

# D R I V E R

DETROIT RIVER  
INTERNATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE



ANNUAL REPORT 2021

# A YEAR IN REVIEW

**Debbie Dingell, U.S. Representative**



Dear Friends,

As we reflect back on 2021 and lean into 2022, it is hard to believe the impact the global pandemic has had on our society. With every new variant, there seems to be a renewed need to pull back on the reins a little and evaluate what a post-Covid world might look like. With every new surge, there are reminders of the impacts and disruptions caused by the pandemic. The bright spot, however, is the glowing evidence that Americans are resilient! Our communities are resilient! The economy and our workforce have proven to be resilient! And our nation's wild places are resilient! As we venture into more uncharted waters in 2022, it will be up to each and every one of us to accept change, to show great empathy and respect toward others, and do all we can to keep each other safe.

As you will see in this year's report, progress is still being made to further the mission and programs of the Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge. During 2021, several new key staff were added to the refuge team. The visitor center storage building construction was completed, and planning and design began for a new Refuge bunkhouse. The bunkhouse will allow the Refuge to offer job opportunities that they otherwise could not, due to housing limitations. The Refuge continues to expand its footprint through the land acquisition process and several restoration projects such as Sugar Island and Ford Marsh are underway or in the planning stages. With the addition of two maintenance workers in 2021, much of the maintenance backlog is now being addressed.

In April 2021, the Refuge Gateway opened 7 days a week to give the public additional options to get outside and shake off those pandemic blues. Anglers, hikers, dog walkers, and a few mushroom hunters showed up. Many, by the carloads. Walleye and white bass anglers found great success on the newly opened fishing pier. The new SMART bus route delivered people from all over Metro Detroit and Downriver. Things seemed to be returning to what seemed like normal. So normal, that last summer I was excited to see that the John D. Dingell, Jr. Visitor Center would finally be opened for the public to enjoy. On July 8, what would have been John Dingell's 95th birthday, the Refuge welcomed visitors into the visitor center for the first time during a "soft" opening. This was a day over a decade in the making and one John would have loved to see. Unfortunately, increasing Covid cases temporarily closed the visitor center one month later. But rest assured, we will officially cut the ribbon for the visitor center in the months ahead - more information to come!

As we move into 2022, I want to encourage you to get outside and enjoy YOUR International Wildlife Refuge. Go fishing! Go hiking! Or simply just go see the magnificent sunrise from the fishing pier! Whatever you do, make an effort to go and see the Refuge Gateway, Humbug Marsh, or other refuge units open to the public. It is all of ours to enjoy!

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Debbie Dingell". The signature is fluid and cursive.

United States Representative

# REFUGE MANAGER MUSINGS

**Steve Dushane, Acting Refuge Manager**

It is quite interesting to be able to look back at each year as another “season” at the Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge (DRIWR). Our many accomplishments from 2021 were hard fought and very rewarding and it is also not lost on me that 2021 was my 16th “season” at DRIWR! I have a unique perspective to have watched the refuge from its birth in 2001 from my seat just down the road at Ottawa NWR to where the Refuge has grown today.

This unique perspective has allowed me to watch as refuge lands were acquired, and then restored. It has allowed me to watch as those restoration projects matured and provided more quality habitat for wildlife.

Some other notable things that make me proud during my “seasons” at the Refuge are the return of spawning whitefish and sturgeon to the Detroit River, beaver making a return to the area after a 100 plus year absence, and the sheer numbers of osprey and eagle nesting in and around Refuge lands. What a place DRIWR has become!

In the Spring of 2021, with the success of the “soft opening” of Humbug Marsh, the Refuge Gateway, and the fishing pier for the public to enjoy, we decided to open the grounds to the public 7 days a week. Just in time for fishing season! In July 2021, when we thought the worst of the global pandemic was behind us, the Refuge opened the doors of the John D. Dingell, Jr. Visitor Center to the public for the very first time. Just as we started to get our staff and volunteers trained and starting to hit our stride, along came Delta. COVID numbers rapidly increased and we were forced to re-evaluate again and decided to close the building to keep our staff and the public safe. Some of the best news for all involved came on September 16, 2021, that the visitor center construction project was finally complete! Just one day shy of being 8 years to the day that the contract was first signed and issued. What a long, long trip that was!

