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# DETROIT RIVER INTERNATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

Annual Report

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## Dear Friends,

None of us could have planned for the year we just had. As 2020 began, the Refuge and partners worked in earnest planning for the May 2020 grand opening. There had been delays in the past, but we weren't going to let anything get in our way this time! In the 14 years of creating the Refuge Gateway and 8 years of construction of the John D. Dingell Jr. Visitor Center, not one of us would have predicted a global pandemic would thwart the opening plans – again! It was hard to accept but as the virus expanded, keeping each other and healthcare workers safe from the uncertainty of viral infection took rightful precedence.

However, as we've all learned this year, safe does not have to mean idle. As you'll see in this year's annual report, the Refuge team and community partners continued to forge ahead on the important work of conservation and connecting people with nature; while instituting crucial COVID mitigation measures for safety. Through spring and fall, the Refuge team worked diligently preparing the site for an eventual opening. In the summer, they conducted vital habitat and raptor surveys and strategically treated invasive species. The lottery hunt at Humbug reopened after having been closed for a few years. The FWS Director joined me and other Congressional colleagues as we discussed options and possibilities for opening to the public. Facilities and safety measures were put in place to prepare the opening. Then, on the beautiful, joyous day on October 1st, the Refuge Gateway opened to the public for the first time ever! To keep everyone safe, it was a 'soft opening' of the outdoors amenities without grand fanfare. Nevertheless, after 14 years of planning, blood, sweat, and tears we all held personal celebrations at the realization of a 20-year-old vision. Finally, people have access to the beautiful river and Humbug Marsh at the Refuge Gateway. Finally, there is fishing on the pier, hiking in the forest, and people sitting quietly at the edge of the marsh in peace to marvel at the river. This river that was polluted and bleak 40 years ago, is now bragging of its resilience and thriving. Like you. Like us. Like the Refuge.



**U.S. Representative Debbie Dingell poses with U.S. Representative Rashida Tlaib at Humbug Marsh. Photo: Susan White/ USFWS**

COVID may have set us back, but the hard work continues. We are now reaping the benefit of years of hard work and resilience – now, when we seem to need it the most. Being outside and connecting to nature are simple things that enhance our own resilience and joy. John knew that. He loved it and strived to find and share that strength and solace in nature at every opportunity. He shared that with me too, and I cherish it. It is for us all. The time, care, and commitment by many people brought us to where we want to be – together. Resilient. Welcoming. Safe. Outdoors. The Refuge Gateway and Humbug Marsh provide us unparalleled opportunity to enjoy the outdoors.

I invite you to get out and enjoy it. You deserve it!

*Debbie Dingell*



**Photo: The Office of Congresswoman Debbie Dingell**

# Refuge Manager Musings

By Susan White

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Introduction

If there's one thing we've learned over the past year, it's how wonderful and important it is to go outside, stretch and move, breathe in the fresh air, and connect to the beautiful nature that surrounds us. While staying home meant keeping each other safe from COVID, it also kept us more tied to computers and other screens, made us more sedentary and disconnected, and less active both physically and mentally. As the summer of 2020 wore on and scientists learned about safety and the virus, opening the grounds at the Refuge Gateway and Humbug Marsh became the priority. When we opened the grounds on October 1st, it was indeed a long-awaited (14 years in the making!) and welcome respite to our home-offices, our home-schools, home-gyms, and home-homes! A result of dedication, hard work, patience, and tenacity; the Downriver community had created a reality from what was just a vision 20 years ago. When we seemed to need it the most, it was finally open for everyone to enjoy.

