

# SANCTUARY!

# Education

By Eric Lind

VEILED BY PAST colonial history and appalling water pollution, the Hudson River still has a powerful natural charm. And as far as wildlife sanctuaries go, Constitution Marsh is also far from pristine. Its been ditched and diked, its soils tainted with heavy metals. But even so, the marsh is a place where one can sense the forgotten, ancient river... the one dominated by nature.

Constitution Marsh is by no means huge; its area is measured in the hundreds of acres, not the tens of thousands. It cannot boast of a one-of-a-kind wildlife spectacle, such as a giant rookery of roseate spoonbills. The natural history here is subtle. But over time, this backwater habitat of the estuarine Hudson reveals a startling diversity of river wildlife, framed by the appealing contours and undeveloped flanks of the Hudson Highlands. The view is virtually the same we could have seen from the deck of the *Halfmoon* nearly 400 years ago.

Stirred by the spring sun and nourished by tidewater, the marsh's



A marsh wren (*Cistothorus palustris*) sings in Constitution Marsh.

tall grasses and wildflowers are beginning to grow again. Soon, the crowded green banks will serve as refuge for a specialized group of birds that don't mind the difficult conditions here, those that can weave sturdy nests in the floppy stalks and cope with ever-changing water levels. Only a handful of species breed in the marsh, secretive and subdued nesters such as Marsh

Wrens, Least Bitterns and Virginia Rails. Others, like common yellowthroats and willow flycatchers breed in the adjacent fringe of swamp or wooded shoreline. Still many more visit the marsh during the spring and fall migrations to rest and to feed on the abundance of insects, seeds and fish. The bird list hovers near 205 species, the latest addition is the Iceland gull that spent most of the day lounging at the mouth of Indian Brook on March 7<sup>th</sup>. The marsh became an Audubon wildlife sanctuary in 1970, and was designated an Important Bird Area in New York State in 1998.

The water is always in motion through the marsh as the moon maintains a slow but persistent ebb and flow. When this tidal rhythm is overlaid against the annual calendar of the Northeast, no two days seem alike. These inconstants are reflected not only in the seasonal movements of birds, but in transient aquatic wildlife as well. Later this summer, surges of herring, anchovies and bluefish will make a showing for a month or two, then

vanish until next year when the river turns warm and brackish again.

The reach of the wildlife in Constitution Marsh extends well beyond the Hudson Valley. Canada can be heard in the voices of eagles, the open Atlantic can be seen in the bright silver-green backs of bluefish, and the neotropics glimpsed in the feathers of yellow warblers. The marsh is more than a small island of protected habitat, it is connected to a much greater landscape by tides and the long-distance travels of wild animals.



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## Prospect Park: Get Ready, Get Set...

By Cheryl Bartholow

THE COUNTDOWN IS ON. Prospect Park Audubon Center is scheduled to kick off its first full season of activities and programs in April 2002. The Center, a partnership between Audubon New York and the Prospect Park Alliance and one of the first urban Audubon centers, will be a place of active discovery, with interactive exhibits and fun, hands-on activities. Located in 520-acre Prospect Park, the center will be housed in the newly renovated Boat-house, a 1905 recreation of the Sansovino Library of St. Mark from 16th century Venice.

The Center will be open year-round, offering programs for families, schools, and adults. "Citizen Science" programs will allow visitors to participate in projects that benefit the wildlife and habitat of the park environment. Prospect Park Audubon Center will also house the park's visitor center with an information desk, gift shop, café area, and seasonal boat rental.

Carol May & Tim Watkins of May & Watkins, a national exhibit design firm located in Brooklyn, are designing the interpretive exhibits at the Center. Exhibits will introduce audiences to the secrets of nature in the park, allowing them to see into the nests and habitats of the wildlife of the park, and practice their observation skills to allow them to view the park in a new way.

A network of interpretive paths exploring the park's environment, history, and design will extend from the Center. Prospect Park, an Important Bird Area, is undertaking a major renovation of these trails, including removal of invasive and exotic plant species, opening historic views of the water, placing directional and interpretive signs, and building replicas of the Park's original historic shelters and benches to encourage visitors to linger at key spots to observe natural nesting areas.

The Audubon Center will be used as a base to offer innovative environmental educational programs



Tupper Thomas, Prospect Park Alliance president, Cheryl Bartholow, Prospect Park Audubon Center at the Boat-house director and David J. Miller, executive director of Audubon New York stand before the sign to the anxiously awaited opening of the boat house.

throughout the Park, as well as extensive outreach programs to community groups and schools. The Center hosted nearly forty teachers from Community School District #17 in two professional development sessions incorporating Audubon New York's For the Birds curriculum, and the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's PigeonWatch program. A teacher advisory group was selected to further develop classroom programs with a park focus. "We want teachers to view the park as a big classroom," says Audubon's education director, Chuck Remington, "where their students can experience a natural habitat first hand, and not just read about it."

Thanks to the leadership of Congressman Jim Walsh as well as the Brooklyn and Senate Delegation, close to \$500,000 was awarded for exhibits through a federal grant. With the support of Assembly speaker Sheldon Silver and Brooklyn New York State Assembly delegation, a matching state grant for this project is pending. The total cost of this state of the art exhibit will be in excess of \$1 million.