

Wild Wednesday 2 December 2020, Cattail by Walt Anderson

December has arrived, and at any local wetland, even the slightest breeze may lift cattail fuzz into the air, while a strong wind will create a veritable snowstorm of tiny parachute-packing seeds with potential to create a new marsh. Just add water.

Having no control over seed distribution, each cattail produces millions of tiny, cheap seeds. There is probably no place nearby that won't end up with seeds, but by playing the numbers game in a big way, the cattail's losses of 99% or more of its seeds don't matter as long as a few reach damp soil and find adequate light and temperature to germinate.

Once established, cattails can spread vegetatively with greater certainty, cloning themselves from spreading rhizomes in the mucky bottom. In fact, if waters are fairly shallow and stable in duration, cattails can completely turn a marsh into a *Typha* monoculture. While fringing cattails can enhance the biodiversity of a marsh, supporting beaver, muskrat, blackbird, ducks, turtles, and many other creatures, a cattail monoculture will support little: maybe some wrens and rails (skinny enough to move between the blades), but not much else. There is a whole field of marsh management around cattail control methods.

Cattails are widely distributed in the world, and there are multitudes of uses, including edibility in many of its forms, baskets, mats, sandals, medicines, paper, insulation, World War II life vest stuffing, bioremediation of pollutants, even bioenergy. Check out a few recipes here:

http://www.cattails.info/Cattail_Recipe.html. Archeologists have discovered that the rhizomes were ground and used as food in Europe as long ago as 30,000 years!

Cattails occur on the margins of our lakes and creeks, even showing up in permanent pools high in the Granite Dells and at Granite Basin Lake. Let's check out this fascinating plant in its various forms, including some of the wildlife associated with it, in the following captioned photographs.



Mature seedheads ready to explode and scatter the mobile DNA when the wind blows.



OK, the wind has arrived! Not a good time to be trying landscape photos if you feel you have to later clone out all the distracting white dots!



What pleasure we take in shaking the fluff into the air! We are seed dispersers both through the direct shaking of the reeds but also as we gradually remove seeds from our clothing long after leaving the marsh.



Cattails offer so many photo opportunities, from gorgeous reflections in water to a substrate for frost crystals on a winter morning.



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A breeding-age cattail with male (staminate) flowers clustered at the top and female (pistillate) flowers in the "sausage" below. Check out the link given earlier for these delicious recipes: **Cat-on-the-Cob with Garlic Butter**, **Cattail Flower Refrigerator Pickles**, and **Cattail Pollen Pancakes**.



The rhizomes that stabilize the plant and allow it to spread vegetatively into a dense thicket. Geese, muskrats, and humans all eat the rhizomes. The ability of this plant to clone so easily implies that you could probably harvest it sustainably while still providing suitable wildlife habitat. Just don't disturb the nesting blackbirds, sparrows, and wrens!



Last year's fallen leaves provide a floating perch for a Great Blue Heron.



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Winter cattails provide cover and good hunting grounds for herons too.



Ruddy Duck with cattail reflections.



Red-winged Blackbirds roosting in a cattail patch.



Dense cattails that have filled in a wetland and reduced its wildlife diversity. Not easy to control unless you have a hungry army of muskrats! Even then, watch out when they have devoured the plants; they get mighty grouchy when they set out to colonize a different wetland.



Fringing cattails and cloud reflections. Cattails have long inspired artists and naturalists.



There is something rather painterly about this cattail scene.