In late summer we also learned that the allure of the Hawaiian Islands was far too great for then Refuge Manager Susan White. The ocean runs deep in her blood and though the Great Lakes are vast, and ocean like to many of us here, it just did not have the same smell and feel as an ocean breeze for Susan. Coincidentally, her last day working for DRIWR was September 11. The actual day that the Visitor Center construction project was closed out.

As we move into 2022, DRIWR still has a lot to accomplish. As we all move forward together, we hope that we will be able to share many additional highlights in the future like the ones outlined in this annual report. I hope we will see you all at the Refuge very soon!



# VISITOR SERVICES

## 2021 Highlights

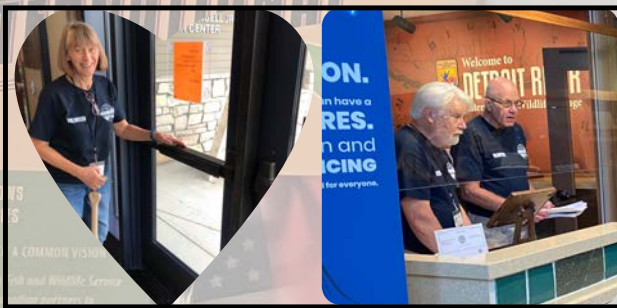
Photos: Nicole LaFleur and Jazmyn Bernard/USFWS



### Visitor Center Opened for Five Weeks

With the 2013 groundbreaking a distant memory, the doors to the John D. Dingell, Jr. Visitor Center FINALLY opened on July 8, 2021! What a special way to celebrate the late Representative's 95th birthday. COVID may have changed our plans for a grand celebration, but over the course of five weeks, the center saw 3,223 visits, before closing again due to rising levels locally. We can't wait to throw the doors open again in 2022!

### We ♥ Our DRIWR Volunteers



Photos: Nicole LaFleur and Joann Van Aken/IWRA

Volunteers contributed greatly to this year's success. The hours spent by those helping with grounds and trail upkeep kept the property welcoming and inviting to visitors, while the time our front desk and nature store volunteers gave helped to ensure everyone was greeted warmly when they entered the visitor center. Overall in 2021, 163 volunteers donated 2,540 hours!

### First Season of Fishing Pier a Success



Photos: IWRA

The fishing pier at the Refuge Gateway saw its first full year of service with 32,750 visits by anglers, bird watchers, and hikers. White bass season in early May was especially popular, as the 700 foot pier attracted entire families to come out to spend the day fishing. In the first three weeks in May alone, over 4,000 fishing pier visits were made. The variety and size of the fish hauled out of the river was amazing.

### Outdoor Programming Carried On

This year has been full of fun and exciting outdoor programs; both at the Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge and our partner locations. We have been able to bring interactive nature-based activities to over 1,700 people. As we start a new year, we are excited to continue activities such as hiking tours, fishing activities, and birding. But we are even more excited to start new activities like archery, phenology hikes, and virtual programming. You can find all our free programs on our Facebook page and website (links on back cover).



Photo: Jazmyn Bernard/USFWS

## Ecorse Creek Clean-Up Events

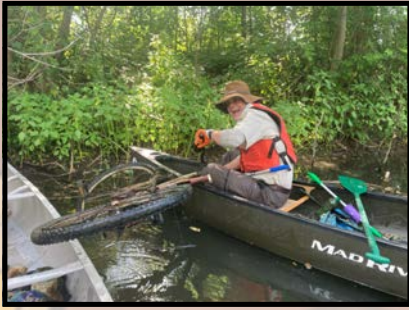


Photo: Jody DeMeyere/USFWS

The Ecorse Creek Committee had a busy summer hosting three litter clean ups, in three cities, along Ecorse Creek. Collectively, 126 volunteers from all over SE Michigan joined together to remove over 2,398 pounds of litter from the creek. Thank you to all the volunteers who supported the clean-up efforts, including Ecorse's Department of Public Works. Their heavy equipment made quick work of equipment cleaning.

