

COMMON QUESTIONS:  
**WETLAND  
FESTIVALS**



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## PREFACE

This question and answer guide is designed for local government officials, land trust staff, staff of watershed councils, state and federal agency staff, landowners and others interested in designing and carrying out a “Wetland Fest”. A selected bibliography and list of web sites provide the reader with more information concerning specific subjects. The guide is one in a series of guides.

The guide draws upon two wetland festivals conducted by the Association of State Wetland Managers, Inc. (ASWM) in 2002 and 2004, two Wetland Festivals conducted by Ralph Tiner of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Amherst Massachusetts in 2001 and 2002, and a variety of conferences, workshops, training sessions and other activities conducted by ASWM over a period of years. It also draws upon other publications and web sites. See bibliography and list of web sites.

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*Photos by Ralph Tiner from the National Wetlands Inventory Wetland Festival, Amherst, Massachusetts, 2001.*

## COMMON QUESTIONS: WETLAND FESTIVALS

### Why conduct a Wetland Fest?

A. Reasons for conducting a wetland festival include:

- Educate the public and build their support for the protection and restoration of wetlands and related ecosystems.
- Interest children and teachers in wetlands and other natural systems.
- Build camaraderie among federal, state, local government, academic and other groups working with wetlands.
- Provide an opportunity for agencies and organizations to highlight their efforts related to wetland conservation.
- Provide a “hands-on” community activity which draws together individuals interested in protecting the environment and focuses them on wetlands and related ecosystems (including greenways, floodplains, wetlands, streams).
- Provide a wetland/nature activity (the Fest itself) which provides economic benefits (food, lodging, gasoline sales) to local businesses and encourages them to protect wetlands.
- Support local wetland artists and photographers and encourage them to select wetland and birding topics in their artwork.

### What steps are needed in conducting a Wetland Fest?

A. These will depend, somewhat, upon the size of the fest although most of the steps suggested below will be needed for almost any fest. The scale of activities will also, of course, differ. For example, a large fest will require a formal advisory committee and structure and more formal organization. Suggested steps for someone interested in conducting a wetland fest include:

- Identify other groups and individuals interested in wetlands and potentially interested in cooperating in a fest.
- Organize a preliminary meeting of the interested individuals. Identify other groups and individuals who may be interested. Contact them.
- Establish a fest advisory committee with at least one representative from each of the cooperating parties. Firm up their roles as cooperating and sponsoring parties.
- Appoint a chairman and vice-chairman for the advisory committee (useful for larger fests, not needed for smaller fests).



- Hold a meeting of the whole advisory group. Set goals. Pick a tentative date for the Fest. Pick a tentative location.
- Check out possible facilities. Confirm date and location with facilities and with advisory group.
- Solicit, with the help of the advisory group, exhibits for the Fest from among cooperating and sponsoring parties, others. Solicit individuals willing to conduct wetland walks, demonstrations, etc.
- Publicize the fest. Create a web site, produce a brochure. Notify newspapers.
- Conduct the actual Fest.
- Follow up with thank you letters.

Selected steps are discussed in greater depth below.

### **What are your goals?**

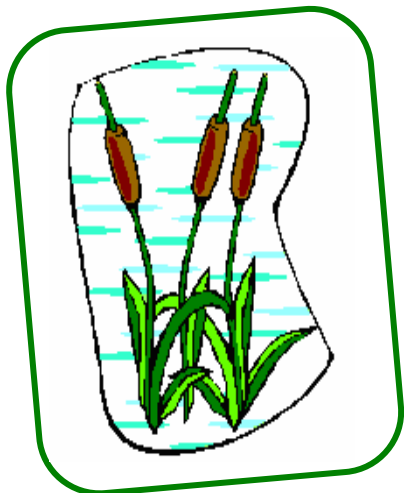
A. Possible goals for your Fest have been listed above. It is important for your advisory committee to agree upon these goals because the goals will, in turn, define the intended audience and the Fest activities. The primary goals and primary audience for a Fest may differ somewhat from year to year. For example, the first Fest we conducted was designed to educate the general public. The second fest focused more on educating birders.

### **What is your primary audience? Your secondary audience?**

A. Your goals will determine your audiences. Primary and secondary audiences of a Fest may include:

- Members of the general public, children
- Teachers
- Birders, land trust members
- Fishermen, sportsmen
- Local, federal, state government officials
- Landowners
- Local artists

Your advisory committee can help you define the primary and secondary audiences.



