



<http://www.cumauriceriver.org>

## Wild Rice, Keystone Species

As ‘keystones’ can hold together brickwork, so ‘keystone species’ hold together our ecosystems. They ensure a viable habitat and food pyramid for creatures, great and small.

In the Maurice River watershed, *Zizania aquatica*, commonly known as wild rice, is one of our keystone species.

Birds, such as Sora Rails and Red Wing Black Birds, seek out this food when they migrate through our region each fall.

Birds aren’t the only ones who depend on wild rice meadows. Young species of striped bass, herring, sturgeon, American shad, and eel must spawn in the fresher, less salty waters of the Maurice River. They also feast upon microorganisms provided by detritus, or decaying vegetation, the wild rice creates.

Wild rice and other marsh vegetation also protect the upland areas: The root mass help hold the base mud of the tidal marsh together, to resist the destructive forces of flood and erosion.

Wild rice has had its challenges in the Maurice River watershed, though. Since the 1980s, increasing numbers of non-migratory Canada Geese have eaten and destroyed hundreds of acres of the plant. Fish and Wildlife biologists discovered that the geese, grazing on the wild, were pulling out entire plants from the soft, muddy substrate.

Because of the importance of wild rice, attention has to be placed on managing the population of Canada Geese. Doing so helps sustain wild rice in its role as a keystone species.