

Its soggy acres – rich in flora, fauna and folklore – abound in mystery

Hockomock Swamp

Largest swamp in region seen as vital resource

By Beth Daley
SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE

Signs to the sprawling 6,000-acre Hockomock Swamp are hard to find. Many residents in the six towns it spans – Norton, Easton, West Bridgewater, Bridgewater, Raynham and Taunton – do not know exactly where or what it is, town and state officials said. Few people enter its

dark recesses.

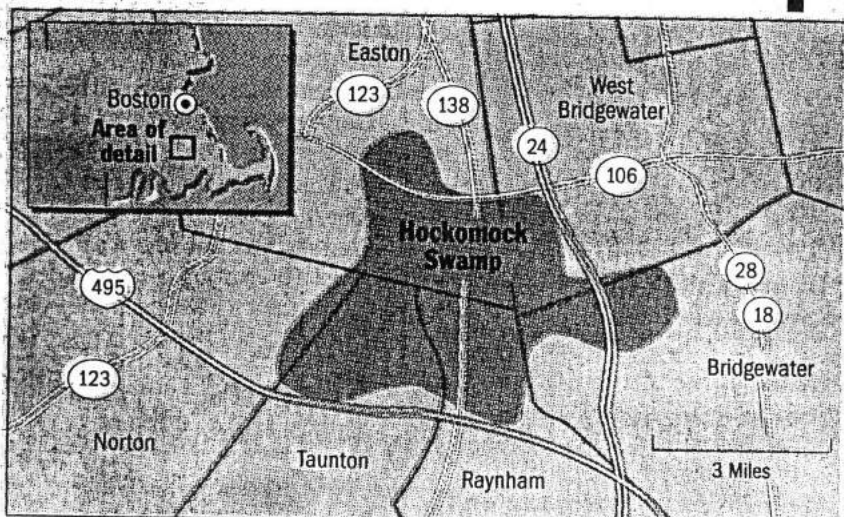
But in this swamp, the largest in southern New England, brilliant wildflowers bloom and wild blueberries thrive. Waterways run rich and red with iron, and thin reeds and flowering plants act as kidneys for billions of gallons of water.

The Hockomock also is home to vital encephalitis research, a 5,000-acre state Division of Fisheries and Wildlife-owned management area open to hunters, fishermen and hikers, archeological secrets and vivid folklore spanning thousands of years.

“You know, people think it is this big ditch, and it’s not,” said Ann Hubbard of Rehoboth, an avid walker and canoer of the Hockomock. “There is so much to do. And no one really uses it.”



The blaze of a cardinal flower can be seen in the less traveled spots in Hockomock Swamp.



GLOBE STAFF MAP

FYI: Resources

There are several resources for learning about and exploring the Hockomock Swamp:

- For maps, safety and hunting information, send a self-addressed, legal-size stamped envelope to the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife, 195 Bournedale Road, Buzzards Bay, MA 02532. For answers to other questions, call (508) 759-3406.

- For information about how to preserve the Hockomock Swamp, which lies in the Taunton River Watershed, call the Taunton River Watershed Alliance at (508) 697-5700.

- For additional maps and

K-12 educational programs that can be adapted to the Hockomock Swamp, call Marion Larson, education specialist for the Division of Fisheries and Wildlife in the Westborough field office at (508) 792-7270.

- For middle and high school educational programs and related teacher courses studying non-point pollution in and around the Hockomock Swamp, contact Faith Burbank of the Taunton River Watershed Connections Project of the University of Massachusetts Cooperative Extension, Plymouth County office, at (617) 293-3541 or (617) 740-4913.

Even with its 1990 state designation as an area of critical environmental concern, those who love the swamp fear lack of knowledge and disinterest could mean its eventual demise. It has been an illicit dumping ground for refuse from tires to beer bottles. Housing, commercial and industrial developments are edging in on the swamp, sparking fears of pollution.

"It's such a fragile place," said Gail Price, who lives on Lake Nippenicket in Bridgewater, on the border of the swamp. "Of course I worry about development. It's important people know about this area."