## SMART Bus Visits the Refuge



Photo: Todd Weston/USFWS

The Refuge is pleased to announce that SMART has added the Refuge to Route 160. Here's a fun idea: Attach your bicycle on the front of the bus, park your bike in the racks once you arrive at the visitor center, walk almost three miles of trails at the Humbug Marsh Unit, and then bike the wonderful Downriver Linked Greenways trail back home! What a great way to spend a day!

## Need Gear? Borrow Ours!

There are many fun things to do at the DRIWR. You can fish on the beautiful fishing pier, walk the forested trails, watch the energetic birds, and much more. But what do you do if you forgot some of your gear at home? Borrow ours! We want to make sure that every visitor can fully enjoy the Refuge. This is why we have a gear closet for visitors to borrow binoculars, fishing poles, tackle boxes, yoga mats, and outdoor exploration backpacks at no charge!

## Bees in the D - Hives Arrive



Photo: Jazmyn Bernard/USFWS

Things are getting busy at the DRIWR! The Refuge hired some new workers in 2021 to help our plants succeed. These little gardeners will pollinate the prairie flowers throughout the Refuge Gateway and Humbug Marsh units. Our new workers are honeybees and they are working hard to keep the Refuge buzzing.

## Improve Yourself at the Refuge

Nature can be a powerful healing force during these stressful times and the Refuge is no exception. Many visitors have used the Refuge as a place to relax and unwind during the pandemic. Thankfully Refuge staff partnered with local yoga teachers and meditation leaders to provide programming to assist with slowing down and finding our center. We are looking forward to providing more opportunities for visitors to find peace in nature.



Photo: Todd Weston/USFWS

# BIOLOGY UPDATE

## Pollinator Garden Seeded at Refuge Gateway

Refuge Biological staff continued to restore prairie habitat on the Refuge Gateway property by frost seeding a pollinator garden. Native plant species that were seeded included: common milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca*), butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*), foxglove beardtongue (*Penstemon digitalis*), common mountain mint (*Pycnanthemum virginianum*) and more!



**Left:** Refuge Biology Jessie Fletcher helps to frost-seed a prairie at the Refuge Gateway. **Right:** Alexa Blankenship channels her inner "salt bae" while hand-seeding important sedges, grasses, and forbs for a pollinator garden at the Refuge Gateway. Photos: Jessie Fletcher/USFWS

## Ford Marsh Habitat Rehabilitation Project Begins!



Deputy Refuge Manager Steve Dushane points out an item of interest in Lake Erie to employees from Barr while conducting an initial site visit with them at the Ford Marsh Unit. Photo: Jessie Fletcher/USFWS

The first phase of the Ford Marsh Habitat Rehabilitation project got underway in 2021. Barr Engineering Co. was contracted by the Refuge to perform a feasibility study for this important wetland rehabilitation project. As part of the visioning and planning, this project will assemble a diverse group of practitioners and stakeholders to come up with a holistic plan to develop a project that is resilient to climate change and will ultimately restore function to not only the coastal wetland system, but the associated native natural beach ridge and in-water sediment transport. We are excited to see where this project goes in 2022!

## Brancheau Moist Soil Unit Receives Much Needed Management



Michala Burke operates a tractor with a disking attachment as part of the Brancheau Unit's Moist Soil Unit reset that occurred in 2021. This unit was treated with herbicide to clear all vegetation, mowed to remove the remaining biomass, and disked to bring up fresh soil and seeds to revitalize the area. The moist soil wetland plants that will grow next year will support resident and migrating waterfowl, shorebirds, and wading birds.

