Cranes and Wetlands

Cranes live in wet, soggy places called **wetlands**. A wetland is a place where water and land mix, at least part of the year, and the soil becomes soggy. Wetlands have many different names. They can be called bogs, swamps, marshes, or estuaries.

Cranes need wetlands as a place to (circle the best answers):

rest during migration
shop
raise their young
go to the post office
play video games
find protection from predators
find their food
go to school
build a nest
take piano lessons

Cranes live in wetlands, but lots of other species call the wetlands home, too! Animals like deer, herons, spiders, and salamanders live in wetlands, along with plants such as bulrush, iris, and wild rice.

All of these plants and animals have special **adaptations** that allow them to live in a wetland. For example, frogs and snakes have smooth, waterproof skins, and ducks have webbed feet which are perfect for swimming. Cranes have long legs, a long beak, and a long neck which are perfect adaptations for wading through tall grasses, shallow water, and searching for food.

Below are the scrambled names of some plants and animals that live in wetlands. Can you unscramble them?

1. nails
2. roonacc
3. rcane
4. akesn
5. liattac
6. ogfr
7. kcud
8. letrut
9. flygondra
10. tibabr

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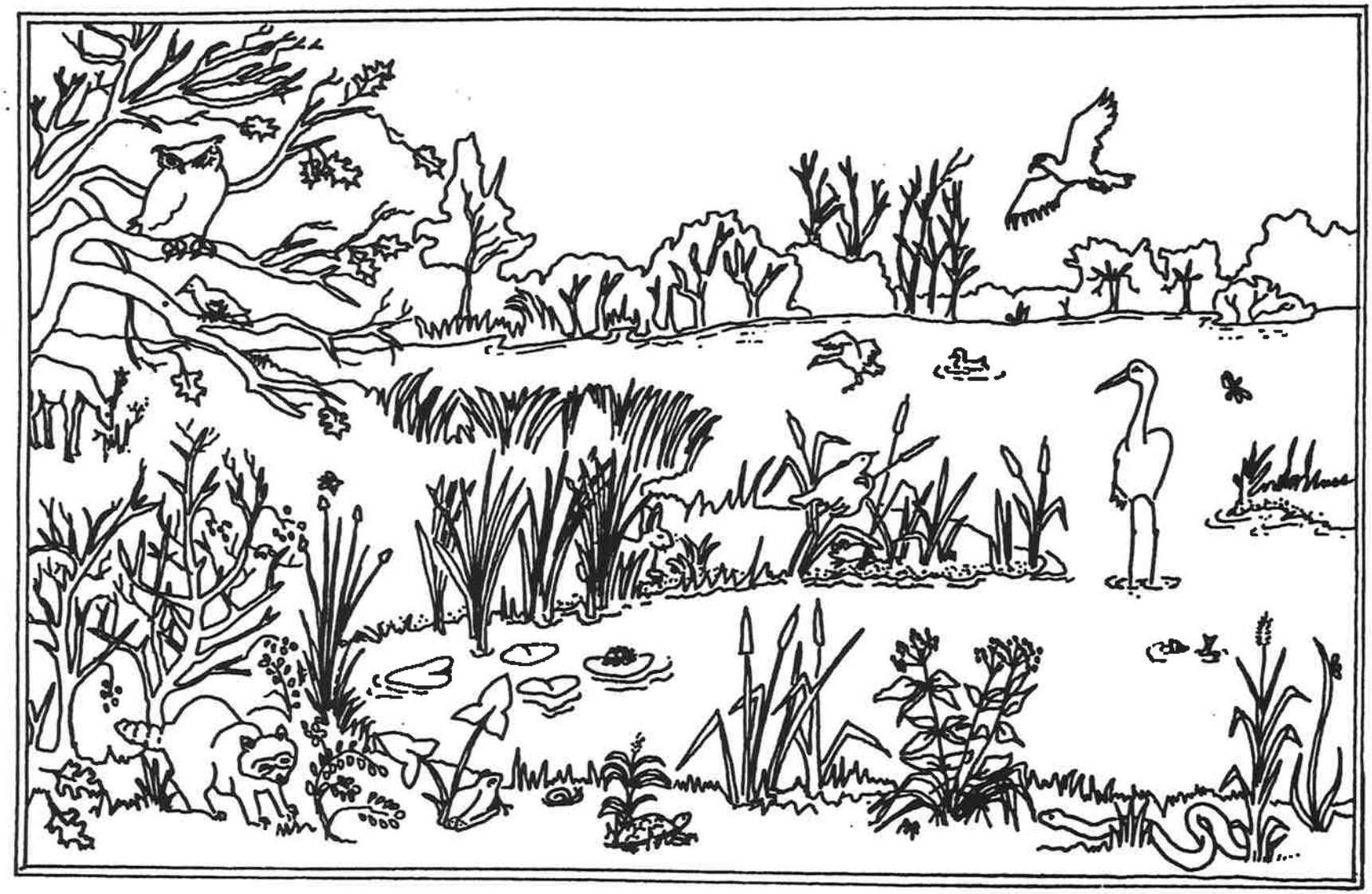
Wet & Wild!