While English settlers knew about the swamp, they steered clear of it. It was a place that harbored Indians, most of them Wampanoags. In 1675, Massachusetts's son, known to the English as King Philip, used the swamp as a fortress in an 18-month war with

HOCKOMOCK, Page SOUTH 4

Huge wetland abounds in history and wildlife

■ HOCKOMOCK

Continued from Page SOUTH 1

nearby settlements. The war left 600 dead and 13 towns destroyed, according to the booklet "Hockomock, Wonder Wetland," published about 30 years ago by those intent on saving the swamp.

Named by the Indians, Hockomock literally means "spirit of low-lying places." Hockomock, or Hobba-mock, was associated with death. But seeing the spirit after a challenging time in the swamp was thought to bring honor. Several campsites on high islands in the swamp were used by the Native

Americans.

These days, archeologists and sometimes visitors still find signs of early life. Old bog iron huts, where colonists mined nodules of iron found in the swamp bottom, can also be found.

Curtiss Hoffman, a professor of archeology at Bridgewater State College and president of the Massachusetts Archeological Society, conducted a dig in the swamp between 1979 and 1981 and uncovered a variety of tools used by Native Americans. When I-495 was built through the Hockomock in the late 1970s,

HOCKOMOCK, Page SOUTH 5

■ HOCKOMOCK

Continued from Page SOUTH 4

other archeological digs were conducted as a prerequisite to the highway being built.

"There is still so much to discover," Hoffman said. "People have this attitude toward swamps, they say, 'Ugh.' But perhaps it's not a bad thing, because the swamps have survived the pressures of development."

The Hockomock would be hard to develop, in any case. With a variable water table, the swamp is part of the Taunton River Watershed, the second largest watershed in the state. While the swamp is mostly soggy marshland and small ponds of open water, there are some forested areas. Atlantic white cedar trees live in the swamp, as do red maples. In upland areas, pine and hemlock can be found.

Farmer Charlie McNamara of Stoughton is allowed by the state Division of Fisheries and Wildlife to farm about 100 acres in exchange for leaving grain for wildlife and quail.

Most of the Hockomock used to be privately held by scores of owners. About 30 years ago, the state Division of Fisheries and Wildlife began acquiring what is now more than 5,000 acres. Some of the parcels are not contiguous, and some parcels in the middle of the swamp still are privately owned, but the owners have never been found. The state continues to try to acquire more land in and adjacent to the 6,000-acre swamp.

Unlike parks, the state does little upkeep on properties like the Hockomock, relying instead on hunters and other visitors to keep trails open. There are several good hiking trails

that can take a visitor several miles through the swamp. Some hunting is allowed all year, although it is most popular in the fall and winter, for deer, waterfowl and various other animals.

HOCKOMOCK, Page SOUTH 6

■ HOCKOMOCK

Continued from Page SOUTH 5

In 1990, through the efforts of Price and others concerned about a mall proposed near Lake Nippenicket, about 16,800 acres, including and surrounding the Hockomock, were named a state area of critical environmental concern. The designation, one of 22 in the state, holds proposed development to more stringent environmental review.

The review further protects about a dozen species in or near the swamp considered to be of special concern, threatened or endangered, according to Tom French of the state Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program. More common animals such as coyotes, skunks and deer are found in great numbers. Fish are plentiful, and the area is host to scores of bird species, according to Wayne Petersen, ornithologist for Massachusetts Audubon.

Fishing is very popular in the swamp, bird watching more difficult because it can be hard to get access to birds deep in the swamp. Trapping used to be common there but has declined with the popularity of fur for outerwear. James Gallery, property manager for Natural Resource Trust of Easton, said he and others used to trap muskrat, raccoon, otter and mink in the swamp.

"It is a valuable place," said Petersen, who lives near the swamp and visits it. "It has a very important status to southern New England."

