

Owasco Flats Wildlife Management Area A Conceptual Management Plan

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NYSDEC Bureau of Wildlife
Mike Murphy, Wildlife Biologist
Tom Bell, Wildlife Biologist
Marie Kautz, Wildlife Manager
Jeffrey Robins, Fisheries Biologist



Photo by Bill Hecht

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Executive Summary

Owasco Flats is an important ecological area located at the south end of Owasco Lake, Cayuga County. Cropland, fallow fields, emergent marsh and swamp comprise the approximately 1,500 acre site, commonly referred to as the “Flats.” Recreational opportunities abound and include fishing, hunting, trapping, birdwatching, skiing, and canoeing. The Flats is important to water quality and will likely play an important role in the future health of Owasco Lake. Threats to the area include residential and commercial development, invasive plants, fragmentation of habitat, and sediment loss.

The Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) recognizes the importance of the Flats for recreation, water quality, and its unique array of plants and wildlife. This is further strengthened by Owasco Flats inclusion as a priority area in the latest edition of the New York State’s Open Space Plan and the conclusions of a stakeholder survey conducted by Central New York Regional Planning and Development Board. Consistent with these assessments, in 2006, DEC announced the goal of acquisition of lands on the flats for their consolidation into a Wildlife Management Area (WMA). Consolidation and establishment of a WMA will provide additional opportunities to address threats to the area. The Conceptual Management Plan which follows is a statement of the agency’s vision for acquisition and future management of this area. The plan is guided by a number of state laws and regulations pertaining to the acquisition of lands by DEC and the public use of Wildlife Management Areas. Acquisition will be only from willing sellers and, by law, must be at fair market value.

The primary goals for the area include acquisition of 1,500 acres of land, enhancement of water quality and habitats to support a diversity of plants and wildlife, and management of access and recreational opportunities. Habitat management activities could include: the restoration of forested and emergent wetlands, establishment of native grasses, channel and stream bank restoration, and eradication of invasive non-native plants and insects. Methods to manage access and recreation might include: the placement of parking areas, installing gates, increasing DEC law enforcement, and establishing use limitations.

There appears to be a great deal of public interest in the future of the Owasco Flats. DEC’s interest in partnering with other groups and not-for-profits will provide opportunities for broad public involvement in management of the area. This conceptual plan is a beginning of those management and outreach efforts.

Introduction and WMA Description

The purpose of this plan is to provide a public document that informs landowners and users of the Department of Environmental Conservation's intent to purchase land and establish a Wildlife Management Area at the southern end of Owasco Lake, commonly referred to as the Owasco Flats. The area is located in Cayuga County in the towns of Moravia and Venice (Figure 1). Extremely rich in plant and wildlife diversity, Owasco Flats is an important area for maintaining the water quality of Owasco Lake, providing habitat for a wide variety of species, and supporting numerous recreational opportunities such as: hunting, trapping, angling, bird watching, hiking, and canoeing.

Encompassing approximately 1,500 acres, the WMA is bordered by Owasco Lake to the north, the village of Moravia to the south, Route 38 to the west, and Rockefeller Road to the east. The Owasco Inlet, the main tributary to Owasco Lake, flows through the area. Water levels in the inlet fluctuate with lake levels, spring run-off and other precipitation. The area is generally comprised of cropland, fallow fields, emergent marsh, and swamps. In all, eleven ecological communities are identified. The northern portion of the area contains the most wetlands (Figure 2) while the southern portion the most agriculture. Nearby population centers are located in Moravia and Auburn. The July 2006 population census indicated 1,319 people living in the village of Moravia. Auburn, at the north end of Owasco Lake, had a population of 27,766.

Goals

- Consolidate management and prevent fragmentation of approximately 1,500 acres of mostly undeveloped land at the southern end of Owasco Lake, Cayuga County, towns of Moravia and Venice, through fee acquisition, easements or management agreements.
- Protect, maintain, restore, and enhance water quality and habitats to support a diversity of plants and wildlife.
- Manage public access and recreational opportunities to maintain a balance between the area's unique ecological communities, human impacts, and local landowner concerns.

