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What is habitat?

There are many types of wetland, ranging from hidden ones far underground with their own unique fauna, through diverse and varied swamps, marshes, lakes and ponds, creeks and brooks, rivers and saltmarshes. All of them provide habitat, in one form or another, often for a great variety of living organisms, sometimes for just a handful of species able to thrive in extreme conditions.

The very word *wetland* suggests the idea of habitat in most people's minds, and is liberally used when talking about anything from the benefits of created wetlands, to restoration and management of degraded places. It is used so loosely that if common and adaptable birds such as sacred ibis or Pacific black duck are present, a wetland is deemed to be a success as habitat, though in these cases all it proves is that there is water present. In reality, most wetland animals (and many plants) need far more than a single 'habitat' for the long-term survival of the species.

Lifecycles and changing needs

Consider the short-finned eel (see Plate 16) of south-eastern Australia and New Zealand, which lives most of its life in fresh waters, feeding and fattening over decades until it has reached breeding age. Young female eels move inland from estuaries and colonise a wide array of wetlands from slow-moving streams and lakes, to farm dams. They are among the few native fishes which can climb past waterfalls, into areas where other fishes may be absent.

Their main needs for this stage of their life are a reliable source of food in the form of small animals including insect larvae and fishes, and a hiding place during daylight hours. The smaller males are more often found near the coast, and mature