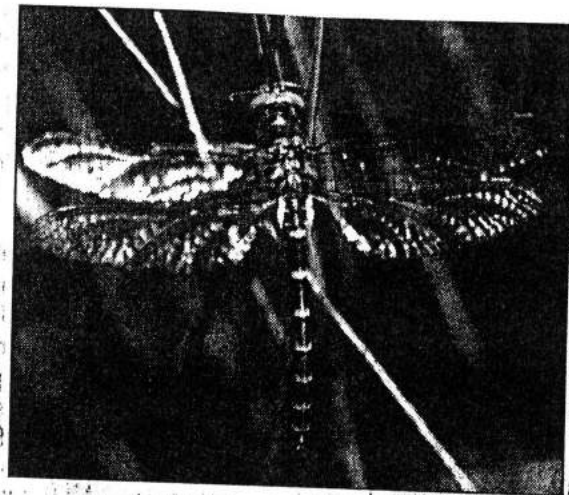
The swamp also is a vital holding area for water that otherwise could flood surrounding towns. The towns of Raynham and West Bridgewater are using wells in or near the swamp. Easton is researching future uses of the Hockomock as a water source.

Other research goes on in the Hockomock as well. The state Division of Fisheries and Wildlife, as well as some private bird observatories, conduct searches for endangered species. The state Department of Public Health tests mosquitoes in the swamp weekly for eastern equine encephalitis, a sometimes deadly virus transmitted from birds to humans via mosquitoes. Nick Komar of the Harvard School of Public Health is in the second year of a minimum three-year encephalitis research project, testing birds for the virus.

Still, Hubbard, Kitty Doherty of the Taunton River Watershed Alliance and others said the area has been largely untapped as an educational resource, especially for the public schools. A \$150,000 grant was given last year to the Taunton River Watershed Connections Project of the University of Massachusetts Cooperative Extension for a three-year program attempting to get teachers and students to study pollution prevention in the Taunton River Watershed, including the swamp. Environmental education programs that can be adapted to the Hockomock are also available through the state Division of Fisheries and Wildlife.

Those who know the swamp said it will take a long time before people appreciate all that the Hockomock offers, including its beauty. They said it is hard for a swamp, particularly the Hockomock, with its gloomy image and scary folklore, to rid itself of such stigmas.

"But you can't beat it, especially this time of year," said Wayne Southworth of Easton, who lives on the edge of the swamp. "It's immense, it's beautiful. I'm out there so much."



C. RAITHE

■ **RINGED BOGHAUNTER DRAGONFLY.** Found in acidic swamps and bogs that are surrounded by woodlands, the boghaunter's body is brown with an orange-brown face and blue eyes. The adult body is 1.5 inches with a wingspan of 1 inch. Young feed on aquatic invertebrates, while the adult dragonfly feeds in-flight on smaller insects. Listed as an endangered species in the state, its habitat is being destroyed by development and is thought to be affected by insecticide spraying.



LEO KENNEY

■ **BLUE-SPOTTED SALAMANDER.** Mostly found underground, this long, slender salamander feeds on insects and worms. It lays its eggs in seasonal ponds in forested areas. The salamander, with its dark gray body and sky-blue dots, can grow to be 4 to 5½ inches. It is a species of special concern in the state, and its habitat is being destroyed by development.

Several rare species inhabit swamp

About a dozen plants and animals found in and around the Hockomock Swamp are categorized as rare on the state's Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program.

The program keeps track of species in three categories - of special concern, threatened and endangered,

which includes the most seriously threatened. Some species are so rare that their whereabouts are not made public for fear they might be further endangered.