Threats to the Resources

Residential and commercial development - Residential and commercial development represent long-term threats to open space all across New York State. The same holds true for the Flats, especially because of its relatively small size. Development can raise wetland sediment and phosphorous



Threat of development

levels, impact drainage, eliminate or displace plants and animals, and cause the loss and fragmentation of habitats. It may also hinder wetland restoration efforts on adjacent lands and reduce recreational opportunities.

Invasive plants - Invasive plants are a threat to the Flats. Nine invasive plants were recently identified including: Autumn olive, Common Reed, Reed canarygrass, Japanese knotweed, Purple loosestrife, Pale swallowwort, Garlic mustard, Multiflora rose, and Honeysuckle. Others could be introduced accidentally or spread into the area. Left unchecked, many of these plant species eventually will crowd-out native plant species, often establishing habitats unfavorable to wildlife.



Purple Loosestrife



Phragmites

Succession - Like much of New York and the Northeast, the Owasco Flats was cleared for agriculture post settlement. A 1938 aerial photograph (Figure 3) shows approximately 70 percent of the land in agriculture. Only about 25 percent of the land is classified as agriculture today. Recent aerial photographs depict a return to a forested landscape probably more reflective of the area prior to the onset of agriculture. More than likely, succession to a forested landscape will continue to occur in the future, reducing the present-day diversity of flora and fauna.

Fragmentation of habitat - Development and succession often work against wildlife diversity by fragmenting habitat. Grassland bird species provide a good example of this principle. As grassland acreage declines and surrounding forests mature, use by a number of grassland birds declines. Evaluating species needs and concerns, such as fragmentation, is important to the overall health of the Owasco Flats.

Sediment - The Owasco Inlet drains more than 115 square miles. The flood-plain acts as a buffer to filter sediment and other materials that make their way to Owasco Lake. Generally wetlands are believed to improve water quality. Therefore, maintaining or improving the filtering capacity of the Owasco Flats is important to the health of Owasco Lake, its residents, recreational users, and plant and wildlife communities. The report, *Owasco Lake, New York: Water Quality and Nutrient Sources*, by the Finger Lakes Institute and Hobart & William Smith Colleges, concluded that the initiation of an Owasco Flats wetland revitalization program was favored by a number of groups and citizens concerned with water quality in Owasco Lake.

DEC Strategies

Acquisition

Purchase of parcels - The primary method used to protect the Owasco Flats will be to purchase properties (Figure 4) within the proposed WMA. The sale of parcels will be totally voluntary and the State will offer fair market value to interested sellers. To determine which properties to buy first, DEC will evaluate properties based on their ecological significance, vulnerability to development, hydrological significance, potential for access, similarities of adjacent parcels, and willingness of landowners to sell. Funds to purchase the properties will come from the Environmental Protection Fund or other available sources such as the Migratory Bird Fund and Pittman-Robertson Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration. When a property is purchased a management strategy will be developed for that individual property or a group of properties. Acquisition will be accomplished piecemeal, as properties become available. Outreach is already underway to advise landowners of DEC's intent. In some instances easements or management agreements may be pursued as an interim or permanent measure.

Laws and Rules Pertaining to Land Acquisition -

Environmental Conservation Law 3-0305 - Land acquisition by the NYSDEC is done under the direction of the New York State Open Space Conservation Plan and by the authority of Section 3-0305 of the Environmental Conservation Law. Owasco Flats is part of the Finger Lakes Shorelines and Wetlands open space project listed as statewide priority project number 103 in the 2006 Open Space Plan. Land acquisition in the area will only be pursued from willing sellers. The fair market value of the land or partial interest to be acquired will be determined by independent appraisal and purchase offers will be made to landowners for the full approved value. The NYS Department of Law examines title to all lands proposed for acquisition by the State, prepares the deed and other closing papers and files the deed after it is executed by the grantor. Title to land acquired by deed vests in the State upon the deed being recorded at the county clerk's office.