### **Who may be interested in helping to conduct the Fest?**

A. We have found that a broad range of parties are interested in helping with a Fest. These include:

- Local offices of national not-for-profit organizations. For example, Audubon Society, Sierra Club, National Wildlife Federation, Ducks Unlimited, Trout Unlimited, and the Nature Conservancy
- Local land trusts.
- Academic institutions including local grade schools, middle schools, high schools, and university and colleges.

- Federal agencies with wetland missions such as U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps), and the U.S. Forest Service (USFS).
- State agencies such as the state pollution control and wildlife agencies. State natural heritage staff are also interested.
- Local governments
- Graphic artists, photographers, batik makers, and other artists.
- Local native plant nurseries (particularly those growing wetland plants).

### **Who should serve on the advisory group?**

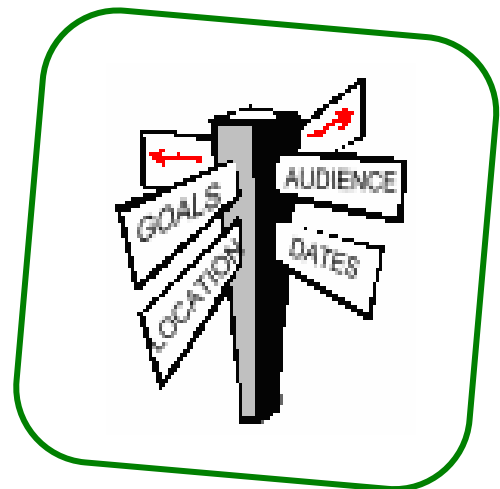
**A.** We recommend that your advisory group includes at least one representative from each of the cooperating parties and organizations. You should seek active participants on the advisory group who would be willing to assume responsibility for some portion of the Fest such as preparation of the web page, other publicity, setting up tents, providing financial support, etc. See discussion below.

### **What issues should be addressed by the advisory group?**

**A.** We recommend that you put together a list of questions you wish your advisory group to address and send or e-mail a copy to each member. Follow this up with a telephone call or e-mail to solicit their individual opinions. We then suggest that you collate the comments and recommendations and share this summary with the larger group through e-mail and an advisory group meeting or conference call.

Sample questions include:

- What should be the goals for the Fest?
- What should be the principal audience for the Fest? Secondary audiences?
- What groups and organizations (or individuals) other than the ones already contacted should be approached as possible cooperating/sponsoring parties?
  - Where should the Fest be held?
  - When should the Fest be held? What dates should be avoided?
  - Who should be approached as exhibitors for the Fest?
  - If funds are needed, how much and for what (e.g. rental of tents, tables)? What are possible sources of funds?
  - Who will volunteer to do what? See more detail below.



## **Where should you hold an advisory meeting?**

A. We suggest that you hold the advisory meeting at the facility you have chosen for your Fest or nearby (if, for example, a town common is to be used). This familiarizes the group with the facility including its strengths and limitations. Meeting face to face also helps coalesce a group and peak the interests of individual members. We suggest that you hold the meeting on an evening or weekend if your advisory group is primarily volunteers since many of the individuals you want for your advisory group may work during the day. If your main cooperators are from government agencies, a meeting during the day is preferable. The meeting can be quite informal. But, we like to go around the table to solicit responses from each advisory member on each issue.

## **What are good dates for a Fest?**

A. Spring and fall weekends are particularly good times for a Fest although the winter may also be fine in the South. Three of the four Fests we have been associated with have been in May—Wetlands Month. May is a good pick for many areas of the country because it is not too hot or cold and there is great interest in the out-of-doors. Many spring festivals, tulip festivals, and other meetings are held in May. However, April or June or the early fall (September or October) are good picks as well. Coinciding a Fest with fall or spring migration of birds is also a good idea.

We associated the second of the two festivals we conducted with a Fall Fest at an environmental education center which typically attracted 2000 plus individuals. Building on an existing fall or spring festival or a birding or other nature festival has several advantages including a guaranteed audience of substantial size and shared responsibility for identifying and locating exhibitors.

