

The Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge

Can you remember when there was not a Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge as you drive Routes 5 and 20 between Seneca Falls and Auburn, or travel the New York State Thruway between exits 40 and 41? This refuge was created in 1938. Consisting of a little more than 8,000 acres currently, it is one of the big tourist attractions in the Finger Lakes. Its story is the subject of this article.

The topography of the Finger Lakes Region was changed greatly by the last glacial period about ten thousand years ago. The Finger Lakes were created by glaciers gouging out rivers. The northern and southern ends of the lakes typically developed gradually into marshes (areas of soft, wet, low-lying land marked by grassy vegetation and often being a transition between water and land). The Algonquin and the Cayuga Indians availed themselves of the food life in these marshes.

The marsh near the north end of Cayuga Lake became known as the Montezuma Marsh. It got its name in 1806 when a Dr. Peter Clark named his home after the palace of the Aztec Emperor Montezuma. Soon the entire marsh and nearby village became known by the name Montezuma.

The nature of the Montezuma Marsh changed very little until the building of the Erie Canal (started July 4, 1817 and first used in its entirety starting October 26, 1825). It was obvious that the previously-constructed Seneca-Cayuga Canal between Cayuga and Seneca Lakes would be linked with the main line of the Erie Canal. This was accomplished in 1828. The Erie Canal and its Seneca-Cayuga Canal link did not, however, greatly affect the marshes because the Seneca River still flowed directly from Cayuga Lake into the marshes.

The widening, however, and reconstruction of the Seneca and Cayuga extension of the New York State Barge Canal, starting in 1810, greatly altered the Montezuma Marsh. A lock was built at the north end of Cayuga Lake, as was a dam at the outlet of the lake. This new lock and dam lowered the Seneca River by eight feet, causing water to drain from the marsh. Still more drainage resulted because the course of the Seneca River was straightened and deepened, creating additional drainage "creeks."

In 1937 the Bureau of Biological Survey (later known as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service) purchased 6,432 acres (2,603 hectares) of the former Montezuma Marsh. The Civilian Conservation Corps (C.C.C.) built a series of low dikes to hold water and restore part of the marsh habitat that had previously existed. In 1938, the Montezuma Migratory Bird Refuge (today known as the Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge) was established by Executive Order 7971 to provide "a Refuge and breeding ground for migratory birds and other wildlife...." The Refuge is situated in the middle of one of the most active flight lanes in the Atlantic Flyway.

The Refuge provides great opportunities for people to observe wildlife with its 3.5 miles auto loop and various observation towers. Sightings of Canada geese are commonplace, as many of this species live in the Refuge year-round. It is estimated that in the spring migrations, there are as many as 100,000 Canada geese, and over 100,000 snow geese. Fall migrations estimates

are over 100,000 mallards and 25,000 American black ducks. A special thrill is to be lucky enough to observe a bald eagle. Bald eagles have resided on the refuge since 1986, first producing offspring in 1987. Several pair of osprey also nest on the refuge, a rare occurrence for the interior of New York.

Currently the Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge consists of a little over 8,000 acres, including 3,500 acres of pools, along with wooded areas, grasslands and wetland habitats on the refuge. The Northern Montezuma Wetlands project, which includes the Refuge and 29,600 acres of surrounding former marsh, is an attempt to broaden efforts to restore and preserve the marsh. In spring 2004, a floating pier into the Cayuga-Seneca Canal was completed to provide canal traffic access to the Refuge visitor center. Plans are under consideration for a boardwalk into the Main Pool, and a pull-off on the NYS Thruway. These projects, when completed, should increase the approximately 135,000 visitors annually to this Refuge.

[Note: This is another in the series of monthly articles on the history of Seneca County published as part of the celebration of Seneca County's bicentennial year in 2004. They are written by Walter Gable, Seneca County Historian.]