Photo: Jessie Fletcher/USFWS

## Avian Window Collision Prevention Devices Installed at Visitor Center

In the spring, our Visitor Center had a mini makeover. White dots were applied to the windows. These dots were manufactured to reduce avian window collisions, especially during migration seasons. On highly reflective surfaces, birds often cannot distinguish between a reflection or actual habitat. These dots help break up the reflection of "habitat" and appear as a barrier. Since the dots were placed on the windows, there have been no fatal collisions (we walk the perimeter of the Visitor Center daily) and there have been fewer recorded non-fatal collisions!



Tyler Dolin and Michala Burke work together to install the anti-collision product on the Visitor Center windows. Photo: Alexa Blankenship/DRWLE-CWMA

# MAINTENANCE UPDATE

During 2021, much of the maintenance staff's time was spent trouble shooting and correcting issues regarding the new Visitor Center. The Refuge was able to complete construction on a new outbuilding for the VC that will house all of our ground maintenance equipment for easy access. It is also set up as a mini shop for doing repairs. With the early and dry spring, the maintenance team had more time to complete many projects which had been deferred. Dikes were repaired at the Fix Unit. The team was finally able to demolish the old Brancheau Unit pumphouse and resurface the area to grass. At the Brancheau Unit, the team was able to replace and reset a 60' pipe and flap gate that separates the pump cell from the perimeter ditch. We performed a substantial amount of trail rehabilitation and maintenance as well. The Strong Unit parking lot was rebuilt and elevating it due to high Lake Erie water levels. The lot was raised to a level at which it should no longer be flooded by high water

Maintenance staff were able to provide Heavy Equipment Safety Training to several participants.

Much of the great success in 2021 can be attributed to the addition of maintenance team members Dave DeMeyere and Jessie Macklin!



Construction of the pipe and flap gate at Brancheau Unit.  
Photo: John Nicely/USFWS



The New outbuilding/mini shop behind the Visitor Center.  
Photo: John Nicely/USFWS

# DETROIT RIVER-WESTERN LAKE ERIE COOPERATIVE WEED MANAGEMENT AREA UPDATE



Strike team technician Michala Burke chemically treats autumn olive stumps at the Refuge Gateway, with cut autumn olive branches lining the right of the path. Photo: Alexa Blankenship/DRWLE-CWMA



Technicians wearing survival suits as they prepare to kayak to Humbug Island for invasive species treatments on a cold November day. Photo: Michala Burke/DRWLE-CWMA



Strike team leader Tyler Dolin chemically treats *Phragmites* grass from the Marsh Master. Photo: Alexa Blankenship/DRWLE-CWMA

## 2021: A Successful Year of Invasive Species Management

In 2021, Strike Team technicians Tyler Dolin, Alexa Blankenship, and Michala Burke returned to complete 9678.10 acres of early detection and rapid response (EDRR) surveys covering 48 miles of coastal ecosystems between Detroit and the Ohio border. Based on the results of these surveys, the Strike Team then completed over 90 acres of chemical and mechanical invasive species treatment. Plant species targeted during chemical treatment at partner properties between the months of June and December included *Phragmites* grass (*Phragmites australis australis*), spotted knapweed (*Centaurea stoebe*), Japanese knotweed (*Fallopia japonica*), floating primrose-willow (*Ludwigia peploides*), wild and cut-leaf teasels (*Dipsacus fullonum* and *D. laciniatus*), black alder (*Alnus glutinosa*), autumn olive (*Elaeagnus umbellata*), and common and glossy buckthorns (*Rhamnus cathartica* and *Frangula alnus*). Two days in May were spent removing approximately 360 pounds of garlic mustard and dame's rocket (*Alliaria petiolaris* and *Hesperis matronalis*). After *Phragmites* chemical treatment concluded in October, the Strike Team spent several days mowing and crushing more than 8.5 acres of dead *Phragmites* to encourage native growth from the seed banks.