## **What is a good Fest location?**

A. If possible locate the Fest in a beautiful location at or near a wetland if possible so that wetland walks and wetland bird watching are possible. Locating a Fest at or near a wetland can also help with the ambiance of the Fest and public appreciation of wetland functions and values. Walking tours can be an important part of a Fest located at or near a wetland. We located our first Fest at the Emma Treadwell Thacher Nature Center on Thompson's Lake, New York near Albany. There was a forested wetland several hundred yards from the Center and other wetlands available for walking tours. We located our second Fest at the Five Rivers Environmental Center in Delmar, New York. Several wetlands were nearby. Wetland and birding walks were designed to visit these wetlands.

Location near an urban area will help draw crowds into the meeting. For example, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service held two Fests on the Amherst Common in Amherst, Massachusetts. The Common is in the center of Amherst and drew many passersby to the Fest. This location also provided food and beverages nearby and was a benefit to local merchants.

Ample, free parking will also help. Location at a facility with sufficient space for exhibits, displays, parking and other needs of the Fest is also essential. Sufficient space to move indoors in case of inclement weather is helpful. Other relevant questions include: Is the location easy to get to from population centers? Is the facility well known with locals and easily reached? This helps with attendance.

## What activities may be part of your Fest?

### A. Some activities include:

- Federal, state, and local agency wetland, stream, lake, floodplain program exhibits (materials, videos, local experts)
- Not-for-profit, land trust, academic institution, other wetland, stream, lake, floodplain exhibits
- Demonstrations of chair-caning and basket weaving with wetland plant materials
- Display of wetland plants including medicinal and poisonous wetland plants
- Wetland photographic exhibits
- Wetland oil, water color, pastels, etching, other art displays
- Native wetland plants nurseries displays
- Wildlife rehabilitators and wildlife exhibitors with an emphasis on wetland species (e.g., birds, beavers, muskrats, fish, wildflowers)
- Wetland videos concerning wetland functions and values, restoration, many other related topics
- Music (great if you can find a group or group that performs “environmental” songs)
- Fish tanks
- Distribution of free wetland, streams, floodplain, riparian, educational materials
- Fly tying exhibits
- Fly and reel casting
- Wetland and birding walks
- Self guiding wetland field trip
- Lectures and PowerPoint presentations (e.g., wetlands and birding 101, wetland restoration)
- “Ask the expert” table exhibits and panels
- Wetlands activities for children (e.g., wetland bingo)

## What are good activities for children?

A. We have found that Fests are very popular with children and a major portion of your Fest activities may best focus on children. Such activities may include:



- Wetland bingo
- Salamander tunnel (plastic culvert pipe)
- Frog calling contest
- Frog-hop sack races
- Wetland coloring books
- Face painting
- Fly tying
- Bead stringing (dried wetland berries)
- Wetland flower pressing
- Wetland art contests (need to be set up in advance with schools)

We have found that Wow, the Wonders of Wetlands is an excellent source of wetland games and activities for children.

## How much money do you need to conduct a Fest?

A. This, of course, depends what you do. Fests conducted over a many day period with rented facilities may be quite expensive and require \$3,000 to \$10,000 or more.

On the other hand, one-day wetland fests at free public or not for profit facilities may be put together at a very low cost and entirely with volunteer labor. The first Fest we conducted had no funding and was conducted entirely with voluntary labor. The second one had support from EPA which certainly made things easier. With a little funding we were able to:

- Rent tents for outside exhibits
- Rent display tables
- Purchase apples and candy to be given away to children
- Prepare free CD's and educational materials

## Where can you find funding support for your Fest?

A. We were able to fund the second fest we conducted with government agency (EPA) support. It may be possible to raise money to pay for your Fest in a number of different ways.

- Applying for a grant from a foundation or from a government agency such as a wetland or wildlife agency.
- Soliciting donations of funds or services from local businesses (e.g., seedlings from local plant nurseries).
- Soliciting donations from cooperating not-for- profits.
- Soliciting donations from individuals interested in wetlands, birding.
- Selling food at the Fest (e.g. hot dogs, popcorn, cookies, and cake).
- Selling wetland t-shirts, mugs.
- Conducting a book sale.
- Conducting a silent auction.

