

What are Wetlands?

Wetlands are areas that, under normal circumstances, are inundated or saturated by surface or groundwater frequently enough and long enough to support vegetation that is adapted for life in saturated soil conditions. Wetlands generally include swamps (forested), marshes (non-forested), bogs (peat) and other similar areas, and may be either freshwater or estuarine (both saltwater/freshwater) systems. A wetland may be ponded year round, or just a seasonally soggy area. The area does not have to be wet all the time, but must have water at or near the soil's surface for at least 2-3 weeks per year.



Wetlands Retain Water: When rain arrives after periods of dry weather, wetlands act like a sponge, absorbing the water and releasing it slowly to connecting channels and estuaries. This provides more time for water to infiltrate into aquifers which replenish drinking water supplies. During rainy periods, some wetlands even prevent flooding and erosion downstream by retaining heavy runoff.



Wetlands Purify Water: Wetland soil, together with the plants, microbes, and organisms living within, acts like a filter to trap and detoxify pollutants that are carried into the wetland by runoff or wind. As long as this capacity is not overwhelmed by too much pollution at once, water leaves most wetlands cleaner than when it entered. Through this filtering process, both groundwater and surface water are cleaned.



Wetlands Provide Habitat: Wetlands provide a rich habitat. In Island County, wetlands sustain at least 150 species of birds, 44 mammals, 8 amphibians, 6 reptiles, over 4 species of salmonids, as well as over 249 plant species.



Wetlands add to Rural Character: Wetlands provide open spaces that add to the rural character and scenic vistas of our communities. Healthy wetlands maintain property values, provide incentives for tourism, and are essential for sustaining safe shores and waters for recreational activities on Camano and Whidbey Islands

Wetlands are identified by these traits:

- **Hydrology:** saturated soils for part of the year
- **Hydric Soils:** soils that formed under conditions of saturation, flooding or ponding, supporting specific types of plants
- **Vegetation:** predominance of water-tolerant/dependent plants

Wetland buffers are important for environmental protection.

A wetland buffer is an undisturbed vegetated area that surrounds a wetland. Because there are different types of wetlands with assorted characteristics and functions, buffer sizes vary. Buffers are also influenced by the type of land use activity or development proposed near critical areas. Vegetated buffers help protect wetland functions by:

- Providing initial filtering of sediments and other pollutants from runoff.
- Providing wood and other organic matter for animals, plants, and insects.
- Maintaining shade, water temperature, and the microclimate.

Island County is home to a variety wetland types, including coastal lagoons, estuarine wetlands, mature forested wetlands, and mosaic wetlands. Click [here](#) to learn more.

For help identifying wetlands on your property, use Island County's [Wetland I.D. Guide](#), or consider hiring a [qualified environmental consultant](#). Please note that wetlands falling within Shoreline Jurisdiction are regulated under the Island County Shoreline Master Plan.

Resources:

- [Island County Critical Areas Planner](#)
- [Critical Areas Ordinance](#)
- [Best Available Science for Wetlands of Island County, Washington](#)
- [Wetland Resources from Washington Department of Ecology](#)

Is your property impacted by wetlands or wetland buffers? To learn more about your property check out [Island County GeoMap](#) to view known wetlands on Island County's Critical Area Maps. Note that not all wetlands are currently mapped.