Environmental Conservation Law 11-2103 - This law describes the acquisition and use of property. The Department has the power to acquire lands, waters or lands and waters for the purpose of establishing and maintaining public hunting, trapping and fishing grounds. Any property can be received if it is deemed suitable for fish and wildlife management.

Environmental Conservation Law 11-2101 - allows for the establishment of regulations for use of State-owned boat launching and access sites and public hunting, trapping and fishing grounds. It allows the Department to prohibit, limit and manage these lands to promote public interest and to produce optimum conditions for fish and wildlife. The selling of timber and other products from these areas is allowed.

Environmental Conservation Law 8-0101 and Codes Rules, and Regulations of the State of New York Part 617 - These laws and regulations discuss the purpose and implementation of the State Environmental Quality Review Act (SEQR). The act ensures review of proposed projects, their actions and the possible adverse environmental impacts. A negative declaration has been filed for the Owasco Flats project.

Habitat Management

The purchase of properties and establishment of a WMA will allow for a number of habitat management opportunities. Management efforts will be geared toward our goals of plant and animal diversity, public access, recreation and water quality. Likely management activities for the WMA include:

- restoration of forested and emergent wetlands
- establishment of native warm and cool-season grasses
- channel and stream bank restoration
- eradication or control of invasive non-native plants and insects

Depending on parcel locations and juxtaposition habitat management plans for specific parcels will range from “do nothing” to intensive projects to improve water quality and plant and wildlife diversity.



Native grasses and forbs



Water control structure

Wetland restoration may include plugging drainage ditches, installing water control structures or allowing natural occurrences, such as beaver dams, to impact the area. Pastures, crop land, and old fields may be restored to native grasses like Canada wild rye, big bluestem, Eastern gammagrass, and Indiangrass. Mowing and/or burning may be used to maintain grassland habitats for nesting waterfowl and song birds. Invasive exotic plant control may include biological, physical, or chemical means. Although a major project, channel and stream bank restoration might be considered to re-engage the flood-plain and reduce sediment loss.

Codes Rules, and Regulations of the State of New York Part 51

- These regulations discuss the public use of state wildlife management areas. They describe what activities are allowed on wildlife management areas. Unless restricted by posted notice, hunting, fishing and trapping are permissible. Use of mechanically powered boats is not allowed, nor is camping. Off -road travel is prohibited as are

motorized vehicles such as motorcycles, trail bikes and snowmobiles unless specifically permitted by posted notice. No permanent structures shall be constructed. Waiver of any prohibition is at the discretion of the Regional Natural Resources Supervisor.

Access and Recreation

The establishment of a WMA in the Owasco Flats will allow for better access to the area's diverse recreational opportunities. Managing this access to protect the unique ecological communities and address local landowner concerns is paramount. Access within the WMA will be determined largely by which properties are purchased by DEC. Some properties are better suited for access than others. Recreational opportunities abound and include: fishing, hunting, trapping, birdwatching, hiking, skiing, and canoeing.

Some potential measures to manage access and recreation include:

- placement of parking areas
- obtaining public fishing rights
- considerations for people with disabilities
- installing gates to limit motor vehicle access
- establishing use limitations
- increasing DEC law enforcement
- posting boundaries
- establishing restricted areas near residences and ecologically sensitive sites



Accessible viewing platform

Fisheries

Owasco Inlet provides habitat for resident and migratory rainbow and brown trout, brown bullhead, rainbow smelt, yellow perch, bass and northern pike. A variety of management activities could be implemented to improve habitat conditions. Water level management through the use of water control structures could be incorporated to allow the spring spawning passage of northern pike. Re-engagement of the flood-plain through the restoration of the stream bank would result in filtering of nutrients, creation of habitat and a decrease in turbidity and sedimentation. Non-essential debris removal will be carefully evaluated, as fallen trees provide suitable habitat for a variety of aquatic species of fish, reptiles and furbearers.

