

Great Salt Marsh Island

14 acres

Great Salt Marsh Preservation Story

In 2004 the possibility of the development of Great Salt Marsh Island was brought to the attention of the Aspetuck Land Trust by the Ash Creek Conservancy. The Conservancy also indicated that the current owner was interested in selling the property. The Land Trust contacted the Fairfield Land Acquisition Commission and found that they were also interested in preserving the property. Fairfield 1st Selectman Ken Flato negotiated a purchase price of \$45,000 for the 14 acre island. Since Great Salt Marsh Island was bisected by the Fairfield-Bridgeport town line, we agreed to split the cost and the land with the Town of Fairfield. The Aspetuck Land Trust was to take ownership of the 7 acres located in Bridgeport and the Town the 7 acres located in Fairfield. In September of 2005, Great Salt Marsh Island was purchased and this important environmental and cultural resource was preserved forever.

Visiting Great Salt Marsh Island

There is no direct access to the Island. Due to its environmentally sensitive nature this is probably a good thing. The Island is easily viewable from both Fairfield and Bridgeport.

- The best location in Bridgeport is from the sand spit located at the mouth of the creek off of Gilman Street. From that point viewers can walk down Gilman Street to see the entire island. At Balmforth street, looking west towards Fairfield, at low tide you can see the remains of the foundation for the old corduroy road that was constructed in colonial times (see Ash Creek History)

- The best location in Fairfield is from the Ash Creek Open Space located at the end of Turney Road. Drive past the gate house, take an immediate left, drive through the boaters parking area to the Open Space parking. The island is visible from this area, but a walk out the narrow peninsula that divides Ash Creek from South Benson Marina provides better views.



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Ash Creek Flora and Fauna

The Ash Creek estuary is a lively place indeed! On any given day you are bound to be treated to a glimpse of its many inhabitants...if you look carefully. Low tide brings out the best.

As you walk along the edge of the marsh area you will find an army of fiddler crabs scavenging for food which includes both plant and animal remains. Also look for the broken shells of mussels which live with barnacles on the rocky jetty alongside the marina and clams and oysters.

The salt marshes draw a crowd of fish, both big and small. If you happen to walk the trail as the tide is rising, look for minnows, mummichugs and killifish. These fish and the marsh grasses are food for a variety of larger fish as well. Several of the popular recreational and commercial species, including winter flounder and bluefish, breed and spend their early lives in these protective food-filled marshes.

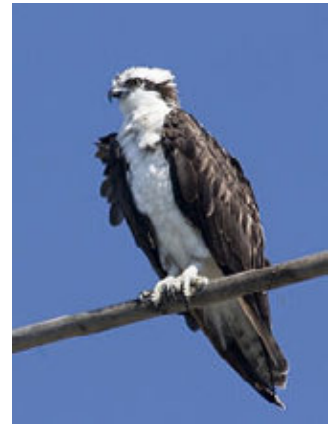
Land animals, such as raccoons, opossums and many marsh birds also benefit from the rich produce of the marsh, feeding on clams, crustaceans, and fish, as well as the roots of plants. Several of their burrows are visible in the banks of the upland slope.

Black cherry trees along the upland ridge are perfect roosting spots for herons. Many of the mussel and clam shells on the marsh trail are dropped by these birds from their perches.

Other conspicuous avian inhabitants are the marsh wrens, which dart among the grasses and eat their seeds, and the brilliant blue and white kingfisher which skillfully nose-dives into the water after fish and makes its home in the sandy hillside.

Great Salt Marsh Island is noted for its nesting pair of Osprey's. Their nest is at the top of a tall tower visible on the island. Ospreys return the same nesting site each year about the end of March. For the last several years we have had the same pair successfully reproducing. In June it is a wondrous sight to see mom or dad swooping in the area in search of food for their children.

Also seen in the area are Yellow Crowned Night Heron's which are on the CT DEP list of species of Greatest Conservation Need.



Osprey



Yellow Crowned Night Heron



Birdwatching tour lead by Milan Bull, Director, CT Audubon June 2006

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Ash Creek History

The origin of the name "Ash Creek" is not known for certain. Early Colonial and British maps show the creek as the Uncoway or Fairfield River. Later records refer to Ash Creek as Ash House Creek, perhaps alluding to the presence of an ash house, for lye-making, on its banks. The most likely source of the present name was the British invasion and burning of the Town which left the creek, and the entire town center, covered with ashes.

Early Fairfielders sailed in and out of the creek when it was a thriving harbor, some brought wheat and other grains to the creek's grist mills, and some traveled from today's Fairfield Ash Creek Open Space across an old road to Black Rock.

For more than a hundred years after Roger Ludlow's settlement of Fairfield in 1639, Ash Creek was the Town's main harbor. The water provided a good supply of fish and shellfish and the salt marshes, which surrounded the harbor, provided pasture land for horses and cattle.

When Fairfield reached a population of 4,500, in 1750, Mr. Peter Penfield constructed grist mills on either side of the creek by damming both sides of the river to Great Marsh Island. The mills, like others in Town, became centers of activity, supplying vital foodstuffs to the townspeople.

At practically the same time the Penfield Mills were built, Fairfielders constructed a short cut to Black Rock -- a wooden corduroy road and bridge which connected an old town road on the Ash Creek Open Space with Balmforth Street in Black Rock. Many a resident helped build the bridge since the Town levied a tax for either labor or money for public works projects.

Owing in part to this new bridge, wharves, stores, and residences grew quickly in Black Rock which soon replaced Ash Creek as Fairfield's main port. By 1790, due to its considerable depth, Black Rock Harbor had become the official port of entry for Fairfield County and a lively international port and boat building center. The bridge which helped spark this activity was destroyed in 1802 but its sturdy remains rest along the marsh's edge for all to see at low tide. See picture of remains of bridge foundation.

Also in 1790, the Town offered 90 English pounds to Mr. Penfield to remove his dams and allow the re-entry of eels, clams and shad which were vanishing from the creek. He refused the offer and the tidal flow of Ash Creek continued to fuel the mills until the 1840's. As you view Great Salt Marsh Island at low tide you will see some of the old dam stones on the western side.

This island marsh is the only tidal wetland remaining in the area that has not been filled, diked for flood relief or ditched for mosquito control purposes – it is essentially in its natural state.

The Town of Fairfield and the Aspetuck Land Trust are proud to have preserved this important part or the area's history.