

Backyard Briefs

A weekly column

By Judy Jessop, A Nature Conservancy Volunteer

The Winter World of Mattamuskeet

My family was back at the Outer Banks again this year to greet the New Year. So that is where we harbored January 2nd and 3rd, while snow piled up over most of the state. Out on the Banks we were buffeted with mostly wind and rain while an angry sea lapped at our doorstep. When the storm finally subsided all were eager to be outside. We decided to go inland to escape the wind. Mattamuskeet National Wildlife Refuge became our destination for we planned to go in search of tundra swan, snow geese or any other wild thing we could find.

The refuge was covered in snow. Pines wore snow shawls while the sleeping hardwoods were striped white on every reaching branch; all glistened in the delicate touch of the early morning sun. As we turned down the road to the wildlife headquarters the first to greet us was a tri-colored heron, sitting atop a piling at the entrance. A snowy egret flew along beside us. A bit further up the road, just as we stopped the car to walk, an otter started to cross the road, but upon seeing us, zipped back into the water. Bright yellow movement drew us to some shrubbery where we found several secretive yellow throat warblers searching for berries. In the wetland to our right tundra swan dosed in the sun.

Back in the car, we meandered down the road gazing at ducks on the water and small flashes of feathered movement in the trees. At the headquarters we wandered about outside the historic lodge, its reflection was mirrored in the water that brackets the front and back. A group of egrets stood motionless in the shallows, poised for the catch, while still more egrets swooped low with graceful wing beats, finally settling to fish downstream.

From there we wandered the wildlife trail eavesdropping on the hundreds of tundra swans; their complexity of mutterings sound much like foreigners in conversation. We also got a chance to watch a nutria foraging in the water and heard him grunting at a great blue heron flying past. There were trees filled with robins, the rustle of ever-busy sparrows in the hedges, and tree swallows swooping in the sunlight. All and all it was a very good day. I highly recommend you try a trip there yourself.