The Strike Team also attended a record nineteen conferences, summits, and workshops to strengthen and develop their invasive species management skills. In addition, the team published a website, and activated a Facebook page to increase interaction and outreach to the community. For a more details on the activities of Detroit River-Western Lake Erie Cooperative Weed Management Area, visit their Facebook page at [www.facebook.com/drwlecwma](http://www.facebook.com/drwlecwma), or visit their website at [www.drwlecwma.org](http://www.drwlecwma.org), where you can download the 2021 Annual Report.





# DETROIT RIVER HAWKWATCH UPDATE



**Detroit River Hawk Watch crew enjoy a sunny start at the count site on Day 1 of the count. Photo: Mark Hainen/USFWS Volunteer**



**Sharp-shinned hawk checking out the count site in September. Photo: Jerry Jourdan/USFWS Volunteer.**

## Eyes to the Skies at Lake Erie Metropark

The Detroit River Hawk Watch completed its 39th consecutive season of monitoring migrating raptors at the mouth of the Detroit River. This year our volunteers, apprentices, and professional counter spent 532 hours counting 14 different species with a total of 94,616 individual raptors. This community science project would not be successful without our dedicated volunteers who spend so much time scanning the sky! To download the season summary for this year, please visit <http://detroitriverhawkwatch.org/>

The Detroit River Hawk Watch was excited to welcome two new apprentices for the 2021 season. Erika Van Kirk and Shourjya Majumder spent the fall learning how to identify and accurately count migrating raptors and got valuable experience with data management and outreach at the count site.

Background photo: More than 900 broad-winged hawks in a kettle in September. Photo: Mark Hainen/USFWS Volunteer.



**Northern harrier flying over the hawk watch. Photo: Andrew Sturgess/USFWS Volunteer**



**Turkey vultures flying low. Photo: Andrew Sturgess/USFWS Volunteer.**



# INTERNATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE ALLIANCE UPDATE



The International Wildlife Refuge Alliance is the non-profit Friends Organization to the Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge and continues to work towards fostering conservation, increasing Refuge awareness and support, and build the capacity of the Refuge to deliver its mission to the American people, even through a pandemic. IWRA actively recruited new partners, maintained relationships with local and national partners, continued to increase public awareness of the Refuge, and secure financial support for a variety of Refuge projects. Notables being the installation of the natural playscape adjacent to the fishing pier and the completion of the handicap accessible kayak launch, both in the Refuge Gateway in Trenton, MI.

2021 proved to be another challenging year as the pandemic continued to cause adjustments to the workplace, but IWRA was pleased to be able to host its 15th annual benefit dinner and present four John D. Dingell, Jr. Friend of the Refuge Awards in recognition of leadership and dedication to conservation on the Detroit River and western Lake Erie Basin. Individual awards given to Mark Messer and Dave Perry, the Non-profit award to the Downriver Linked Greenways, and the Business award to Roemer Utility Services.

Despite the limited time the visitor center was open to the public, the Canvasback Corner Nature Store operations went smoothly and provided insight for future success of the store. Special thanks to Hydro Flask's Parks for All program, allowing 144 customers to receive a 22 ounce Hydro Flask tumbler with a \$50 purchase.



Thanks to generous donations by the Brown family, the Wilson Foundation, and DTE, a new addition has come to the Refuge Gateway Unit near the fishing pier. A natural playscape has been installed. Surrounded by boulders and downed trees, the site will ignite everyone's childhood imaginations. A covered pavilion will be added in spring 2022. Photos: Jody DeMeyere/USFWS



Grab your kayak and head to the Refuge Gateway. The accessible kayak launch has been installed and is ready for use. Refuge staff are working closely with Wayne County Parks to invite a local livery to rent boats for those who want to test the waters before purchasing their own. This is a great way to experience another perspective of Humbug Marsh, Michigan's only Wetland of International Importance. Photo: Joann Van Aken/IWRA

