RAGING SWAN PRESS

20 THINGS #54: NOISOME MARSH





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20 THINGS #54: NOISOME MARSH

Are you a busy GM? Does session prep take too long? Do you never have time to work on the cool little details that can bring your session to life? Well fear not! That's where the 20 Things line comes in. This short, focused compilation gives you, the time-crunched GM, the tools to effortlessly add verisimilitude and detail to your adventure. Use the material herein either before or during play and bask in your players' adulation.

This instalment provides five pages of material compatible with virtually any fantasy roleplaying game and is designed to help you flesh out and bring to life the noisome marshes in your campaign.

CREDITS

Design: Creighton Broadhurst

Development: Creighton Broadhurst

Art: William McAusland, Dean Spencer and Maciej Zagorski (The Forge Studios). Some artwork copyright William McAusland, used with permission.

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USING THIS BOOK

You can use these system neutral tables either during session prep or "on the fly" during the actual session. Roll on the desired table and describe the result. Remember:

- Some players may assume because you describe something it is important. This may slow down the party's progress through the adventure. This isn't necessarily a bad thing.
- Modify any result so it fit with your game.
- Ignore or re-roll inappropriate results.
- Have fun!

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1: CAMPING & CAMPSITES

Travellers in a noisome marsh would be wise to seek a good campsite. Boggy ground and the attentions of the place's fauna can make a night in the marsh a miserable experience.

- 1. A reed-fringed knoll rises from the muck to provide a dry campsite. A single gnarled tree grows atop the knoll's summit.
- 2. A sluggishly-flowing channel of muddy water divides a small patch of dry land from the surrounding fens. The water is thigh-high for a human, but deep silt covers the bottom of the channel. Rushes and reeds growly thickly along its banks.
- 3. A ramshackle hut stands amid a field of large boulders, which are slowly sinking into the mire. The hut still stands—barely—and inquisitive adventurers discover an extensive, but surprisingly partially flooded, cellar below the structure.

- 4. A dry, reed-fringed swathe of land overlooks a wide, muddy pool. A maddeningly constant—and increasingly cacophonous—chorus of froggy croaking fills the night air, one the sun sets. The sound comes from all around the party. (Unwittingly, the heroes have camped in a frog spawning ground, and they are doomed to a sleepless night).
- 5. A field of tumbled rubble-some pieces of which look suspiciously like carved stone blocks-covers the ground atop a low, tree-fringed hillock. Characters searching the hill find many signs of previous expeditions' campsites. A vaguely triangular-shaped pile of stones hides a set of slippery, slimecovered steps plunging into the bowels of the hill.
- 6. A jagged hunk of stone about 50 ft. in diameter rises from the noisome swamp. Although moss and lichen cling to the stone's flanks, it is pitted and ridged, making climbing easy. Atop the stone, a natural hollow provides shelter from the wind and unfriendly eyes. If it has been raining, a small pool of water fills the bottom of the hollow.

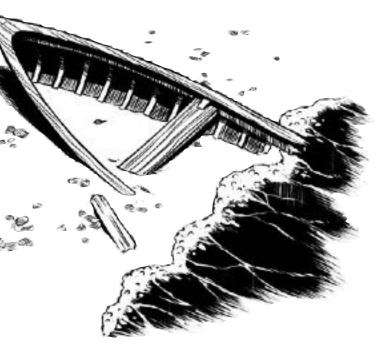


2: LOCAL LANDMARKS

Much of a marsh's landscape is unremarkable and mundane; however some features become local landmarks and are used as waymarkers or meeting places.