As a conservation manager, seeing people outside and enjoying nature and the Refuge is a gift beyond words. It is a check-mark done - ✓ - on a goal of this Refuge. We are here to provide opportunities for people to deepen their connections to nature. We all know it's important. There is plenty of research to support what we all feel; being outside in nature can reduce stress and improve our overall mood. Our bodies physically become calmer while in nature and we're able to process things better and think more clearly. By taking that walk around the Refuge, the kids can run and we can all blow off some steam. It helps us create space from the negativity we may feel being confined to our homes – even when we don't realize it at the time. We see that taking time to go into nature helps us to gain that clarity of thought, improves our health, and it brings out creativity and inspires us. It helps us all, young and young-at-heart.

The visitor center will open, in time, when it is safe to do so. For now, having people outside and enjoying the beautiful river and its wondrous wildlife is what matters most. Spring is upon us. Bird migrations are starting. Fish are biting. Families are laughing along the trails. Stay Safe and we will see you at the Refuge!



Well-behaved, leashed dogs are welcome at the Refuge, just remember to clean up after them and take all trash with you!  
Photo: Susan White/USFWS



Refuge Manager Susan White points biking visitors in the right direction during the Refuge Gateway's first open weekend.  
Photo: Shannon Nelson/IWRA

# Ready, Set, Go!

Early in 2020, staff, volunteers, and contractors worked hard to prepare the grounds for our May 2020 Grand Opening. The Coronavirus pandemic halted that progress in its tracks.



Interpretive exhibit installation began during the first week of March 2020. Photo: A contractor works on exhibits at the visitor center; Susan White/USFWS



Volunteers braved a cold winter day to build a bridge over an inaccessible portion of the Green Trail. Photo: Six volunteers pose on the new bridge; Jody DeMeyere/USFWS



A boardwalk was added to expand the Orange Trail, allowing for awesome views of the Marsh! Photos: Boardwalk under construction (above) and completed (right); Jody DeMeyere/USFWS



Office furniture was delivered in late February. On March 17, staff finally moved into the Visitor Center! Photos: Boxed furniture lines the hallway of the staff wing (left); Movers unload boxes from a moving truck as staff provide directions (right); Jessie and Steve wait in the hallway for more boxes to be unloaded (below); Susan White/USFWS



Two days after moving in, staff shifted to mandatory telework status as Michigan and the U.S. Interior Department called for stay at home orders. While work on the Refuge was paused, staff continued to work hard from home. Photo: Stay Home Stay Safe graphic; Michigan.gov



In July, warm weather and successful flattening of the curve allowed for mission-critical, socially distant work to resume. Photos: Tyler stands on a ladder to fill a seed drill with native prairie mix (right); Steve directs a tractor seeding native prairie on the Refuge Gateway (above); Alexa Blankenship/TWRA



# Teamwork Makes the Dream Work!

After several months of stay at home orders and working remotely, the need for safe outdoor recreation was apparent. The Refuge Gateway, Fishing Pier, and Humbug Marsh trails could open! With less than a month's notice, staff rallied together to add the finishing touches to the site for the public to enjoy.



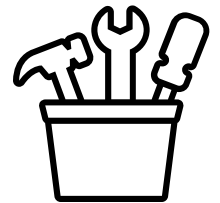
Interns and technicians mowed grass and weeded overgrown areas. Photos: Michala (above) and Alexa (right) sit and pull weeds around the visitor center; Susan White/USFWS



Staff worked together to stain kiosks, install interpretive panels, and fill brochure boxes with educational materials. Photo: Steve stands behind a kiosk as he tightens a screw; Jody DeMeyere/USFWS



Strength in numbers! The Fisheries Team dedicated a week to clean up the Refuge Gateway and trails, install signs, and prepare the fishing pier for local anglers to use. Photos: 11 masked Fisheries staff pose six feet apart after a long day of work (above); Jim Boase/USFWS; Justin and Jim use a drill to fasten PVC containers to pier railings for fishing line disposal (right); Jody DeMeyere/USFWS



Refuge and Fisheries staff take a socially-distanced lunch break from gateway preparations on the Friday before opening the grounds. Photo: A panoramic view of staff sitting in chairs around a wide circle on the Visitor Center patio; Nicole Lafleur/IWRA

Celebrate Open Gates!