Wet and wild--that's a **wetland**. A crane's **habitat**, or home, is a wetland. In their habitat cranes find food, protection, and a place to build their nest. Cranes like to eat insects, seeds, fish, frogs, worms, mice, and water plants. Because they eat both plants and animals, they are called **omnivores**.

Lots of other plants and animals live in wetlands. Together, they form a **community**--a wetland community! If one plant or animal in a community disappears, others that depend on it may disappear, too.

Look in the picture of the wetland community. Can you find ten plants and animals that cranes like to eat? Draw a line from these wetland treats to the crane.

What other animals can you find in the wetland? Do they eat any of the same things that cranes eat?

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Why Care About A Soggy Ol' Piece Of Ground?

Let's see why this soggy ol'piece of ground, or **wetland**, is so important. From the name, you can probably guess that wetlands are sometimes covered with water. Sometimes they are completely dry. Usually they are somewhere in between. They can be as large as the Okefenokee swamp in Georgia, or as small as a wet place along the roadside that has a few cattails and some nesting birds. **Why are wetlands so special?**

They Store Ground Water:

Did you know that much of the earth's fresh water is underground? It is stored in cracks and holes in the rocks and soil. How does the water get there? Wetlands often collect water from rain and melting snow and allow it to slowly trickle into these openings.

Try to think of wetlands as a big bank safe. Instead of holding money and jewels, they hold something even more precious. They hold much of the water that we use for drinking, washing, and other important activities. Can you list 20 ways that you use water every day? What would we do without water?

They Help Prevent Floods:

What sometimes happens when we get too much rain or snow melt? Wetlands can hold this extra water and slowly release it into nearby lakes and streams. It is very important that the water is released slowly so that the rivers and streams don't overflow.

If wetlands disappear, where would all that extra water go? Have you ever seen a flood? What happens to the houses, farms, and buildings during a flood? Do you think wetlands are important?

They Help Keep Our Water Clean:

Have you ever used a screen as a sifter in a sandbox? You might have noticed that the small pieces of sand fall through the sifter while the larger rocks and sticks are held on the screen. A wetland acts just like that screen. If there is pollution or dirt in the water that enters a wetland, some of it can be separated just like the rocks and sticks on the screen. Then, the clean water trickles into our underground water supply and makes its way into our lakes and streams.

They Provide Habitat For Plants & Animals:

Wetlands provide **habitat** for many plants and animals. Many endangered species live in wetlands, as well as many creatures that are important to humans. Wetlands are home to mink, otter, muskrat, and beaver. All of these animals have been important resources because of their fur. Wetlands provide protection for deer, raccoons, pheasants, and other animals. Even fish use wetlands as a place to lay their eggs. They are also home to plants such as cranberries and wild rice. Have you ever eaten plants or animals that depend on wetlands? Are wetlands important sources of human food?

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Classroom "Wetland" Experiment

Background

Cranes are sometimes called an **indicator species** of the environment because they are so large and demand such extensive territories for nesting. If the cranes are doing well, it **indicates** that their wetland community is also doing well.

Not only are wetland areas important to cranes and other wildlife, but they are also important to people. Wetlands collect water from surrounding areas and slowly release it to streams, lakes, and oceans. During this slow travel through the wetland, many pollutants and sediments settle out or decompose. The water that reaches rivers and streams is much cleaner. If ditches are built through the wetland, excess water races through them, flooding downstream property, and polluting lakes and streams.

Here is an experiment you can try in your classroom to create a model of how wetlands work:

You will need:

- 1 bread pan
- 1 large damp sponge (4"X 7" X 2")
- 2 tsp. soil
- 1 brick
- measuring cup
- water

Activity

1. Place the brick in the bread pan. Sprinkle 1 tsp. of soil (our pollutant) at one end of the brick. Tilt the pan, soil end at the top, and slowly pour 1 cup of water over the brick. Remove the brick from the pan and measuring the remaining water. Is it "polluted"? Empty the water from the pan.

2. Place the damp sponge in the pan. Sprinkle 1 tsp. soil (our pollutant) at one end of the sponge. Tilt the pan again, soil side uphill, and slowly pour 1 cup of water over the sponge. Carefully remove the sponge and measure the remaining water. Is it "polluted"?

Discussion Questions

How is the brick like a drainage ditch?

How is the sponge acting as a wetland does in controlling pollution and flooding?

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