

## Gulf of Maine Coastal Program

### *Merrymeeting Bay/Lower Kennebec River: using partnerships and flexibility to protect habitat*

Since 1992, the Maine Wetlands Protection Coalition (Coalition), including the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) Gulf of Maine Program, Maine Dept. of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, Land for Maine's Future Program, The Nature Conservancy, Maine Coast Heritage Trust, Ducks Unlimited, Inc. and other statewide and local conservation organizations, has been participating in an innovative partnership to protect lands in the Merrymeeting Bay/Lower Kennebec River drainage — one of the state's five Focus Areas within the Atlantic Coast Joint Venture of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan. By taking advantage of the collective strengths of each Coalition member, this habitat protection success story continues to grow and evolve.

The Merrymeeting Bay/Lower Kennebec River Focus Area includes freshwater and salt water tidal marshes and mudflats that offer important feeding and resting habitat for thousands of migratory waterfowl, shorebirds and wading birds. The region also provides habitat for rare, threatened and endangered species, including nesting osprey and eagles, short-nosed sturgeon, piping plover, and least and roseate terns. This pristine area is located close to the state's largest population centers and is now receiving increasing development pressures.

Recognizing the value of the region, biologists from the USFWS Gulf of Maine Program worked in cooperation with other Coalition members to develop an approach to habitat protection. Using data from Maine Dept. of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife and other sources, Gulf of Maine Program biologists compiled databases and analyzed information using a Geographic Information System (GIS). Gulf of Maine Program biologists identified 27,000 acres of the highest value waterfowl wetlands, associated upland buffer zones, and threatened and endangered species habitat.

Once Gulf of Maine Program's biological analysis was completed, outreach efforts in the local community took center stage. The Gulf of Maine Program's final report and maps, as well as presentations to land trusts and other conservation groups, and meetings with interested landowners, led to some of the Coalition's first successful land protection projects.

Encouraged by these early successes, the Coalition applied for a series of grants for additional land protection. Four North American Wetlands Conservation grants have been funded to protect important habitat in the Lower Kennebec and Merrymeeting Bay. In addition, the Coalition has been awarded three National Coastal Wetland Conservation grants, a National Fish and Wildlife Foundation grant, and a state Land for Maine's Future Program grant. All together, \$3.7 million in federal funds and \$5.6 million in non-federal funds (including lands donated by willing owners) have been assembled to permanently protect more than 6,300 acres of wetlands and associated upland buffers through this collaborative, voluntary approach. Protected lands will be managed by private landowners, non-government organizations and/or Maine Dept. of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife.

This evolving habitat protection success story is about the best of partnerships. Working together, the Coalition has already accomplished what none of the organizations could have achieved independently. Focus Area designation and the potential for substantial habitat protection encouraged Gulf of Maine Program to direct its biological, computer mapping and outreach expertise to the Focus Area. Local land trusts are offering site-specific knowledge, identifying potential acquisition sites and contacting landowners. Other Coalition members are providing funds, writing grants and negotiating with landowners. Partners are using a broad array of habitat protection strategies: federal grants, private philanthropy, technical assistance, state bond funds, conservation easements and fee acquisition. By integrating our collective strengths, and by retaining a flexible, non-regulatory and voluntary approach, the Coalition is well on its way to turning its ambitious vision into thousands of acres of protected habitat for waterfowl, migratory fish and endangered species.



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