- A muddy bowl-like dell pierces the fen. Reeds grow thickly along its rim and after heavy rain water cascades into the dell. Locals know the place as The Devil's Bowl and avoid the place after bad weather. A persistent legend tells of a fearsome lizard-like or snake-like creature that dwells underground and emerges to hunt after heavy rain.
- 2. A muddy ring of standing stones—many leaning at drunken angles or fallen into the muck—surmounts a low hill. The remains of a wooden causeway run to the hill across a series of narrow, mud-filled streams. Reeds, rushes and small trees grow among the stones. A stone lies at the centre of the ring; ancient legends tell of the cultists who cavort here "when the stars are right" and of the strange things they call forth with blood sacrifices from deep marsh.
- A vast hawthorn tree grows from the mire. The tree's wide boughs provide an area of deep shade and amid the shadows lurk three partially sunken burial cairns fringed with a great mass of reeds and wild flowers.
- 4. A single carven obelisk-fully 30 ft. high and 15 ft. in diameter –rears from the mud. Standing perfectly straight it has resisted the mire's downwards pull for centuries untold. Fantastical images of a black dragon, huge lizards and other marsh-dwelling creatures decorate its surface. The Dragon's Pillar—as it is known—was risen long ago by a tribe of marsh-dwelling lizardfolk in veneration of their master. The tribe's degenerate descendants still dwell in the trackless reaches of the deep swamp and occasionally come here.
- 5. The Grey Fen is a stretch of lifeless, foul smelling water, avoided by locals and other intelligent swamp dwellers. The fen fills a depression in the wider swamp barely half a mile in diameter. Within, only twisted, warped plants grow and local tales tell of hideously deformed, strangely coloured creatures swimming and wallowing in its slimy waters.
- 6. Kildrak's Run wends its torturous way through the swamp. This meandering, often narrow but always, deep channel is navigable all along it length. Local stories tell how the insanely murderous dwarf Kildrak the Slayer used the channel to flee after he hunted down and killed several local women he believed to be witches.
- 7. Tumbled stone blocks, and a wide circle of partly sunken, vine-strangled menhirs, dot and surround the so-called Fetid Fane. This crumbling, lop-sided ruin stands at the end of an opt-flooded, always muddy, sunken processional. Strange sounds emanate from the fane when a gibbous moon hangs low in the nighttime sky, and the site is the subject of many outlandish legends of an elder queen and her queer, froggy subjects doomed to attend her through all eternity.

- 8. Watcher's Crag rises from the swamp's fetid marsh like a petrified giant. Its rocky, grey flanks perpetually ooze water, and thick growths of moulds, lichens and ferns cling to its vertiginous cliffs. A single, worn and slippery stair hacked from the rock, wends its way around the crag. A ruined tower squats atop the forbidding spire, providing commanding views over the surrounding muck. Travellers often use this place as a relatively dry and safe campsite, although the crag's zenith is all but inaccessible to mounts and the like.
- Four sickly willow trees with slightly yellowed bark stand about a pool of water fed by three streams wending their way through the surrounding marsh. The trees are known locally as the Four Sisters.
- 10. A cave mouth–named in elder legend as the Dragon's Maw–pierces the side of a low hill surmounted by a ring of tumbled stones. Weeds and brambles grow thickly atop the hill, and a wide, stone-lined well of ancient aspect cuts deeply into the ground from the hill's zenith.
- 11. A suspiciously shaped conical hill devoid of all vegetation rises from the mire. In the hill's vicinity the water is black with peat and vegetation is stunted and ill-coloured. Legends speak of a powerful lich dwelling beneath the hill and of the three tunnels leading into its lair. Legends also speak of the scores of adventurers who have sought the hill, and who have not returned. Locals call the place, the Hill of Horrors.
- 12. A wide, low-lying reed-fringed pool lies in an isolated part of the marsh. Nine islands rise above the pool's fetid, stagnant water. Large burial mounds stand atop each island. This was a place sacred to the lizardfolk who dwelt in the marsh long ago. Now a small colony of will-o'-wisps linger amid the bones and remnants of the lizardfolk's fallen civilisation. Locals name the place the Pool of Glimmering Bones; all right-minded folk avoid this accursed place.



3: MINOR DAYTIME EVENTS

Few journeys in a noisome marsh are wholly without incident. Sometimes, bandits, lizardfolk or worse waylay travellers; other times, events are more mundane.

