



# CARING FOR COASTAL WETLANDS

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The sun is shining warmly on the Shebeshekong River in Carling Township, where the shore is mainly a marshland of grasses and reeds. Beneath the water's surface waterweeds grow. Above, at river's edge five painted turtles bask comfortably on an old gray log. The largest turtle seems the bravest, being the last to plunge back into the shallow water as a canoe and humans approach.

It's a peaceful natural setting, framed in the distance by the typically breathtaking Georgian Bay scenery of giant pines growing on high faces of pink granite rock.

Seemingly worlds away, yet only a few hundred kilometres in actual distance, two large freight ships pass on the beautiful turquoise blue St. Clair River between Sarnia, Ontario, and Port Huron, Michigan, at Lake Huron's most southerly tip – their horns blaring in greeting. As the two massive vessels travel past each other, the river is still wide enough for other boats. A pristine white sailboat glides by comfortably.

It's a busy setting framed in the distance by the large metal docks constructed along the river's edge, for loading and servicing the many Great Lakes ships regularly passing between Lake Erie and Lake Huron via Lake St. Clair.

How are the two scenes related? They're linked in a growing concern about how lowering upper Great Lakes' water levels is impacting wetlands.

The 1960s' dredging of the St. Clair River to allow passage of Great Lakes vessels is currently being studied by the International Joint Commission on Canadian and United States water, to determine if subsequent erosion in the river has created a drain effect conveying excessive amounts of water out of the upper Great Lakes.

Not only is the lowering of the upper Great Lakes' water levels causing concern, but also inconvenience, for many. One of the concerns expressed is that lower water levels have already contributed to the drying up of some of the Georgian Bay coastal wetlands, and more could be impacted in the future. Some of these wetlands are considered provincially significant. The Shebeshekong River wetland has already experienced some impact, with lower water levels, exposed banks, and drying shorelines.

It is estimated there may be hundreds of small coastal wetlands in the Georgian Bay area. Every one is unique. Some contain uncommon plant life. Some are spawning grounds for Georgian Bay fish. Waterfowl, mammals and a variety of other wildlife, as well as humans, use these places.

On Partridge Bay, (west of Killbear Provincial Park) which, true to

its name is the habitat of many partridges, humans find their beaches expanded and their water sources further away from their cottages. However beavers have industriously blocked off a section of a stream on the other side of a cottage road. A sparkling woodland pond now exists there, surrounded by raspberry canes and mounds of rock surmounted by pines and other trees.

While the beaver on Partridge Bay have found a solution, having the ingenuity to help themselves, the turtles and other wildlife on the Shebeshekong River are more vulnerable.

The Shebeshekong River water level is down. Large boulders along the edges of the picturesque waterway show water lines from years past. The highest water lines are three or more feet above the existing water level. New docks are stepped down from old ones.

The area is important to wildlife as well as humans. Mergansers and mallards, among other waterfowl, migrate to this area and mate in the spring. A map turtle and its youngster bask together on a large rock.

It's a peaceful habitat for wildlife. Very shy ducks fly at the sight of a canoe in the distance, the brilliantly coloured males and the duller coloured females beating their feet against the water as their wings pump the air to gain altitude and safety. Canada geese, larger and more confident, paddle slowly and nonchalantly away from the canoe, occasionally emitting their distinctive honks of annoyance and warning.

The air is filled with music from the white-throated sparrow's patriotic song of O' Canada, to the red-winged blackbird's rapturous trill as it sways on a reed and sings to a potential mate – Pick me, pick meee.

Overhead a gull charges a crow who has found a morsel of food from the grounds of one of the cottages. Hawks circle patiently higher overhead and a goose lays low to the ground. Terns swing to and fro over the water, searching diligently.

Along the edges there are black mudflats. Moss grows between the bank of drying grass and reeds and the mud reaching to the water's new edge. Deer hoof-prints show clearly at the river's edge, close to a stand of oak trees. Here the ground is littered with acorns, ready to turn wetland into forest if the opportunity presents itself.

The canoeist's paddle touches bottom easily in most places. A channel marked on the map is now nothing more than a series of puddles.

The Shebeshekong River and Partridge Bay are two of a