Finally, on the chilly morning of October 1, 2020, the Refuge Gateway opened to the public for the first time ever.



The weekend began at sunrise by raising the American Flag - the same one flown over the U.S. Capitol while Congressman John Dingell laid in state - over the Refuge Gateway and Visitor Center. Photo: Joann Van Aken raises the American Flag with assistance from Jim Boase on the lawn of the Visitor Center; Susan White/USFWS



Visitors were encouraged to keep group sizes small, practice safe distances, and wear masks when in proximity to others.

Photos: Jody provides information to three masked visitors (above); Longtime volunteer Dorothy McLeer and her leashed dog Fruli pose with the visitor center in the background (left); Shannon Nelson/TWRA; Visitors walk on the path to the fishing pier while two boys throw a football on the adjacent lawn (below); Susan White/USFWS



NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGES

PLEDGE TO  
**PHYSICALLY  
DISTANCE**  
by keeping  
group  
size small.



The fishing pier quickly filled with visitors excited to cast their first lines into the depths of the Detroit River. Photo: Five people fish along the north perimeter of the fishing pier (above); A man holds up the first yellow perch caught from the fishing pier (right); Susan White and Jason Blake/USFWS



PLEDGE TO  
**Recreate  
Responsibly**  
NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGES





Joann and Dave ready to greet visitors and answer questions under the information tent at the Refuge Gateway. Photo: Susan White/USFWS

Visitors could now enjoy the Refuge Gateway, Fishing Pier, and Humbug Marsh Thursday through Sunday from Dawn to Dusk



At the Refuge Gateway, Federal Wildlife Officers (FWOs) are commonly the first employee a visitor may meet. FWOs assist with safety and security, provide familiarization of the unit, and answer questions from visitors. Photo: A law enforcement truck parked at the Refuge Gateway; Clayton Hamilton/USFWS



A small child imagines how big an eagle would be while playing in the family-sized eagle's nest in Humbug Marsh. Photo: Nicole LaFleur/ IWRA



The Refuge is a great place for families! Whether pushing a stroller along accessible trails or letting the kids run ahead in open sight lines, everyone can feel comfortable in nature here. Photos: Two grandparents and their two grandchildren stop for a picture on the Refuge Gateway bike path (above); A family with two adults and two children (one in a stroller) pose in Humbug Marsh while walking the trails (right); Susan White/USFWS



# Welcome to your Refuge!

# Biology on the Refuge



Deputy Refuge Manager Steve Dushane operates a tractor pulling the seed drill equipment. Photo: Jessie Fletcher/USFWS

## Native Prairie Habitat Planted at Refuge Gateway

Refuge Biological staff prepared the Gateway by treating invasive plants with herbicide and mowing, before using a machine to sow native seed to create important prairie habitat! Seeded native plant species included common milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca*), butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*), purple coneflower (*Echinacea pallida*), tall sunflower (*Helianthus giganteus*), wild bergamot (*Monarda fistulosa*), foxglove beardtongue (*Penstemon digitalis*), wild columbine (*Aquilegia canadensis*), marsh blazing star (*Liatris spicata*), and more!



## Native Bee Surveys

Biologists from the East Lansing FWS Ecological Services office traveled to Detroit River IWR this summer for the first season of native bee surveys on the Refuge. These surveys will be replicated for the next few years so that Refuge staff can compare the 2020 baseline data and assess the health of native bee populations in our area!

## Hawk Watch Keeps Flying!

Not even a global pandemic can stop migration! The Detroit River Hawk Watch celebrated its 38th consecutive year of monitoring diurnal raptor and turkey vulture migration at the mouth of the Detroit River. This year, our volunteers and professional counter spent **568 hours** counting **101,200 individuals** across **16 different species** of turkey vultures and raptors.



