a nickel. New Jersey Audubon is surveying the Dismal Swamp’s birds throughout 2008.

“The Dismal Swamp is incredibly rich freshwater wetlands habitat that supports a large array of shorebirds, ducks, migratory songbirds, turtles, frogs and other wildlife,” said Greg Remaud, Conservation Director for the non-profit NY/NJ Baykeeper. “It is among the most significant ecosystems of the Hudson-Raritan Estuary Region.”

Families of beavers build lodges in the Dismal Swamp’s gently flowing streams, while flying squirrels scamper along the branches after dark. Two dozen species of reptiles and amphibians ply the waterways and forest floors, from the powerful snapping turtle to the red-backed salamander. Catfish and minnows swim along the brooks in search of their next insect meals.

With such an abundance of wildlife, the earliest area residents viewed the Dismal Swamp as an outdoor supermarket. At least five prehistoric sites have been discovered here, including clam-shell mounds, fire pits and thousands of arrowheads, some of which are on display in the Edison Municipal Building.

Long after the hunter-gatherers moved on, dairy farms moved in—but fortunately the Diz was left largely intact.

Now it's the closest thing to wilderness we have. At dusk in March and April, the Dismal Swamp sounds like you stepped into a rainforest—even though you're just minutes off of Interstate 287. The melodic late-afternoon birdsong of sparrows, woodpeckers and red-winged blackbirds gives way to a chorus drone of spring peepers, or miniscule tree frogs, their echoing cacophony growing louder and louder from vernal ponds throughout the Diz. Little wonder that portions of the Dismal Swamp are known as "the Everglades of Central Jersey."

The Dismal Swamp's wetlands are designated a Federal Priority by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the Fish & Wildlife Service. Unfortunately, that doesn't stop people from illegally dumping garbage and construction debris along the backroads. Nor does it stop illegal off-road vehicle drivers from destroying habitat.

Those threats, however, pale in comparison to the rampant destruction caused by ill-conceived developments. There are currently two major proposals to clear-cut forest and pave over wetlands in order to build housing complexes and a sprawling Jehovah's Witnesses hall in the midst of this flood-prone waterworld. In the past, such politically connected developments were rubber-stamped by local planning boards, whose short-sightedness led to many of the flood problems and overdevelopment that nearly killed the Dismal Swamp for good.

In a sign of the times, however, a different kind of development recently occurred. The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, Baykeeper, and the Middlesex County Freeholders announced the preservation of the South Plainfield Holdings site, 69 acres of healthy wetlands and forested uplands.

"The South Plainfield Holdings land acquisition and other potential land purchases here represent an extraordinary opportunity to preserve high-quality natural lands amidst our region's densely populated urban core," said Remaud.

This preservation is the first key step in a new regional approach to the Dismal Swamp. Edison Wetlands Association—an independent non-profit organization unaffiliated with the Township of Edison—and former Metuchen Mayor John Wiley are drafting a Three Town Resolution to enable South Plainfield, Edison and Metuchen to work together in guiding the vision of the

Dismal Swamp. Rather than being destroyed by piecemeal cookie-cutter development schemes, the resolution can encourage managed public access, expanded nature trails, and habitat restoration in the last substantial natural area.

Working together, the towns can ensure the Dismal Swamp Conservation Area remains a wildlife refuge enjoyed by families, birders, and schoolgroups. That's certainly preferable to paving it over for more condos in a floodplain.

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