

Salt Marshes

A Valuable Long Island Habitat

What are Salt Marshes?

Also known as **tidal marshes**, they are where the ocean meets the land but unlike sandy beaches, they have a **rich variety of grasses, muddy soils and organisms** that live in **pools** formed by tides slowly washing in and out of the sturdy grasses.

They have mostly **saline, or salty, ocean water** with sometimes a little fresh stream water from the land mixed in so anything living here must tolerate salt!

What lives here?

Many diverse animals and plants call the salt marsh their home. All of these organisms create an important **food web**, meaning they are all connected by feeding on and becoming food for everything that lives here.

Cord grasses such as *Spartina alterniflora* and **glassworts**, *Salicornia*, filter the water and add nutrients to the muddy soil through their roots. A variety of **rushes and sedges** grow in higher areas and provide food for birds and small mammals.

Mollusks such as ribbed mussels and clams live in the mud. Fiddler crabs, juvenile shrimp and other **crustaceans** live in shallow waters and feed on small animals and plants, including **algae**. Many **types of fish** swim, eat and grow in these waters. Examples are striped bass, menhaden and flounder. **Birds**, like the snowy egret and blue heron, use their big beaks to feast on these animals by digging into the mud for mollusks or catching fish and crustaceans.



Why do we need them?

Salt marshes **provide nutrients, or food**, for the many different organisms that live and feed here. They are also the "**nurseries of the sea**" providing a safe place for young fish, crabs and mollusks to eat and grow protected from predators and rough seas.

They can help **clean the environment** by soaking up, or filtering, pollutants out of the water. Also, the strong roots and stems of the marsh grasses give us **protection from storms and hurricanes** by keeping big waves from washing very far inland.

How can we protect them?

Salt marshes are in danger of being destroyed by human activity. They become polluted very easily from **land run-off** which contains pesticides, fertilizers and trash. They are being ruined by **development**, or building homes and businesses, close to the shore.

It is important to be educated about **conserving** these ecosystems. You can help save them by leaving animals where you find them -- don't take them home! Another way they can thrive is to **create nature preserves** that will protect these areas by law.

For more information please visit your library or a local nature center. Also, check out: www.epa.gov/owow/estuaries/kids/visit/index.htm or <https://home.nps.gov/fiis> to learn about a Long Island salt marsh.