Detroit River Hawk Watch volunteer and professional counter physically distance while counting migrating raptors. Photo: Jessie Fletcher/USFWS



Summer 2020 Directorate Fellow Rachel Smaby standing with field equipment in a wetland. Photo: Rachel Smaby

## DRIWR's First Directorate Fellow

The Refuge was excited to welcome Rachel Smaby as the 2020 summer FWS Directorate Fellow on the biology team. Rachel worked virtually with the Refuge for 12 weeks on a rigorous project as part of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service's Directorate Fellowship Program. Rachel's project assisted with drafting two inventory and monitoring protocols including Water Level Analysis Surveys and Great Lakes Coastal Marsh Vegetation Surveys. We wish Rachel luck in her future career with USFWS!



Two Ecological Services biologists collect and identify bees from traps. Photo: Jessie Fletcher/USFWS





# Field Season Successes!

Although 2020 had a breadth of challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Detroit River-Western Lake Erie Cooperative Weed Management Area (DR-WLE CWMA) strike team persevered through telework and beyond, amassing a number of accomplishments. The team took advantage of stay-at-home orders to brush up on their invasive species identification and eradication skills with virtual webinars and trainings, including a Michigan State University Threats to Michigan Forest Health webinar and an Upper Midwest Invasive Species conference. These provided technicians the opportunity to network with others involved in invasive species management throughout the Great Lakes region. The strike team also reached new and interested students by conducting a virtual presentation to students at Carlson High School about their work and how they too can get involved with the Refuge, DR-WLE CWMA, or pursue a related career.

In 2020, the strike team **surveyed 8,839.4 acres** of plant communities and **mapped 2,746 invasive species** population data points across all DR-WLE CWMA partner properties, despite getting a late start to the field season. They ended the season strong by exceeding their goal of treating 75 acres, for a grand total of **89.4 acres treated!**

After the herbicide treatment season, the team roller-chopped 16 acres of dead Phragmites stands via Marsh Master at the Nature Conservancy's Erie Marsh Preserve. Roller-chopping invigorates the soil, thereby improving the success of herbicide treatments and allowing the area to be revegetated by other native vegetation and improving access for future habitat management. The Refuge's Fix Unit was also roller-chopped after the treatment season to provide habitat for migrating waterfowl.

This year while surveying, technicians discovered a state-threatened plant, American water willow (*Justicia americana*), on privately-owned partner land! A new population of the state-threatened arrowhead (*Sagittaria montevidensis*) was also recorded this year.



*Justicia americana* individual found by the DR-WLE CWMA strike team. Photo: Tyler Dolin/IWRA



*Sagittaria montevidensis* individual found by the strike team. Photo: Tyler Dolin/IWRA



Photos (from top): Technician Tyler takes field notes about a new invasive plant species in a coastal wetland; Technician Alexa drills into an invasive European black alder tree in preparation of herbicide treatment; Technician Michala travels through a wetland on the Marsh Master; Alexa Blankenship/IWRA and Michala Burke/IWRA



## International Wildlife Refuge Alliance Mission Continues Through 2020

A challenging year for all, yet through dedication and passion for conservation the International Wildlife Refuge Alliance (IWRA) persevered to continue to build capacity for projects and programming of the Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge.

Mandatory telework, a revision to our daily lives first felt restraining, but after digging our heels in to the situation and learning ways to continue communications from afar, IWRA managed to sustain as well as initiate new funding to support a variety of Refuge projects. The public will soon be able to experience the waters of the Humbug Marsh via the handicap-accessible kayak launch in the Refuge Gateway, and from the comfort of home for those not yet ready to visit, experience educational videos on recreational use on their public lands produced in partnership with Detroit Outdoors and students from the University of Michigan-Dearborn through the generosity of Ford Motor Co.

