

Friends of the Sheboygan Marsh

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The Broughton Sheboygan Marsh Park and Wildlife Area: Natural and Cultural History of This Unique Resource

The Broughton Sheboygan Marsh Park and Wildlife Area (the Marsh) is the prominent feature in a 133 square mile watershed of the Sheboygan River. This pristine area contains about 14,000 acres of land and surface water, of which 7,414 acres are owned by Sheboygan County and an additional 752 acres are owned by the State of Wisconsin. The balance of the Marsh is under private ownership.

Sheboygan County owns a 30 acre park at the gateway to the Marsh. The park is a major tourist destination with 64 developed campsites, group camping facility, large picnic area with shelter, playground, boat launch ramps, fishing piers, the Marsh Lodge (full service rustic restaurant and tavern), and the Broughton Lodge (the historic original lodge which is open to large gatherings and special events). Part of the park is traversed by the 228.4 mile public snowmobile trail.

As the entryway into the Marsh, the park is also visited by numerous hikers, canoeists, cross country skiers, hunters, trappers, and fishermen.

The Marsh itself is a wilderness area and for the most part visitors who enter into it must be physically fit and have the time and equipment to fully enjoy this vast area.

The Marsh exists due to the retreat of the last glacier that covered the region. Melt waters and successive water flows were blocked by a prominent rock outcropping which served as a dam.

Over thousands of years, the original glacial lake that was formed behind the rock outcropping was filled in with decaying plant matter to form the present day Marsh. In fact, up to 100 feet of marl and peat fill the Marsh basin.

During earlier periods, the Marsh was home to many now extinct creatures such as the dire wolf, mastodon, mammoth, musk ox, giant beaver, barren ground caribou, and big horned bison.

Evidence indicates that the thick deposits of marl and peat may cover a treasure trove of the remains of these animals.

The Marsh today is home to white tail deer, wild turkey, coyotes, fox, great blue herons, sandhill cranes, ruffed grouse, red tail hawks, sora rails, yellow headed blackbirds, rabbits, raccoons, muskrats, and mink. The Marsh is an important waterfowl nesting and staging area. Fish species include northern pike, bass, black bullhead, and panfish. In addition to these larger and widely known animals, the Marsh is a biological repository for countless other organisms, many of which may never be seen by the casual observer.

Mission: To allow this and future generations to learn about nature and the environment, and to enjoy the rich beauty the Broughton Marsh Park has to offer.

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A tower view: Looking south over the Marsh.

Because of its extensive and excellent wildlife habitat, the Marsh draws many viewers as well as hunters. Fishing is also very popular at the Marsh. More than half a million northern pike and thousands of pan fish were stocked in the Marsh in 2002.

Plant communities in the Marsh have changed over the years, from boreal spruce to today's large cedar and tamarack tracts. The Marsh is unusual in that this type of cedar and tamarack habitat generally occurs much farther north. There are also large stands of lowland hardwoods and some prairie throughout the Marsh. Because of the unique habitats, there are many rare plants in the Marsh that are listed by the State of Wisconsin.

The Marsh has always been an area where wildlife has concentrated, even as the species changed because of shifts in climate and other factors. Due to the richness of wildlife, Native Americans successively settled along the fringes of the Marsh. Indeed, the perimeter of the Marsh has been densely populated by Native Americans for more than 12,000 years. There are many burial and village sites around the Marsh, and numerous artifacts have been found. Construction and farming activities around the Marsh in the early to mid 20th century unearthed the skeletal remains of five Native American people. These remains were kept on display at the Sheboygan County Historical Society for a time before being returned to tribal custody for proper reburial.

Several major collections of tools and projectile points collected from the Marsh exist, numbering in the many thousands of pieces. Plowed farm fields around the Marsh today contain some of the greatest visible concentrations of prehistoric artifacts to be found anywhere.

The Marsh thus can be regarded as an ecological vault, storing vast treasures of biological, paleontological, and prehistoric materials and knowledge. Although there have been some preliminary investigations over the last 150 years into these treasures, there have been no major concentrated studies. Preserving the Marsh will ensure that these riches can be studied in the future.

Most people would probably agree that preserving the Marsh is a good idea, but that was not the case from about 1870 to about 1930. During those years, there were several schemes to drain the Marsh and convert it to farm land. Enormous steam-powered dredges were used to dig ditches, and more than 20 miles of those drainage ditches can still be seen and traversed in the Marsh today.

