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The Nature Conservancy Preserves Island Near Lake Superior

At Risk of Development, Clough Island Will Be Conserved for Fish, Wildlife and Outdoor Recreation

The Nature Conservancy announced today that it has acquired the landmark 358-acre Clough Island located at the heart of the St. Louis River Estuary near Duluth, Minn. and Superior, Wis. where the St. Louis River meets Lake Superior.

Also known as Whiteside Island and Big Island, the property is the largest island in the estuary.

The island was at risk of being developed into a resort with condominiums and a golf course until the Conservancy purchased it so that it could be preserved for conservation and outdoor recreation. It provides essential habitat for wildlife including native fish and migratory and breeding birds.

“Clough Island is the centerpiece of the St. Louis River Estuary,” said Peggy Ladner, who directs the Conservancy’s work in Minnesota. “It needed to be conserved to sustain the fish and animals that thrive there. We’re thrilled that we were able to save it. It can now and forever be enjoyed by people and wildlife.”

Clough Island is in Wisconsin, but the Conservancy’s Minnesota and Wisconsin programs teamed up to protect it.

“Nature knows no boundaries,” said Mary Jean Huston, director of the Conservancy’s Wisconsin program. “We all have to work together to conserve our best lands and waters. We cannot live without clean air and water. We need wild and beautiful places like Clough Island.”

Preserving Clough Island and other key natural areas in the Lake Superior Basin helps keep its water clean. In Minnesota, Duluth, Beaver Bay, Grand Portage, Silver Bay and Two Harbors all draw their drinking water directly from Lake Superior. Cloquet, Minnesota relies upon Lake Superior as its backup water supply. The city of Superior in Wisconsin also gets its drinking water directly from Lake Superior.

Clough Island and the St. Louis River Estuary provide critical habitat for migratory birds and fish. As many as 230 species of birds have been documented using the estuary, and 115 are known to breed there. The estuary is also home to 45 species of native fish and beaver, mink, river otter, muskrat, wolf, bear, bobcat and white-tail deer.

Migrating birds fly along the St. Louis River and Lake Superior in both fall and spring, making the estuary one of the upper Midwest's best places for birdwatchers. About 200 pairs of common terns nest in the estuary, which are nearly two-thirds of the entire Lake Superior basin population. Common terns are listed as endangered in Wisconsin and threatened in Minnesota. The sandy, open-water flats near Clough Island are an important fishing area for common terns feeding on emerald and spottail shiners, two species of minnows that are their primary source of food.

Clough Island's location adjacent to the river channel makes it critically important for fish from Lake Superior, including lake sturgeon, that enter the estuary to spawn. Lake sturgeon are a large and ancient fish that are starting to return to the estuary thanks to reintroduction efforts by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. The Nature Conservancy also helped improve spawning habitat upriver of Clough Island below Thompson Dam for lake sturgeon and game fish.

Clough Island is also surrounded by sheltered bays, emergent wetlands and open-water flats; all habitats essential for fish, including species that are popular with anglers such as walleye, northern pike, muskellunge and smallmouth bass.

Tom Melius, Midwest Regional Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, said that the agency awarded a \$1 million grant that will help pay for the conservation and restoration of Clough Island through its National Coastal Wetlands Conservation program.

"Coastal wetlands are a high priority for the Fish and Wildlife Service because of their invaluable contributions to the Great Lakes ecosystem. They protect against flooding, support good water quality and provide habitat for a diverse range of birds and other wildlife. Not only do these coastal environments have ecological importance, but they also support the more than \$7 billion Great Lakes economy fueled by commercial and recreational fishing and tourism."

The island's uplands were farmed until the mid-1950s. The abandoned fields are now reverting to forest. A steel-pole barn and the foundations of a house are all that remain of the farm buildings. Timber harvests also took place, but substantial wooded areas remain, including stands of aspen, birch, spruce and fir.

The Conservancy is raising money from individuals and other sources to cover its costs related to acquiring Clough Island and, in time, plans to transfer the property so that it can be publicly owned and managed. The Conservancy has also applied for a grant from the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Fund in Wisconsin.

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The Nature Conservancy is a leading conservation organization working around the world to protect ecologically important lands and waters for nature and people. The Conservancy and its more than 1 million members have protected nearly 120 million acres worldwide. Visit The Nature Conservancy on the Web at www.nature.org.

The National Coastal Wetlands Conservation Grant Program was established by the Coastal Wetlands Planning, Protection, and Restoration Act (Act) of 1990. Under the program, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service provides matching grants for acquisition, restoration, management or enhancement of coastal wetlands. The grant program to date has granted about \$183 million in grant monies to 25 coastal states and one U.S. Territory to acquire, protect or restore over 250,000 acres of coastal wetland ecosystems. Typically, between \$15 million and \$21 million in grants are awarded annually through a nationwide competitive process. Funding for the program comes from excise taxes on fishing equipment and motorboat and small engine fuels. For more information about the grant program, go to www.fws.gov/coastal/coastalgrants.