Maintenance

Statewide, DEC Wildlife Management Areas consist of over 200,000 acres of upland and wetland habitat. Pittman-Robertson Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration funds are most often used to maintain these areas. Maintenance activities includes: mowing, controlled burns, road and parking lot repair, trash removal, posting, tree removal, and repairs to water control structures. Many of these activities will occur as properties are purchased and become part of the Owasco Flats WMA. Partnerships with other organizations and government entities may enhance DEC's ability to maintain the area.

Management Summary

After a significant portion of Owasco Flats has been acquired (through fee, easement or management agreement) a Unit Management Plan (UMP) will be developed as staffing allows. The purpose of the UMP will be to guide the management of the area in a way acceptable to the stakeholders involved in the process. The process is outlined below.

The UMP Process:

- Conduct resource inventory of the unit area.
- Solicit written and verbal input from the public through press releases and meetings.
- Develop a draft plan and address State Environmental Quality Review Act (SEQRA) issues.
- Prepare a draft plan.
- Release draft UMP and conduct public hearings.
- Resolve issues, revise the plan.
- Approval of final plan by DEC Commissioner.
- Adoption of the UMP.

Partners

In order to effectively manage WMAs, DEC is open to developing partnerships with various groups and not-for-profits. Potential projects suitable for partnerships include: establishment of native warm-season grasses for grassland nesting birds; installation of a water control structure to establish a shallow marsh for waterfowl or maintenance of early shrubland habitat for woodcock and other early succession wildlife. DEC encourages partnerships to further program goals and objectives. Often these goals and objectives are quite similar to those of other conservation organizations.

Sociocultural Considerations

According to a survey conducted by the Finger Lakes Land Trust, landowners in the Flats are most concerned with water quality, privacy, public access, hunting and fishing opportunities, and trespass on their lands. The planned goals of the proposed WMA address most of these issues. DEC expects to improve water quality, continue recreational pursuits such as fishing and hunting, clearly post state land boundaries, and increase law enforcement patrol to prevent trespass problems. Realizing increased public access can have positive and negative effects, DEC will work to manage access and recreation to protect the Flats' resources and its residents. Little change in the sociocultural climate in the Owasco Flats is anticipated. Benefits will accrue in future years due to the establishment of the WMA and enhancement of these lands and waters so they can function as natural ecosystems supporting sustained human uses.

Acknowledgment

The Final Report of the *Owasco Flats Conservation Planning and Stakeholder Survey Project*, June 2007, is cited as the primary reference for the information and planning efforts found in this document. Prepared by Mark Whitmore and the Finger Lakes Land Trust, the report offers an excellent assessment of the area's natural resources and the associated issues of water quality, access and public use.

