Wetland Plants are Awesome

Wetland plants, called hydrophytes or hydrophytic vegetation, are the most obvious indicator that you are in a wetland and they are some of the most interesting plants! We will cover just a few including the tall, stately cattail, stinky skunk cabbage, trees with knees, the sponge-like sphagnum, and plants that eat "meat".

All plants form the beginning of the food web. In wetlands many waterfowl species as well as muskrats and beaver consume the seeds or the tubers (an underground storage organ like a potato) of wetlands plants. More importantly, much of the plant material enters the food chain as **detritus**, (dead particulate organic material which typically includes the bodies or fragments of dead organisms and plant material). Detritus is eaten by invertebrates, which are eaten by fish, which are eaten by other wildlife. A variety of organisms also use plants as cover or habitat.

Wetlands plants are also power houses at improving water quality by removing nutrients and some toxins from water. Moreover, wetland plants can reduce peak flood events and stabilize soils.

Skunk Cabbage

Your first stop is near a swampy place. Poking up through the snow (if there's any left) you're likely to see a most unusual plant. If you can get close enough, take a sniff. Whew! Does this plant stink? You've just encountered skunk cabbage, a plant that actually generates enough heat to melt the snow around it. The skunk cabbage blooms long before any other spring wildflower. It also looks very different from most other wildflowers. Instead of having petals, there is a single leaf-like looking sheath called a "spathe." It is hood-shaped and maroon streaked with greenish-yellow. (Can you find it in this picture?) The spathe protects the "spadix," which is a fleshy club-shaped spike. The spadix looks fuzzy because it is crowded with tiny flowers with no petals. Its bad odor attracts bees, flies, and gnats which pollinate it. Large leaves emerge later and grow to the size of rhubarb leaves. (Can you find them in the pictures?)

http://eekwi.org/veg/plants/skunkcabbage.htm

Pickerel Weed

Pickerelweed is a valuable food source for large variety of aquatic and terrestrial animals. The large leaves and clusters of stems provide an excellent sanctuary for fish, birds, swimming mammals, amphibians and reptiles. Pickerelweed has a dense root system and stems which provide a wave barrier for protecting shoreline sediment from erosion. Pickerelweed received its name from the pickerel fish, with which this plant is thought to coexist.

Edible parts: Pickerel seeds are tasty when roasted but they can be eaten raw or cooked. They are best collected when they fall into your hand right off the plant. They can be ground and made into flour or toss some seeds into your bread recipe. The young leaves can be eaten as greens; boil older leaves before ingesting. Young stalks are also edible.
Caution: Be sure that the water source you harvest pickerel from is not polluted.

Sphagnum Moss

What is sphagnum moss?

One of the most important plant species of the bog is sphagnum moss. It is a genus of approximately 380 accepted species of mosses. Thick clumps of sphagnum moss form mats on the bog's surface growing so close that it forms a cushiony "bog mat" that floats on top of the water. The mat can be strong enough to support the weight of several large moose. These accumulations also provide habitat for a wide array of peatland plants, including orchids and carnivorous plants.

Accumulations of sphagnum can store water, since both living and dead plants can hold large quantities of water inside their cells. The moss absorbs water, similar to a sponge, and may hold 16–26 times as much water as their dry weight, depending on the species.

Sphagnum makes bog water acidic. Sphagnum peat moss refers to the partially decomposed remains of sphagnum moss. This material is collected at the dense, bottom layers of bogs, where decomposing material compresses within a highly acidic solution. Sphagnum peat moss has helpful uses in the garden because of its water retaining properties. The peat can also be cut into blocks and removed for use as fuel.

Common Cattail

This wetland plant is very common to Wisconsin's marshes, ponds, ditches, rivers and lakes. Cattails grow in wet areas in dense groups. You'll see the 2-10 foot tall sword-like leaves pointing up to the sky with a hearty stalk standing between them. Atop the stalk you'll see its signature long oval brown spike. Above the spike will appear a yellowish flower between May and July. In September or October, after the flower has been pollinated, you'll see the brown flower head pop open and get very fluffy. This means that the seeds are ripe and ready to float through the air in cottonball-like clumps of seeds ready to start new plants.

Cattails are very important for many animals. They provide a place for the red-winged blackbird to build a nest to hide their young, a place for fish to hide or nest under the water, and a food source for young ducklings and muskrats. Cattails also give us humans many products. Their starchy rhizomes (a horizontal root-like stem that sends out roots and leaves) are ripe for eating in fall and winter, all you have to do is peel and cook them like potatoes. The rhizomes can also be pounded into flour to make other foods. If you're looking for a tasty spring treat, try the young shoots raw or cooked. Immature flower spikes are great boiled and eaten like corn. The slender tall leaves aren't for eating, but they made excellent material for weaving baskets, floor mats, and

home-building materials in days past. If you're ever in a bind for something warm or soft, use the soft-fluffy fruits to stuff a pillow, or insulate a sleeping bag or jacket.

Cattails are cool!

http://eekwi.org/veg/plants/cattail.htm

Bald Cypress

Although many conifers are evergreen, bald cypress trees are deciduous conifers that shed their needle-like leaves in the fall. In fact, they get the name "bald" cypress because they drop their leaves so early in the season.
The feature that bald cypresses are really known for, though, is their "knees." These aren't knees like ours, but rather they are a special kind of root. The technical term for the knees is "pneumatophore," which means "air bearing." **Pneumatophores** grow from horizontal roots just below the surface and protrude upward from the ground or water. Since bald cypresses often grow in swampy conditions, it's thought that the pneumatophores function to transport air to drowned roots underground. They also might help to anchor the tree.

Growing up to 120 feet tall with a trunk 3 to 6 feet in diameter, bald cypresses are frequently referred to as giants!

Bald cypresses have very important roles in the wild. Since they tend to grow along rivers and in wetlands, they are excellent at soaking up floodwaters and preventing erosion. They also trap pollutants and prevent them from spreading. Frogs, toads, and salamanders use bald cypress swamps as breeding grounds. Wood ducks nest in hollow trunks, catfish spawn in the submerged hollow logs, and raptors like bald eagles nest in the treetops. Seeds are eaten by wild turkey, wood ducks, evening grosbeak, water birds, and squirrels.

http://www.nwf.org/Wildlife/Wildlife-Library/Plants/Bald-Cypress.aspx