## How can we reduce the costs of our Fest?

A. We have found the following to be useful in reducing costs (perhaps stating the obvious):

- Utilize free host facility
- Utilize the services of cooperating organizations to help organize, publicize, and conduct the Fest
- Use volunteers extensively
- Make the Fest part of an existing annual Fall Fest or Spring Fest





## How can you best publicize your Fest?

A. We have used a variety of techniques to publicize our Fests:

- Creation of a web page and posting to the Internet.
- Creation of a Fest brochure and poster and posting in food stores, gasoline stations, general stores, schools, other locations throughout the region.
- Notification of local newspapers (often public service announcements are free).
- Contacting science teachers at schools.
- Contacting radio stations, TV stations, cable television stations for free public service announcements.
- Direct mail to schools; inclusion in school newsletters that go home to parents.

## What are some major “do’s in designing and carrying out a fest?”

A. Some do’s include:

- Keep it simple. Too much complexity in scheduling or any other aspect often leads to problems.
- Keep the crowd together as much as possible (don’t disperse the exhibits too much).
- Pick a high visibility date and good location.
- Make the event a joint activity with cooperating organizations, share responsibilities.
- Make the festival fun for both the audience and exhibitors.
- Have plenty of child-oriented activities.
- Prepare for rain.
- Acquire event insurance if the host organization does not have such insurance.

## What are some major “don’ts”?

A. Some don’ts include:

- Don’t make it too complex.
- Don’t make it too academic.
- Don’t incorporate any element which will be unsafe for the public.



## Where do you go to get more assistance?

A. Often there are individuals in the community who have had experience in conducting festivals who may be able to help with organization.

Federal, state, and local government wetland agency technical staff may be able to help with locating exhibitors and publicizing the Fest.

## SUGGESTED READINGS

Kesselheim, A., and B. Slattery. 1995. Wow! The Wonders of Wetlands. Environmental Concern, St. Michaels, Maryland

Millar, Nancy S. How to Organize a Birding or Nature Festival. American Birding Association. <http://www.americanbirding.org/programs/consfestlr.pdf>

American Birding Association. List of birding trails in the 50 states. Excellent. <http://americanbirding.org/resources/birdingtrails.html>

## SUGGESTED WEBSITES

<http://www.birdingamerica.com/links.htm>  
Birding Links. Excellent site with many links.

<http://www.fws.gov/partners/>  
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program. Working Together to Restore Habitat.

<http://www.audubon.org/campaign/wetland/map.html>  
Nation Audubon Society Wetlands Campaign. Audubon at Work on Wetlands. A great resource for any wetlands advocate.

<http://www.americanbirding.org>  
American Birding Association. Much excellent material and many excellent links.

<http://www.savingcranes.org/>  
International Crane Foundation.

<http://www.audubon.org/bird/iba/index.html>  
Audubon. Important Bird Areas Program: A Global Currency for Bird Conservation.

<http://www.npwrc.usgs.gov/resource/othrdata/chekbird/bigtoc.htm>  
U.S. Geological Survey. Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center. Bird Checklists of the United States. Excellent site.

<http://www.geocities.com/ntgreencitizen/birdsandwetlands.html> Birds and Wetlands. If You Care About Birds, You Care About Wetlands

<http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/nature/birding/festivals/>  
Texas Parks and Wildlife. Birding and Nature Festivals of Texas

<http://www.horiconmarshbirdclub.com/birdfest/events.cfm> Horicon Marsh Bird Festival  
<http://www.gunflint-trail.com/planner/birding.html>  
Gunflint Trail Vacation Planner – Birding

<http://www.twingroves.district96.k12.il.us/Wetlands/Swamp/SwampFest.html>  
Kildeer Countryside Virtual Wetlands Preserve. Swamp Tour: Swamp Fest

<http://www.crestonwildlife.ca/visit/vosprey/ospreyfest.html>

Creston Valley Wildlife Management Area. 2005 Osprey Festival

<http://northeast.fws.gov/wetlandfest/>

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The Wetland Education and Nature Arts Festival, Amherst, Massachusetts.

<http://www.fb-net.org/fb-links.htm>

Farm Bill Network. Links to Farm Bill Programs

<http://www.epa.gov/owow/birds/help.html>

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Bird Conservation. What You Can Do?



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An electronic version of this brochure is available in PDF at:

<http://www.aswm.org/brochure/wetlandfestival.pdf>