HABITAT
SALT MARSHES
Nature’s Nursery
A salt marsh serves many important roles in the Sound’s ecosystem:

- Nursery
- Filter
- Sponge
- Nutrient source
Mosquito ditches criss-cross the marsh; they were originally hand-dug to combat diseases carried by mosquitoes, which breed in pools of standing water.
Salt marshes have distinct zones of vegetation determined by elevation. **Tall saltmarsh cordgrass** grows along the water’s edge in the low marsh, which is regularly flooded by the tides; this grass tolerates changing water level, salt concentration, and temperature.
The high marsh is flooded only during storms or unusually high tides; saltmeadow cordgrass (l) and spikegrass (r) dominate this part of the marsh.
Salt pannes are small, “desert-like” depressions in the marsh, where soil salinity can reach levels that are almost twice that of full strength sea water.
Glasswort, a succulent plant, grows in the salt pannes, looking like a field of tiny, spineless cacti.
Sea lavender has delicate flowers and wiry stems, grows in salt pannes and low marsh.
Salt-marsh asters (l) and orach (r) grow among the grasses in the high marsh, adding color in spring and fall.
The **uplands** are a transition zone from marsh to forest, and are home to many shrubs and broad-leaved plants.
Common reed or Phragmites often grows in dense stands at the upland edge of disturbed marshes; the thick stems can reach 15 feet tall.
Sumac is a shrub that grows in the upland zone, providing food and shelter for birds.
Ribbed mussels grow along the edges of tidal creeks in salt marshes, providing food for terrestrial mammals and other organisms.
The longwrist hermit crab, carrying an empty snail shell on its back for protection, moves about in the shallows of the marsh and tidal flats.
Green crabs inhabit the Sound’s marshes, rocky areas and tidal flats; voracious eaters of bivalve shellfish, they also eat seaweed and worms.
Tidal creeks and mosquito ditches winding through the salt marsh shelter small fish from most larger predators, while blue crabs forage for prey in these creeks.
Striped killifish and other *minnows* rely on camouflage coloration and swimming in schools to confuse their predators.
Two sparrow species of special concern, the *seaside sparrow* (l) and the *saltmarsh sharp-tailed sparrow* (r), rely on larger patches of salt marsh in Long Island Sound as key habitat; they build their nests in the marsh grasses.
Egrets and herons are common sights along the salt marsh edge and shore, where they stand quietly in shallows waiting to spear fish; most are colonial tree nesters like this **great egret**.

A **green heron** watches and waits patiently for prey.
Osprey, or fish hawks, are a common sight around Long Island Sound, especially in eastern regions; they arrive in March to nest, mostly on manmade platforms which keep their nests out of the reach of predators.
Diamondback terrapins live in the Sound’s salt marshes, eating a mixture of plants and animals; locally, these reptiles were nearly hunted to extinction for their meat.