Figure 1: Owasco Flats WMA Project Area

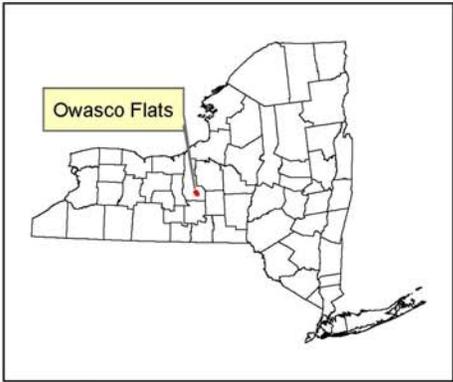
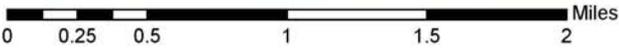
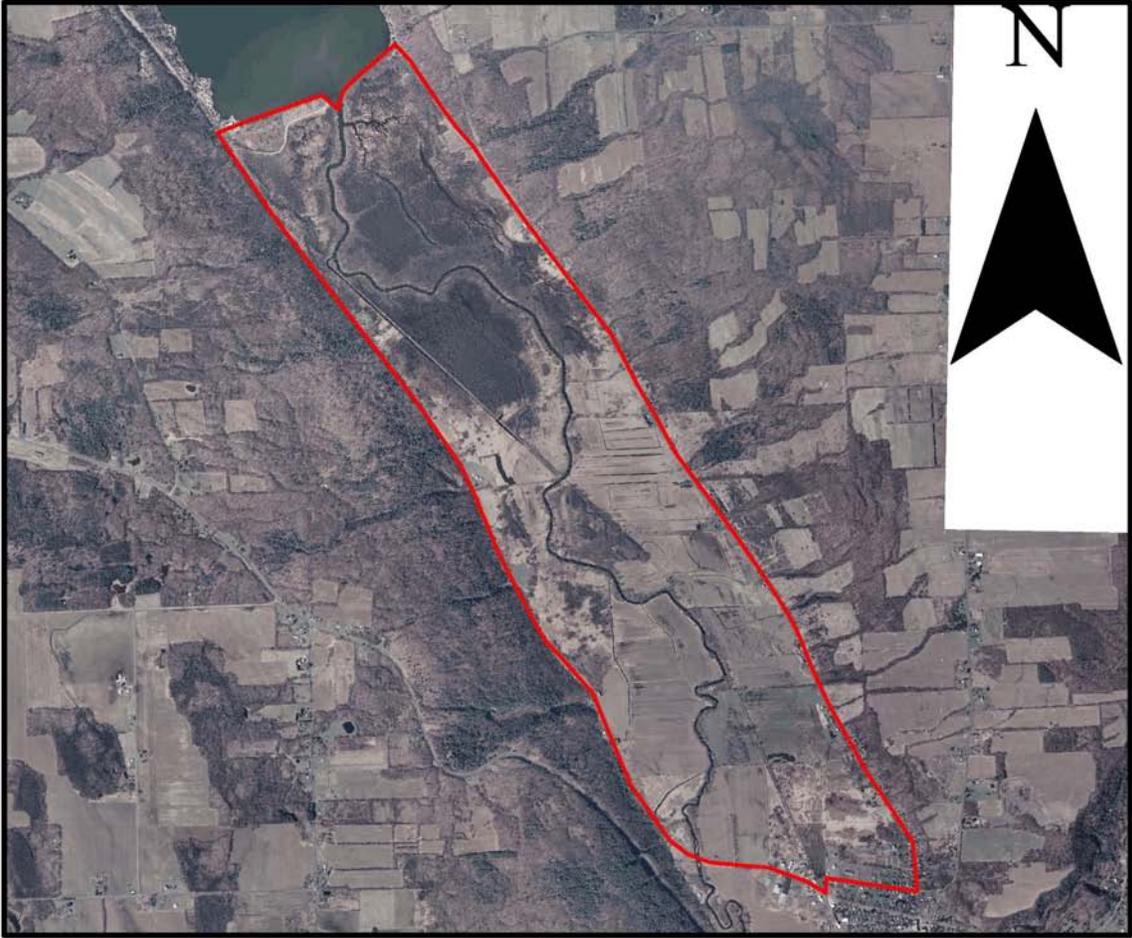
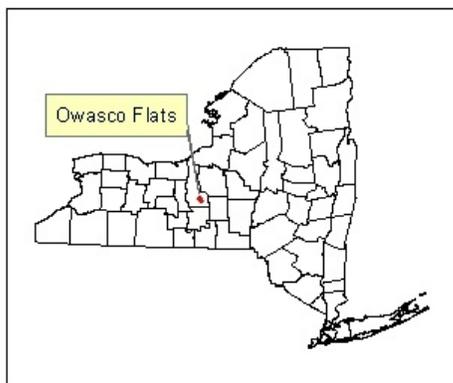
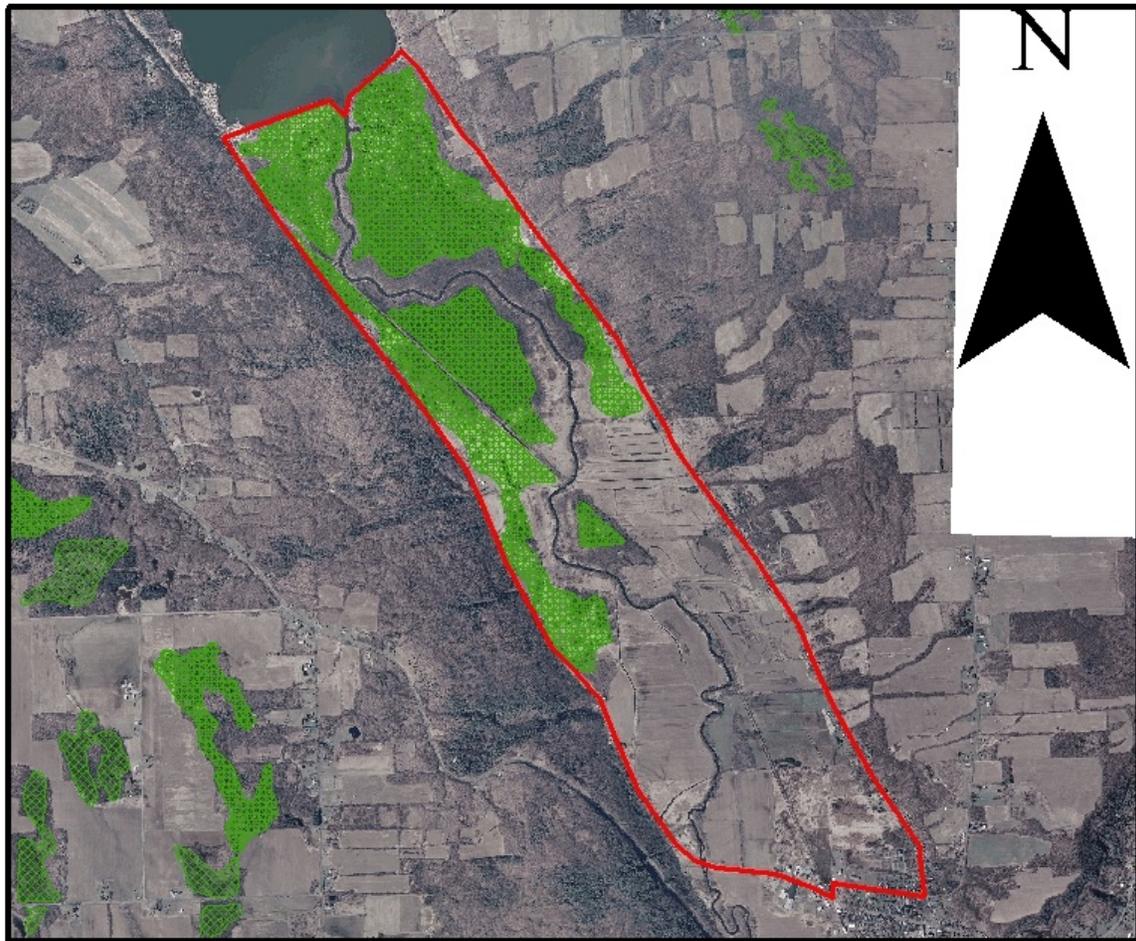