- A flock of marsh birds suddenly take flight from a nearby thicket of reeds and fly away squawking loudly. Seconds later a loud crashing sound echoes from the same thickets as some large predator pounces moments too late.
- 2. Flies, gnats and other bothersome marsh-dwelling insects buzz about the party; many of the characters suffer irritating bites and skin rashes as a result.
- 3. Heavy rain hammers the swamp; as the day wears on, the ground gets boggier and the water level in the swamp's many streams, pools and so on begins to rise, hampering the characters' travel.
- 4. The clouds clear from in front of the sun, and the temperature rises. The sun's rays glitter upon the innumerable pools and streams scattered across the marsh, possibly dazzling travellers.
- 5. Birds swoop low over a section of swamp off to the party's right, before landing out of sight behind some rushes. As the party watch, the birds take flight carrying something red and dripping in their beaks.
- 6. As the party come to a river a series of splashes draws their attention to a jumbled wooden dam. Druids or rangers identify it as an otters' dam. It is sturdy enough to serve as an impromptu means of crossing the river.
- 7. The sound of crashing and splashing amid a deep thicket of rushes heralds the arrive of a filthy and mud-splattered skinny mongrel dog. At sight of the characters, the dog hesitantly wags its tail. The dog is starving and easily befriended.
- 8. Drizzle falls, creating an omnipresent pitter patter sound. At first almost pleasant the ubiquity of the sound could quickly become irritating. The drizzle falls for much of the day, making travel wetter and more miserable than usual.
- 9. A rustling in the nearby reeds presages the arrival of a small, muddy boar. The boar is a juvenile; moments later two more juveniles and their mother crash through the undergrowth. The mother is extremely protective of her babies.
- 10. Dark clouds hang over the marsh, shrouding the fens in shadow and gloom. Dark shadows gather amid thickets of reeds and under the trees growing along the mire's many streams and rivers. In such weather, the marsh is even more dreary and depressing than normal.
- 11. Several miles ahead, and slightly off the party's line of travel, the smoke of a fire drifts lazily into the still air. The fire could be nothing more than a campfire left unattended, the cooking fire of some remote farmstead or something more sinister.
- 12. When the characters reach a wide stream or river, they note a half-submerged coracle floating lazily passed. A jagged chunk is missing from the coracle's wickerwork hull and blood covers the surrounding piece of hull.

4: MINOR NIGHTTIME EVENTS

Few folk travel the marsh in the dead of night, but that doesn't mean nothing happens to those camping under the stars.

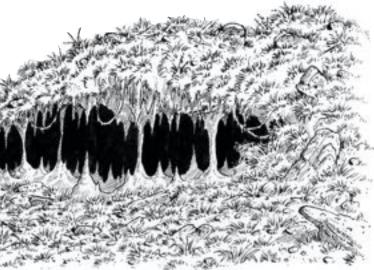
- 1. A loud splash, from a noisome pool only 20 or so feet away, echoes through the night air.
- 2. A gust of strong air blows a pungent bubble of marsh gas over the party. The smell is strong, almost overpowering, but—mercifully—quickly dissipates.
- 3. Rustling in the undergrowth, and the sound of something squelching through the mud, heralds the approach of some nocturnal predator.
- 4. A constrictor snake slithers through the fen on the hunt for dinner. It avoids man-sized or larger creatures but could try to take a dog, halfling or other easy-to-handle prey.
- 5. A cool nighttime breeze blows across the marsh, stirring the surrounding reeds and rushes into a susurration which could lull a tired guard into a deep sleep.
- 6. Strangely coloured lights bob in the darkness near the party's camp. If a guard investigates, the lights float away—perhaps leading the inquisitive character into a bog of sucking quicksand-like mud.
- 7. Light rain falls sporadically during the night, extinguishing the party's campfire and generally making life miserable for those on watch.
- 8. Moonlight bathes the swamp on this cloudless, cold night. The marsh's pools and ponds reflect the moon's radiance, giving the place an ethereal, ghostly feel.
- 9. A bubble of noisome swamp gas drifts across the camp enveloping the party in a noxious odour. The gas is harmless, but foul-smelling.
- 10. Bright fire blazes to life, casting lurid shadows over a hill several miles distant. Although initially fierce, the fire quickly lessens and after an hour or so nothing is left by a faint smouldering glimmer.
- 11. A deer and her three young suddenly burst into camp. The deers' flanks are heaving as if all four have been running—or perhaps fleeing—for a considerable time. An alert guard isn't surprised by the animals' arrival, but a guard distracted by wine or dozing will likely be startled by their sudden appearance. Whatever is chasing them may—or may not—arrive several rounds later.
- 12. A random character awakes in the middle of the night to discover they are beset by leaches—their neck and legs are coated with the foul bloodsuckers. The character suffers 1 hit point of damage, and must deal with the pernicious bloodsuckers before being able to get back to sleep; the leaches hinder the character's rest, meaning they may not regain hit points, be able to relearn spells and so on.