## 2021 FRIEND OF THE REFUGE AWARD HONOREES



Downriver Linked Greenways is dedicated to the establishment and maintenance of non-motorized trails connecting the DRIWR and 21 communities. The trail passes the Refuge Gateway and Humbug Marsh Unit. Thanks to the dedicated efforts of Mary Bohling and Anita Twardesky, the Refuge has become a functional aspect of the Downriver Linked Greenways initiative. Photo: Joann Van Aken/IWRA



Pete Roemer and Roemer Utility Services stepped up when the DRIWR needed it most. When construction problems held up the completion of the Visitor Center, Pete oversaw subcontractors to finish and landscape the visitor center. Pete and his lead rep, Ed Behnke, worked to ensure completion of complex repairs allowing the visitor center to open its doors July 2021. Photo: Joann Van Aken/IWRA



Mark Messer, volunteer photographer, has given his time and talent in memorializing events, securing relevant images for a variety of uses by IWRA and the Refuge. His talent to depict the energy and camaraderie at events are often used in creating awareness of the DRIWR as an urban asset. Photo: Joann Van Aken/IWRA



Dave Perry, with his strong belief in conservation with community support, has become the voice at the IWRA benefit dinners, stimulating public interest for fundraising support. Dave is a trusted voice from his endeavors with DU. His outreach and awareness of the Refuge near and far is greatly appreciated. Photo: Joann Van Aken/IWRA



Refuge Manager Susan White presented the first official visitor of the John D. Dingell, Jr. Visitor Center with a gift bag of souvenirs from the Nature Store on July 8, 2021. Photo: Joann Van Aken/IWRA



The fully stocked Nature Store and Hydro Flask giveaway graphics. Photos: Nicole LaFleur/ IWRA





Refuge staff pictured in "Together Mode" during a virtual staff meeting on Microsoft Teams. Photo: Jason Blake/USFWS

## DRIWR Staff

Daniel Kennedy, Refuge Manager  
 Steve Dushane, Deputy Refuge Manager  
 Jody DeMeyere, Visitor Services Manager  
 Jessica Fletcher, Wildlife Biologist  
 John Nicely, Maintenance Mechanic  
 Dave DeMeyere, Maintenance Apprentice  
 Aleigha Alexander, Park Ranger  
 Jazmyn Bernard, Park Ranger  
 Todd Weston, Park Ranger  
 Doug Briggs, Zone Officer  
 Joann Van Aken, IWRA Executive Director  
 Nicole LaFleur, Nature Store Manager  
 Alexa Blankenship, Biological Technician  
 Michala Burke, Biological Technician  
 Emma Delie, Biological Technician  
 Erika Van Kirk, Hawk Watch Apprentice

The only International Wildlife Refuge in North America, DRIWR is located along the lower Detroit River and western shoreline of Lake Erie - just 20 miles south of Detroit, Michigan and 50 miles north of Toledo, Ohio. Situated in a major metropolitan area, the Refuge's location is unique, as is the history of how the Refuge was created.

In 2001, Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge was established by Congress as a result of efforts by U.S. and Canadian politicians, conservation leaders and local communities to build a sustainable future for the Detroit River and western Lake Erie ecosystems. In recognition of this collaboration and with the understanding that wildlife don't understand political boundaries, the Refuge was given international status, making it the first and only of its kind in North America.

While the Refuge consists of more than 6,200 acres of habitat, it is not one contiguous plot of land. Made up of more than 30 separate parcels, known as Refuge units, each were acquired either through purchase, donation or cooperative agreement. While some Refuge units have specific covenants or stipulations about how they are to be managed, all are governed by the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997.

## Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge



5437 W. Jefferson  
 Trenton, MI 48183

734-365-0219  
 detroitriver@fws.gov



[fws.gov/refuge/detroit\\_river](http://fws.gov/refuge/detroit_river)  
[facebook.com/DetroitRiverIWR/](https://facebook.com/DetroitRiverIWR/)