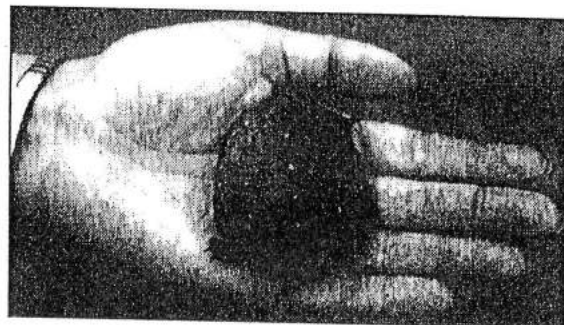
Of the more abundant threatened species, here are four that inhabit the Hockomock:





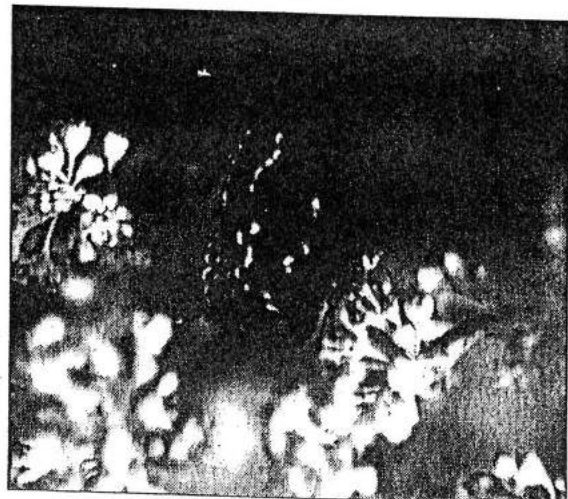
GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / MARK WILSON

Nick Komar of the Harvard School of Public Health makes his way through a tunneling path in the phragmites. He is in the second year of an eastern equine encephalitis research project, testing birds in the swamp for the virus.



TERRY GRAHAM

■ **SPOTTED TURTLE.** Also known as the polka-dot turtle, the spotted turtle is found in wet areas, where it feeds on insects, worms and tadpoles. Adults reach 3.5 to 4.5 inches in length. Orange and yellow spotting often is found around the head and neck. A species of special concern, its habitat is being overtaken by development.



C. RAITHEI

■ **HESSEL'S HAIRSTREAK.** Found only in Atlantic white cedar swamps, such as the Hockomock, the caterpillar feeds exclusively on new growth of the cedar. The adult butterfly feeds on the nectar of nearby flowers. The underside of the wing has patches of brilliant green and white. The upper side of the wings is dark brown in the male and reddish in the female. Wingspan is seven-eighths to 1 inch. A species of special concern in the state, this butterfly is not found in all Atlantic white cedar swamps possibly because of exposure to pesticide spraying for gypsy moths.

THE HOCKOMOCK SWAMP



An evening flight of starlings, blackbirds and grackles prepares to settle into a thick stand of phragmites in the swamp.

GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / MARK WILSON

Legends and myths rise from the murk

By Beth Daley

SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE

Indians believed spirit of death lived there, while others saw visions of evil

One legend holds that the spirit of an insane woman glides through the Hockomock Swamp in a billowing nightgown. Others say the ghost of the Wampanoag King Philip still roams the swamp. A group dedicated to paranormal investigation is convinced the Hockomock is home to strange creatures and prehistoric looking birds. "Swamps become the accumula-

tors of people's thoughts — often negative thoughts," said Curtiss Hoffman, an archeology professor at Bridgewater State College, president of the Massachusetts Archeological Society and a student of the Hockomock.

Unlike the English settlers who displaced the Native Americans, the Wampanoags liked the Hockomock swamp. Their spirit of death, signify-

ing neither good nor bad, lived there and in other New England swamps, according to Hoffman and William Simmons' 1986 book "Spirit of the New England Tribes" (University Press of New England). Hobbamock, later Hockomock, appeared to Native American tribes in the shape of a snake and was considered a sacred vision, according to Simmons' book.

English settlers misinterpreted the Indians' awe of the Hockomock Swamp and began to believe the southeastern Massachusetts swamp was evil. The swamp was said to have claimed the lives of several young English girls, according to several historical accounts, including the booklet "Hockomock, Wonder Wetland," published three decades ago by preservationists.

To this day, stories of weird creatures and unusual birds sighted in the swamp remain alive through historians, old-timers who trapped in the swamp and younger people who grew up around it.