5: WILDERNESS DRESSING

While vast swaths of a noisome marsh may seem boring and unremarkable, travellers will—no doubt—encounter some things of minor interest.

- 1. A wide river flows sluggishly through the mire. An old wooden causeway crosses the channel mere inches above the water. After heavy rain, the causeway is submerged and only a large marker stone at either end betrays its presence.
- 2. Long bulrushes grow in this stretch of marsh in profusion. The rushes's triangular head—almost eight-foot above the ground—sway softly in the breeze. Paranoid characters may think this is a good place for an ambush.
- A crudely-crafted spear juts from the mud. Investigation reveals the spear is probably not of human artifice. Several brightly coloured feathers hang from a cord just below the spear's head.
- 4. A track, bounded by low hedges of rushes and reeds, snakes through the swamp, along a low ridge. Here, the ground is relatively dry and the going easy, but the chance of randomly encountering travellers or swamp denizens is doubled.
- The mouth of a partially flooded cave pierces the side of a low, weed-cloaked hill. A stream wends its way along the hill and pools outside the cave before flowing onwards into the deeper marsh.
- A fallen tree, thick with lichen and moss, lies across a wide stream, forming a makeshift bridge. A ranger or druid examining the fallen tree can make out clawed footprints imprinted into the moss growing on the tree and in the nearby mud.
- 7. The remains of a campsite, partially sunken in the mire, overlooks a virtually stagnant river. The campsite stands atop a slight rise surrounded by stands of rushes and reeds. Investigation reveals the campsite to be an old one; worryingly, several large rips in the camp's tents suggest a large clawed something tried to get at those sleeping within.
- 8. Thick mud interspaced with stands of rushes stretch for hundreds of feet before the mud gives way to a wide, sluggishly flowing river.
- 9. The blackened stump of a once immense tree juts forlornly from the swamp's noisome waters. The tree's exposed roots break through the mud of the low island upon which it stands, looking like frozen great worms or snakes. The blackened stump is 30 ft. tall and is visible for a mile in all directions.
- 10. Without warning, the straps on one of the characters' backpacks snaps dumping the pack's contents into the mire.

- 11. The rotting remains of a small hut set atop a near-flooded wooden platform lean drunkenly over a reed-fringed pool of surprisingly clear water. The prow of a sunken rowboat juts from the water near the platform. The rowboat has a small hole below the waterline, but is otherwise serviceable.
- 12. A slime-covered statue lies facedown amid the noisome swamp's muck. The statue is man-sized and difficult to prise from the cloying mud. If the characters manage the feat, they discover the statue is a surprisingly lifelike depiction of a man with a look of ultimate horror upon his face. So lifelike is the carving that it hints at the subject's insanity or terror...
- 13. A swath of colourful wild flowers grow amid the fetid mire. The flowers carpet the ground, but close examination reveals the ground to have the consistency of quicksand. To walk among the flowers, invites death.
- 14. An upturned, and rotting, rowboat lies on the banks of a wide river. One of the boat's oars is tangled in the low-hanging branches of a nearby weeping willow.
- 15. The partially sunken skeletal remains of a humanoid lie tangled among the weeds and reeds bounding a placid pool. The remains could be those of a lizardfolk or traveller.
- 16. Footprints–slowly filling with boggy water–cross the characters' path. A tracker can determine that whoever left the tracks was here mere minutes ago.
- 17. A small stone marker, replete with a chiselled arrow pointing to the west, is rendered almost invisible by a thick stand of weeds and creepers.
- 18. A huge tree stands hard against a stagnant pool of muddy water. The tree's twisted, grasping roots break the surface of a muddy bank before growing into the pool itself.
- 19. The remains of a shattered wagon lie incongruously over several sunken boulders. Investigation reveals it looks like the wagon was dropped from a great height, and has not been here that long.
- 20. The buzzing of many insects comes from a thicket of reeds. Characters investigating the sound discover the rotting, disembowelled corpse of a lizardfolk.



