

Cattail

Typha angustifolia and *latifolia*

By Ellen Horowitz

Pheasant and white-tailed deer hunters often keep a close eye on cattail marshes during fall. The wet, dense areas hold roosters and some dandy bucks, especially later in the season.

I do the same when hunting, but I also explore wetlands during other times of year. In fact, a cattail marsh formed the watery laboratory of my youth. By day, my brothers and I immersed ourselves in the lives of turtles, tadpoles, lily pads, dragonflies, and frogs. But by night, the cattails formed a barrier we never crossed on account of hair-raising stories we'd heard about swamp monsters.

Cattails remain a mystery to most people, despite the plants' easy recognition, wide distribution, and abundance. Adding to its mystique is the cattail's colorful common names, which include cat-of-nine tails, punk, corndog grass, water torch, and candlewick.

Where and how they grow

Montana is home to two species: the native broad-leaved cattail and the introduced narrow-leaved cattail. Both grow in marshes, ponds, sloughs, roadside ditches, and other wetlands. These resilient plants tolerate flooding and withstand drought, but ideal conditions consist of wet soils and full sun.

Cattails reproduce both from seeds and spreading root systems (rhizomes) that form clusters of cattail clones, similar to the growth of aspen trees. Cattail leaves grow rapidly in spring. By early to midsummer a 4- to 7-foot-tall stalk supports two cylindrical flower spikes. The narrow upper spike contains the short-lived male (pollen-bearing) flowers. The lower one contains female flowers (which eventually turn brown). In winter, the sausage-shaped flower head

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Scientific name

Typha is from the Greek word *typhe*, meaning cattail. *Angustifolia* is Latin for "narrow leaf" and *latifolia* is Latin for "broad leaf."

morphs into white cottony fluff, or down, containing seeds. That's what pheasant hunters see in the air when their dogs are rooting out roosters from a frozen marsh.

Life among cattails

Cattail stands provide food, shelter, nesting, and hiding cover for wildlife. When cattails grow next to farmland, pheasants use them as hideouts from predators and for thermal protection from brutal winds, icy temperatures, and heavy snow. When growing in complex marsh ecosystems, cattails attract marsh wrens along with red-winged and yellow-headed blackbirds, all of which attach nests woven of the plant's leaves to its sturdy upright stalks. Ruddy ducks, canvasbacks, redheads, grebes, and coots nest in or around cattails. Hard-to-find birds such as American bitterns, Virginia rails, and soras also nest there, too. American goldfinches, cedar waxwings, and many other songbirds line their nests with cattail down.

Canada geese and some duck species feed on cattail roots and shoots. Painted turtles eat the seeds and stems. Muskrats gnaw on the roots and use the leaves for building their lodges and feeding platforms.

Cattail cuisine

People also are attracted to the cattail's edible, nutritious, and tasty parts, from its starchy roots to the pollen-filled flowers. In his *Stalking the Wild Asparagus*, Euell Gibbons refers to cattails as the "supermarket of the swamps." In spring, the tender shoots can be eaten raw or cooked. In summer, the immature flower spikes can be steamed or boiled and eaten like corn on the cob. Some people add cattail pollen to pancake mixes, biscuits, and bread. The roots can be peeled and cooked, or dried and ground into flour.

Other uses

For years people used cattails as a source of useful materials. Dried flower heads, when dipped in oil and lit, became torches. Cattail down worked as fire-starting tinder, mattress filling, and boot insulation. The long, sturdy leaves were woven into mats or used as chair caning. These days, crafters collect the brown fuzzy flowers for decoration.

Of all things related to cattails, the most significant value is the habitat they provide. And that's beneficial not only to wildlife. Cattail marshes rank high on the list of places I go to watch and listen to birds and other animals. When I hear the eerie, thumping, percolating sounds of the bittern, or the long, descending whinny of a sora, I recall the magic (and monsters) of the cattail marsh of my childhood. 🦘