Figure 2: Owasco Flats WMA Wetlands



Owasco Flats WMA Wetlands

 Flats Project Area

Freshwater Wetland

CLASS

 Class 1

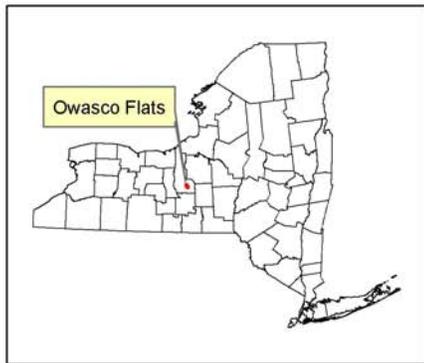
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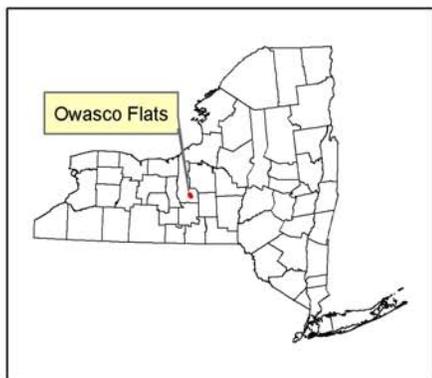
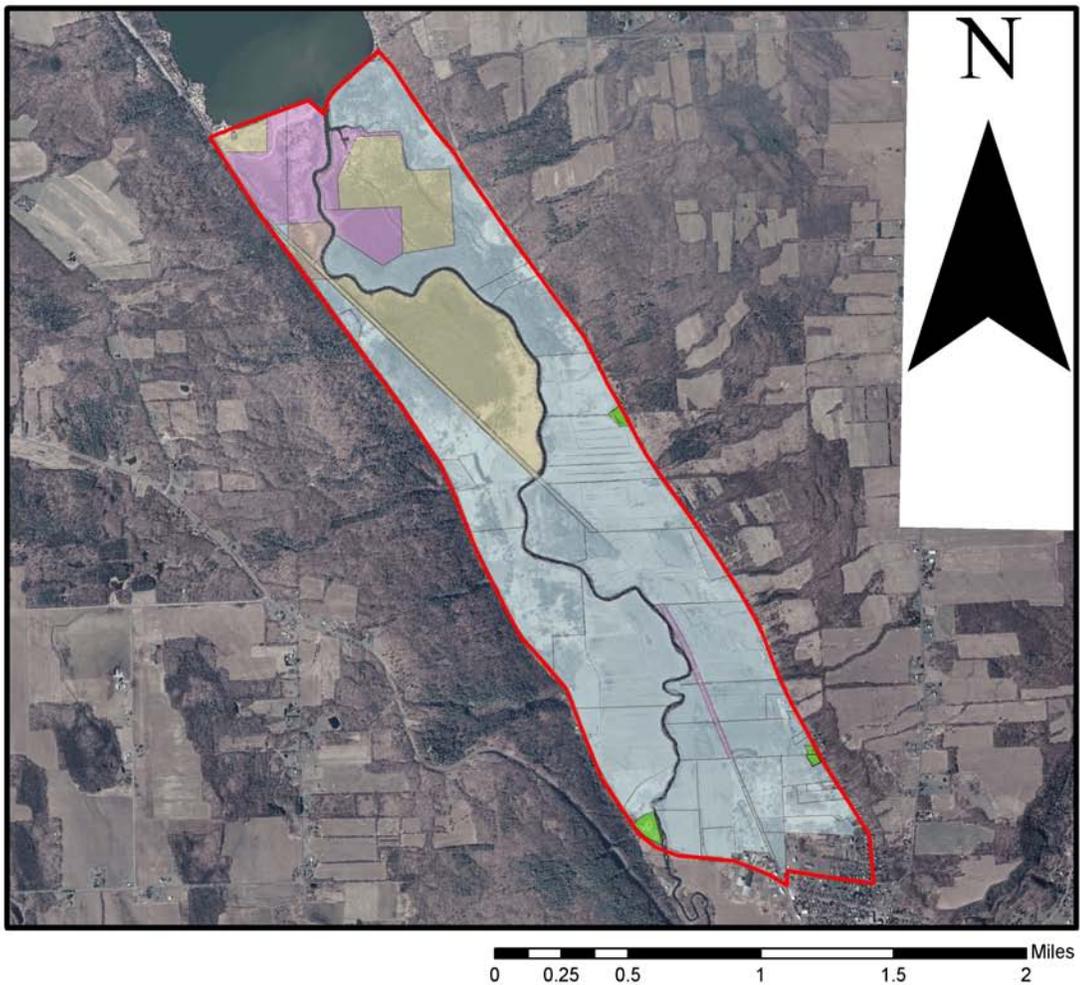
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Figure 3: Owasco Flats WMA 1938



Courtesy Cornell University Library, New York State Aerial Photographs Collection

Figure 4: Owasco Flats WMA Acquisition Targets



Acquisition Targets

- Flats Project Area

Parcels to purchase

Targets

- City
- County
- No
- Owasco Flats Nature Reserve
- Yes