

The Montezuma Wetlands and the Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge

As a result of the retreating glaciers about 10 to 12 thousand years ago, a marsh area developed near the north end of Cayuga Lake. This marsh became known as the Montezuma Marsh because of a Dr. Peter Clark who settled in this area. When he was building his new home in 1806 on an elevated area, he 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 reconstruction of the Seneca and Cayuga extension of the New York State Barge Canal, starting in 1910, greatly altered the Montezuma Marsh. A new lock and dam lowered the Seneca River by eight feet, causing water to drain from the marsh. This helped to create what locals call the “muck lands” where many table crops are grown yet today.

In 1937 the Bureau of Biological Survey (later known as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service) purchased 6,432 acres 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. Bald eagles have resided on the refuge since 1986, first producing offspring in 1987. Several pair of osprey also nest on the refuge.

The Montezuma Wildlife Refuge is part of the Wetlands Complex Project, The MWC is an effort by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation, and Ducks, Unlimited, Inc. to protect, restore, and enhance wildlife habitat within the MWC. In addition to the Refuge itself, the MWC includes the state-owned Northern Montezuma Wildlife Management Area and lands owned by conservation groups and private landowners of lands that were formerly part of the original Montezuma marshes.

In 2006, the Montezuma Audubon Center (MAC) opened on State Route 89 just north of the Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge. The MAC is a state-owned facility operated through a cooperative agreement between the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation and the National Audubon Society. The MAC houses a large exhibit area, classroom, nature store, office area, auditorium, and a meeting room. On its 198 acres there are five different types of habitat, two restored freshwater marshes, a one-mile hiking trail, and an all-access observation platform.