6: Uneventful Travel

Some days, an adventurer's life is full of danger and excitement. However, many other days are boring and uneventful.

- 1. The weather is overcast all day, and toward evening light rain falls over the swamp. The pitter patter of rain obscures much of the normal marsh sounds the characters have become accustomed to hearing. The sound could also lull tired characters—and perhaps their guards—to a deep sleep.
- 2. All morning, the party ford a series of shallow muddy streams, cutting through the mire. Weeping willows and the like cast their wide branches over the streams, creating many shadowy places for ambushers to lurk. Once the sun reaches its zenith, the party reach higher–dryer–ground.
- At dawn, a thin mist hangs over the marsh, giving the place an
 ethereal, otherworldly feel. It burns off quickly and the day is
 hot and dry. As the party penetrate deeper into the marsh, the
 terrain becomes more unforgiving, and the dryer places
 fewer and farther between.
- 4. The morning's weather is typical of the season, but by early afternoon thick, dreary clouds hang low in the sky threatening a heavy and sustained downpour. Such a deluge begins just after the party stop to camp.
- The party do little all day but slog through thick, glutinous mud and thickets of grasping reeds. In places, the reeds are so high, the characters temporarily lose sight of each other as they push onwards.
- 6. The day is uneventful, and the characters see no other travellers in the marsh. Around midday, they reach a large pool—or perhaps a small lake. The water is shallow and a flock of wading birds regards the characters as they pass.
- 7. Although the party must battle through swaths of dark, glutinous mud for much of the morning, they reach a section

- of higher ground later in the day which provides much easier going. Toward the end of the day, they discover a suitable campsite. (Roll on "Camping & Campsites" to determine the campsite's characteristics).
- 8. The day dawns dry and bright. Birds, and their song, fill the air, which seems fresher than normal for the noisome swamp. The sun rises high in the sky, and the day is a pleasant one. Although the characters slog through the mire for a whole day, they encounter no other travellers or large predators. Light clouds gather, at dusk.
- 9. The characters stumble upon a raised, dry track wending its way thorough the mire which uses the contours of a low ridge to avoid the worst of the bog. Signs of other travellers are plentiful in the soft, but not boggy, ground, and the characters make good time. (Such an area is a good place for the characters to meet other travellers, if the party is in need of assistance or information).
- 10. A boring day's travel through the monotonous mire is only broken by the occasional cloud of biting insects attracted to the party's sweat. The ground is squelchy, but relatively firm, and although everyone ends the day tied and muddy nothing untoward befalls the party this day.
- 11. The morning's travel is stop-start as the characters find their way over or around a dozen streams flowing through the boggy, low-lying ground. Sometimes the streams are narrow enough to jump across while in other spots sodden causeways or fallen trees serve as primitive bridges. The party sees no one all day (although-obviously-someone much have had a good reason to build the causeways).
- 12. Heavy rain pummels the marsh, halving visibility and soaking travellers to the skin. It quickly becomes evident that travel in such conditions—particularly as water levels begin to rise—is impossible. The party is best-advised to find a relatively dry spot to wait out the rain.



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