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## Hemi-marsh Wetlands - Their Value and Management

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"Hemi-marsh" may not be a universal term, but waterfowl hunters and bird watchers are likely familiar with these bird havens. Dozens of

bird species - often numbering in the thousands - frequent hemi-marshes year-round for cover, nesting habitat and food. While hemi-marshes can be classified as wetlands, not all wetlands are hemi-marshes. This leads to the question: what is a hemi-marsh?

Simply put, a hemi-marsh is a patchwork of about 50 percent open water and 50 percent emergent vegetation or wetland plants. This ratio can fluctuate within and between years, but the goal is to manage for the mix to be about equal.

The presence of open water and aquatic vegetation may define a hemi-marsh, but the value may be determined by other variables. Usually, each variable is related in some way to water. Too much water for a long period of time can direct the marsh (and its value) in one direction while



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*This hemi-marsh, located at Red Slough Wildlife Management Area, shows the 50:50 mix of open water and mixed emergent and aquatic vegetation.*

too little water can do the opposite. The goal is to balance all of the variables – especially the water – for maximum benefit.

Most land managers with hemi-marshes use levees and water-control structures to change water levels throughout the year. Lowering the water level (drawing down) in the spring is critical to promoting an abundance of seed-producing annual plants that attract and hold birds in fall and winter. A slow drawdown maximizes shallow water and moist soil diversity, promoting an explosion of aquatic insects for feeding birds. As fall nears, pumping water through pipes or gravity-fed gates from adjacent water sources helps restore the marsh to its "natural" state.

The overall, simplified concept of hemi-marsh management is to manage the water for the highest quality and diversity of food plants for wildlife. Not all plants are equal, with some being very invasive and poor for wildlife. Knowing how and when to manipulate water levels combined with other well-timed management practices can be tricky and usually requires a "learn as you go" approach.

Establishing and managing a hemi-marsh may seem far too complex for landowners to consider for their property, but wetland and wildlife professionals are always available to assist with the design and management. The rewards for wildlife, hunters, and bird lovers are nearly endless, making it all worth the while.