The Canvasback Corner Nature Store has been stocked and is nearly ready to welcome you as soon as the doors of the John D. Dingell, Jr. Visitor Center are able to open. We are forever grateful to our continued, dedicated partners and supportive donors to help us get through a trying year. We look forward to seeing you on the grounds of the Refuge Gateway and at the upcoming Annual Benefit Dinner September 9, 2021!



Two people take a walk through the snow on the Humbug Marsh Green Trail. Photo: Janine Lajavic/USFWS



A bicycle repair station was installed at the Refuge Gateway, pictured here with the Visitor Center in the background. Photo: Richard Skogulnd/IWRA

## Ecorse: A Refuge Gateway City

Located about halfway down the Detroit River and nestled within the Downriver communities, the City of Ecorse has leveraged its strategic position to support the Great Lakes and national economy. Development trends in the 20th century maximized industrial and urban growth, leaving very little public land and even less natural areas intact. Today is a new day. The City of Ecorse is developing a vision that renews the community's relationship with its natural resource assets and its neighboring communities. The Refuge is proud to be a part of a growing group of influential partners known as the Ecorse Creek Committee. This group is proudly sharing their vision formed around the essence of healing communities, natural systems, and the relationship between people and nature.



A kayaker collects trash in Ecorse Creek during a clean up event. Photo: Jody DeMeyere/USFWS

Search Facebook/EcorseCreek for learn more.

## Community Connections Internship

Hi! I'm Mike Solomon, IWRA's Community Connections intern for 2020! I am a Senior at University of Michigan- Dearborn, in the Earth Science program. Over the course of 2020, I took on the challenge of bolstering our digital presence through a series of environmental education videos. The idea behind the project was to foster engagement with the community we serve, even if it had to be done at a distance.

I found the work I did at DRIWR to be incredibly rewarding, and it solidified my resolve in pursuing a career in environmental education. Video production is a challenging, lengthy process, and I learned how to write scripts, storyboard ideas, set up a "home studio" and adapt educational programming into an easy to film format. Overall, this process, was a great way to learn how to budget time and plan long-term projects.

Bringing people closer to the nature that surrounds us is something I'm very passionate about, and this video series allowed me to do that safely and effectively!



Mike Solomon, Community Connections Intern. Photo courtesy of Mike Solomon

## Detroit Outdoors Youth Conservation Educator

The Detroit Outdoors Youth Conservation Educator program is a partnership between the U.S. Forest Service, Sierra Club, IWRA, and DRIWR. Christopher Jackson leads the partnership to provide conservation education programming opportunities and outreach to underserved populations in Wayne County. The partnership strives to increase understanding and awareness of the value of forests, riparian habitats, and outdoor recreation in urban and rural environments.

The Refuge team welcomed Detroit Outdoors partners to the Refuge for a day of brainstorming collaboration opportunities and strategies of how to introduce camping to an urban audience in COVID times. The day ended with a potluck and bonfire at Visitor Services Manager Jody DeMeyere's house.



Refuge and Detroit Outdoors staff enjoy a bonfire after working together to increase camping access to urban communities. Photo: Jody DeMeyere/USFWS

# Hard Goodbyes & Exciting Hellos

2020 was quite the year for Refuge projects, but it was also a year of changes to our staff. In January, longtime Administrative Assistant AnnaMaryLee Vollick accepted a new position with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Then, in February, Park Ranger Jennie Braatz lead her last nature walk on Humberg Trails before the birth of her second child. She has since moved to the Upper Peninsula with her family. We miss you, Anna and Jennie!



How we miss gathering like this! In January, friends from Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge joined us for Anna's goodbye party. Photo: A large group of people posing for a picture; USFWS staff

## New Additions to Our Staff - Welcome Aboard!




**Administrative Assistant**

**Jason Blake**



**Park Ranger**

**Jazmyn Bernard**



**Biological Technician**

**Michala Burke**



**Maintenance Apprentice**

**Dave DeMeyere**



**Maintenance Worker**

**Jesse Macklin**



**Park Ranger**

**Todd Weston**

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