

## **Backyard Briefs**

*A weekly column*

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### **Mattamuskeet– Unique in Many Ways**

A winter visit to Mattamuskeet is impressive. The lake is speckled white with thousands of tundra swans and snow geese; your eyes are often pulled toward the vibrant colors of wood ducks, mallards and other ducks—many are “bottoms-up” as they feed among the vegetation on the bottom. Lake Mattamuskeet is the largest natural lake in North Carolina, measuring 18 miles long and 6 miles wide. Its shallow water however, is what makes it such an ideal place for wintering waterfowl. This very large lake varies from ½ - 5 feet in dept, with an average “swan’s neck reach” of 1 ½ feet. Such shallow water allows the nourishing aquatic vegetation to thrive in dense beds throughout the lake.

This refuge not only provides essential habitat for tundra swans, Canadian and snow geese, and 22 species of migrating ducks, but there are also over 240 species of other birds, including peregrine falcons, bald eagles, and ospreys. The red wolf once again roams this refuge, along with a wide array of other mammals, amphibians and reptiles.

At one point in its history this lake was almost lost. In the early 1900's developers dreamed of turning the shallow lake into farmland. Encouraged by similar projects in Holland, a project began to drain the lake and convert it to farmland. In 1914 the largest pumping plant of that time was built, along with a network of canals; the plant was capable of pumping 20,000 gallons of water per second. Millions of dollars were spent to drain the lake before the project was finally abandoned as impractical and too expensive.

In 1934 the US Government bought the lake and surrounding land to form the Mattamuskeet National Wildlife Refuge. The Civil Conservation Corps converted the pumping plant into a lodge and the smoke stack was transformed into an observation tower. The lodge was host to fisherman, hunters, wildlife observers and photographers until it closed its doors in 1974.

Today the old pump house/lodge is being renovated once again. This historic building is slated to house the Visitors Center for the refuge and the East Carolina University Field Station for Coastal Studies at Mattamuskeet. They are also planning to provide educational programs at the facility. I look forward to future visits to this unique place.