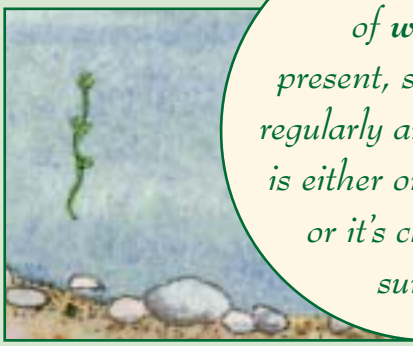
Show me the Riparian Area

You've seen them, crossed them, and walked in them; you may live on one. Riparian areas are the green zones around lakes and wetlands, the emerald threads of vegetation that border rivers and streams and the lush fringe in valleys. Riparian areas are transitional; they exist between the surface water of a river, wetland or lake and the surrounding drier upland. Think of them as "wetter than dry" but "drier than wet". Riparian areas are rarely uniform and show lots of variation. What is common to all of them is the interaction of water, soil and vegetation. A combination of the following clues will help you solve the mystery of what is "riparian".

Clue 1



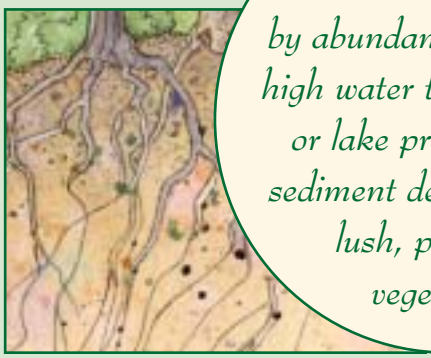
*Lots of **water** is present, seasonally or regularly and that water is either on the surface or it's close to the surface.*

Riparian areas are called many things. These are some of the terms used to describe them: shores, floodplain, bottomland, bogs, muskeg, slough, wetland, seep, floodprone, marsh, pothole and spring. Lentic riparian areas are associated with still water systems like lakes and wetlands. Lotic riparian areas are found along rivers and streams.

Clue 2

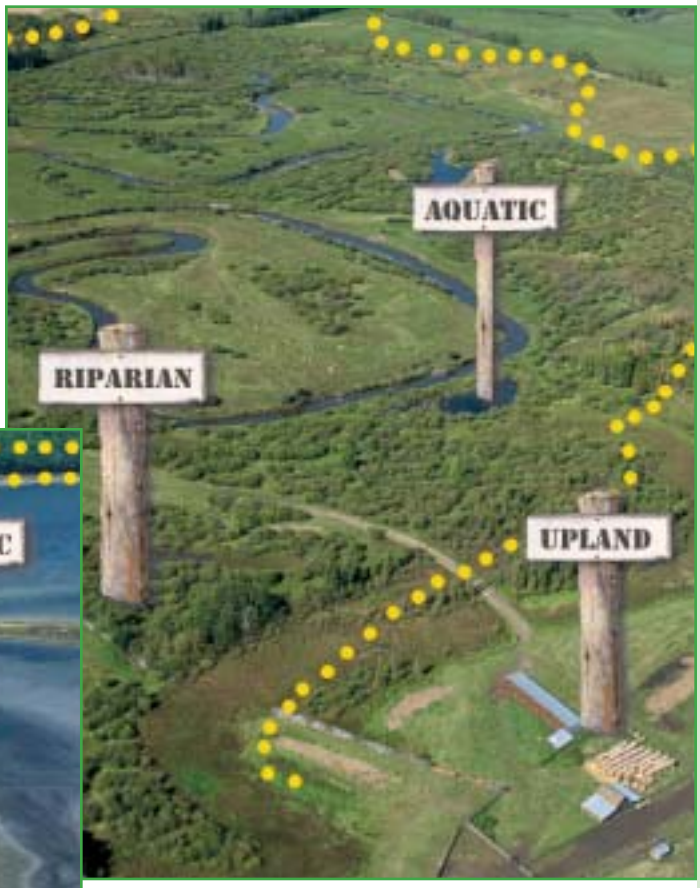
***Vegetation** is present that responds to, requires and survives in abundant water.*

Clue 3

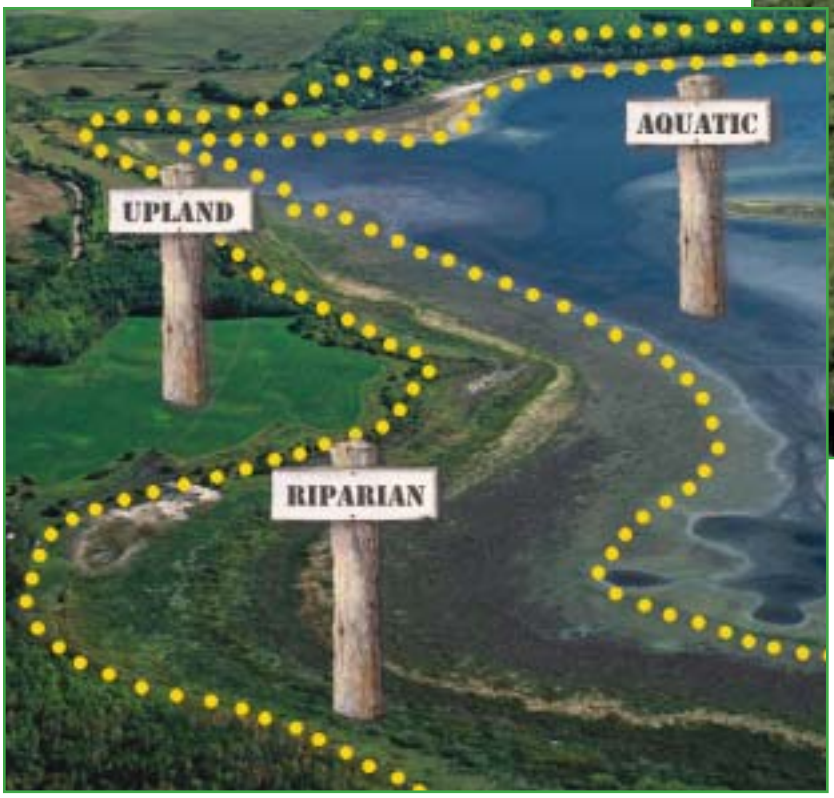


***Soils** have been modified by abundant water (as in high water tables), stream or lake processes (like sediment deposition) and lush, productive vegetation.*

Riparian areas are part of a larger, continuous landscape that grades from wet to dry. They are the thin, green line in that landscape transition. Despite their small size (2-5%) riparian areas are a key piece of the landscape because they are the buffer, the edge and the border between uplands and the aquatic zone. Riparian areas buffer the impacts of uplands on the aquatic area as well as protect uplands from erosion. To measure the health of the riparian area and it's ability to be the critical buffer, you need to understand what is "riparian".



Riparian areas on streams and rivers can be quite wide, reflecting high ground water tables, flood history and the profile of the valley.



Riparian areas on lakes and wetlands include emergent vegetation like cattails, as well as the vegetation on the wetter portion of the shoreline.

Sometimes it isn't easy to determine precisely the border, edge and size of the riparian area, especially where land use has modified some of the clues.

Look for the WATER