

PARKER RIVER N.W.R. PROPOSES TO DESTROY THE HABITAT OF RARE, THREATENED AND ENDANGERED MARSH BIRDS

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service has set forth a proposal to remove a portion of the dike and allow the free flow of saltwater from the Plum Island Sound into the one-hundred acre North Pool freshwater marsh impoundment on the Parker River National Wildlife Refuge in an uncertain and unsuitable attempt to convert the site to a salt marsh. Such an action will destroy one of the largest and most important freshwater wetlands in Massachusetts. The North Pool has a long history of providing critical habitat for many species of freshwater marsh birds and animals, currently including breeding-season populations of FIVE state-listed "Endangered," "Threatened," or "Special Concern" bird species as designated by the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife. These are American Bittern, Least Bittern, Northern Harrier, King Rail, and Common Moorhen.

Conversely, little is to be gained by converting the area to salt marsh, but much will be lost. With many thousands of acres of salt marsh surrounding the area, another hundred acres of salt marsh at this site is of comparatively low value. None of the above mentioned rare bird species are nearly as likely to breed in a salt marsh. Additionally, the conversion of this pool to salt marsh is a far from certain outcome. The result of a "passive restoration," simply breaching the dike and allowing in the tide, may be a brackish marsh and a resultant hundred-acre monoculture bed of the undesirable invasive Phragmites reed. We recognize the refuge's important mission to manage for various nationally threatened saltmarsh species, but those species are doing very well in the thousands of acres of salt marsh on the refuge. It is the fresh-marsh species listed above that are threatened in the region, and management for these species should be a foregone conclusion.

Furthermore, removing a portion of the dike and allowing an unrestricted normal high tide into what is now the North Pool will also cause the tidal inundation and immediate death of much of the critically important Hellcat forest and thickets. These swampy woodlands provide a vital feeding and resting stopover for the full gamut of neotropical migrant landbirds including hummingbirds, flycatchers, vireos, thrushes, and warblers. Astronomical and storm tides will be much higher and cause even more extensive damage to the island's swamps, forests and thickets.

All of the state-listed rare marsh birds (and their habitats) listed above are fully protected by both the Massachusetts Endangered Species Act (M.G.L. c.131A) and the Massachusetts Wetlands Protection Act (M.G.L. c.131, s.40 and regulations 310 CMR 10.00), and the federal Coastal Zone Management Act makes these state regulations enforceable on federal property. Any alteration of this wetland will be an action contrary to and contemptible of both the letter and intent of state and federal regulations designed to protect rare birds and their habitats.

The refuge will be a poorer place if the North Pool fresh-water marsh is destroyed. It will be poorer in species diversity. A fresh marsh is a far more valuable asset than a salt or brackish marsh at this site: more valuable in terms of providing habitat for state-listed species, and more valuable in terms of overall diversity of biota.

We, the Committee to Save the North Pool, therefore strongly oppose this proposal. We call upon government regulatory agencies such as the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife and The Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program, along with private conservation organizations such as the Massachusetts Audubon Society, to unequivocally support the full protection of state-listed species and their habitats, and to support biological diversity over expediency or economic and political considerations, before it is too late. We urge all conservation-minded citizens to join us in both speech and action in opposition to the destruction of this very valuable freshwater habitat. Most important, we call upon the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service to withdraw this unwise proposal and make it refuge policy to manage the impoundment for these threatened species in perpetuity.

Sincerely,

The Committee to Save the North Pool (Jim Berry, Phil Brown, Tom Carrolan, Steve Grinley, Rick Heil (Chair), Sue McGrath, Steve Mirick, Tom Wetmore)