Large parts of the Marsh actually were drained by these attempts, but the personal fortunes of investors were squandered as sales of the drained lands never materialized for a variety of reasons. Instead of the “Utopia” proponents had hoped for, draining the Marsh resulted in environmental devastation, and large areas of the Marsh became wastelands instead of wetlands.

In 1912, a fire that burned large expanses of the drained Marsh could be seen in the night sky many miles away. Between 1928 and 1931, many acres of the drained Marsh burned or smoldered almost continually, with more than 1,000 acres being consumed by one large conflagration in September of 1931. The fires were sustained by the burning of the dried peat, and in some areas the peat was combusted down to a depth of three feet.

Beginning in 1927, conservation-minded citizens began attempts to restore the Marsh. These efforts were led by Charles E. Broughton (whom the Marsh is named after) and the Sheboygan Chapter of the Izaak Walton League. Mr. Broughton purchased and then donated 80 acres of land to Sheboygan County in 1937. The County subsequently purchased an additional 6,349 acres of the Marsh at a public foreclosure auction for \$17,646. In 1938, a dam was constructed on the Sheboygan River by the federal Works Progress Administration. The dam quickly re-flooded the area, and the Marsh once more flourished. Since the construction of the dam, the Sheboygan County Board has consistently funded improvement and protection efforts for the Marsh through the succeeding decades.

The Broughton Sheboygan Marsh Park and Wildlife Area is a focal point for public use, environmental education, natural and historical interpretation, and outdoor recreation. There is also much interest in the geological features due to the readily discernable remnants of glaciation in the surrounding area. The Marsh is a wildlife viewing area and a top birding destination. Historical and archaeological sites are seen as major tourism draws in studies of tourist preferences. As such, the Marsh could be conceived as underutilized. The Marsh has far greater potential to be a regional and even a national tourist destination with potential broad economic impact in Sheboygan County. This can be accomplished, if citizens wish, while still protecting the Marsh for future generations.

The observation tower, the largest structure of its kind in Wisconsin, is a great asset to the Marsh. The tower itself is a tourist destination, drawing families wishing to enjoy the park without getting their feet wet or venturing into the wilderness areas that can instead be seen from the tower. The tower infuses in visitors a sense of pride and stewardship for one of our last remaining vast open spaces.

Historically and ecologically, the Marsh has been a huge laboratory where human occupation has had a lengthy and sometimes harmful impact on the environment.

From a near historical perspective, Charles E. Broughton, the founder of the protected status of the Marsh, was a very influential person of statewide significance. Mr. Broughton was the editor of the *Sheboygan Press*, a philanthropist and patron of state and local historical organizations. Specifically, Mr. Broughton was noted for public debates concerning his opposition to prohibition (1929-1933); negotiations for the

proper burial of Chief Kahquado, last of the Potawatomi chieftains in the region (1930-1931); investigations into price fixing in the cheese industry (1931-1933); forcing legislative investigations into the condition of state mental institutions, for which he was a runner up for a Pulitzer Prize (1934); the development of the Sheboygan Marsh and the Horicon National Wildlife Refuge (1930-1949); and for being a leader in the early fight against pollution in the state (1930-1949).

Another prominent and colorful local personality, John Sexton, lived near the present day entrance to the park. Mr. Sexton came to the area in 1845 and was the first school teacher in Elkhart Lake, the first clerk of the Town of Russell, and the first postmaster, serving in that position for 17 years. He became a philosopher and hermit in his later years, and even the Governor of Wisconsin would stop by Sexton's ramshackle cabin to converse with him. Mr. Sexton was brutally murdered in 1911 and the crime became a local drama. Hundreds attended his funeral on one of the warmest days ever recorded in Sheboygan County. The alleged assailant escaped to Italy where he later died in prison.

The noteworthy stories of these two men and other prominent residents around the Marsh could also become part of any increased interpretive emphasis of the Marsh.

The Marsh tower serves as the first step, but a critical step, in further developing the park to educate and inform people about the natural, cultural and historical wonders associated with the Marsh, or that remain hidden under its waters and muck.



A tower view: Looking west over the Marsh, the Sheboygan River, and a drainage ditch.

"I come to you making an appeal to carry on, for you have the opportunity of writing history here today which will be read long after we have passed away and will mean a heritage of the great outdoors for those who are to come." Charles E. Broughton, May 4, 1937, during his presentation to the Sheboygan County Board of Supervisors while donating the first 80 acres for public ownership of the Marsh.