One tale, recounted by Hoffman and other sources, is of a young woman, the daughter of a wealthy landowner on the south side of the swamp, who was disowned by her father. After her young husband died, she was left with a young son to raise at the edge of the swamp, where she quietly went mad. People have claimed her ghost haunts the swamp. Hoffman researched the story and dug up what he concluded was part of the son's unfinished homestead, near the swamp where he mined bog iron.

There also is the story of King Philip, the Wampanoag warrior who resisted the influence of settlers. Ultimately the two sides went to war. Killed in 1676, Philip was beheaded. According to some historical accounts, the head was on display for 25 years in Plymouth.

However, some Indian legends dispute that and indicate Philip's head is buried between Taunton and

Mount Hope in Bristol, R.I. Every three generations, King Philip appears and reveals to a medicine man where the head is buried, according to Simmons. Some descendants of Philip believe his spirit is in the area.

Other stories are the kind, according to Hoffman and other historians, that come with the turf of dark, unexplored places. Stories of people mysteriously disappearing, lovers seeking privacy in the swamp coming across ghosts or talking bodies. Stories of trolls and mysterious

Some folk tales could have practical explanations, said Kitty Doherty of the Taunton River Watershed Alliance. Phosphorous in the water could explain mysterious green glows or lights. A person who is lost for some time could suffer physical effects that lead to imagining things.

But those explanations do little to persuade Joseph DeAndrade of Bridgewater the Hockomock is a safe area.

Head of the Paranormal Investigation Organization, he and his group claim the Hockomock is the most dangerous place of an area known to them as the Bridgewater Triangle.

"It's a very dangerous area, especially the swamp," said DeAndrade. "That is the worst place. I would not go in there alone."

The Triangle, with its angles resting in Abington, Freetown and Rehoboth, is the scene of odd sightings of creatures, according to DeAndrade. A creature known as Big Foot has been sighted in the triangle area, he said. Also, one of the more bizarre creature sightings in the swamp was of a black dog with red eyes, he said.

Wayne Southworth, who lives near the swamp in Easton, said he has heard numerous stories about the swamp. "It's amazing these tales," said Southworth. "But you get out there and get lost, it can be scary. You hear some strange sounds and noises, it can shake you."

Accessing, with care, the Hockomock

For those looking to enter the Hockomock Swamp for hiking, bird watching and boating, Dick Turner, wildlife manager for the state Division of Fisheries and Wildlife, urges caution.

The area, most of it owned by his division, is used by hunters after waterfowl, deer and other prey. Brightly colored clothes should be worn if using the swamp during hunting seasons.

Also, while no evidence of eastern equine encephalitis has been found this year in humans or mosquitoes in or near the swamp, the state Department of Public Health and those who frequent the swamp said it is a good idea to wear insect repellent for several types of pests, including mosquitoes.

There are several access points for the Hockomock Swamp:

NORTON

▶ Take Bay Road north from Taunton. Soon after crossing into Norton turn right onto Toad Island Road. Enter through the Erwin S. Wilder Wildlife Management Area.

▶ Take Bay Road north. Turn right onto Lincoln Street. After one mile, turn right onto unnamed dirt road. Enter at the end of the street.

▶ Take Bay Road north. Turn right onto Lincoln Street. After two miles take a right onto an unnamed dirt road. Enter at the end of the street.

▶ Take Bay Road north. Canoe landing on Snake River.

RAYNHAM-EASTON LINE

▶ Enter where the high tension wires intersect with Route 138, near the Raynham dog track. The swamp is on both sides of the road. Heading south on 138, walk in on the

right side to intersect with the old Taunton-Boston railroad bed.

BRIDGEWATER

▶ Take Pleasant Street across from the Mobil Station on Route 104, near Route 24. Bear right onto Maple Street. Parking area at end.

▶ Boat ramp on Lake Nippenicke off Route 104.

WEST BRIDGEWATER

▶ Canoe landing on the Hockomock River off Route 106 by the Easton line.

EASTON

▶ Enter off Route 106, just west of the Southeastern Regional Technical Vocational Institute. A dirt path on the right opens to walking paths that lead to the old Taunton-Boston railroad bed.