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Common Terns Fledge from Belle Isle for First Time Since the 1960s

In 2012, two common terns were confirmed to have fledged from restored habitat created on the eastern tip of Belle Isle by the Detroit Zoological Society (DZS), the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD), and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) for the first time since the 1960s. Between 2008 and 2010, 8,600 square feet of sand and crushed limestone was placed on DWSD property on eastern Belle Isle where as many as 1,200 nesting pairs of common terns were found in the early 1960s. Over a two-year period, project partners have removed invasive vegetation, planted native plants beneficial to incubating terns and their chicks, erected a sheep fence to exclude predators during the nesting season, and placed 100 decoys and a solar-powered sound system to broadcast non-aggressive calls to help attract this threatened migratory bird species back to Belle Isle. The colony is now active and defended by common terns from mid-April to mid-July and can be viewed well from the Blue Heron Lagoon once wetland restoration there is completed.

The common tern is a gull-like bird that is slightly bigger than a blue jay. It is considered *threatened* in Michigan, as well as in many other U.S. states, and represents an important indicator of ecosystem health for the Detroit River watershed. With its buoyant flight and acrobatic maneuvers, it catches small minnows chased to the water's surface by bigger fish. Many terns overwinter from the Gulf of Mexico south to as far as the shores of southern Peru, but return to the northern latitudes, including the Detroit River to nest in colonies on isolated islands and rocky outcroppings. Common terns are not common. Colonies are widely spaced along the Great Lakes shorelines and have declined significantly throughout the 20th century, with fewer than 1,300 nesting pairs in Michigan today.

In the early 1960s, there were approximately 4,500 common tern nests on islands in the Detroit River. Today, there are fewer than 200 nesting pairs annually on two Grosse Ile bridges, representing a 96% decline over the last 50 years. This decline was the result of forest development on former nesting islands like Mud, Grassy, and Bo-lo Islands, excessive mammalian predation, effects of contaminants, and competition with abundant ring-billed gulls. Tom Schneider, Curator of Birds at the DZS, approached the Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge in 2007 about collaborating on common tern habitat restoration at this site. "The site is still ideal for common terns after over 50 years because it is isolated from human disturbance and can be managed to keep predators out," noted Tom Schneider of DZS. A scientific roundtable of common tern experts was convened at the Detroit Zoo in December 2010 where common tern experts agreed that the site

could one day contain as many as 190 pairs of common terns using methods proved effective in other parts of the Great Lakes.

Researchers found a dozen pairs of common terns fiercely defending nests on-site in summer 2011. In the summer of 2012, two common terns hatched from the restored site were viewed flying, representing the first such fledging success on Belle Isle since the early 1960s.

"This is a tremendous conservation accomplishment for the Detroit River," noted Refuge Biologist Greg Norwood. "With our current emphasis on predator control in the coming years at the Belle Isle site, we expect fledging success to increase next year."

"During the 1960s, the Detroit River was considered one of the most polluted rivers in the North America," said Dr. John Hartig, Manager of the Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge. "The news of common terns fledging from Belle Isle, coupled with the evidence of recovering populations of lake sturgeon, lake whitefish, walleye, bald eagles, peregrine falcons, osprey, mayflies, and wild celery, represents one of the most dramatic ecological recovery stories in North America." See table below for a summary of the evidence of ecological recovery of the Detroit River.

EVIDENCE OF ECOLOGICAL RECOVERY

Indicator Species	Evidence of Recovery
Bald eagles	Nearly complete reproductive failure in the 1970s; there are now at least seven active bald eagle nests producing young in the vicinity of the Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge, after a 25-year absence
Peregrine falcons	Falcon population in Michigan was decimated in the 1950s; falcons were reintroduced in Detroit in 1987; since the early 1990s falcon reproductive success has steadily increased until this species was removed from Endangered Species list in 1999; expanded their range in recent years to Windsor under the Ambassador Bridge
Osprey	In 2009, a pair of osprey built a nest in a cell phone tower adjacent to the Gibraltar Wetlands Unit of the Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge, representing the first time that osprey have successfully nested in Wayne County since the 1890s
Common terns	Since the early 1960s there has been a 96% decline in nesting pairs along the Detroit River; in 2012 three common terns fledged (i.e., reached sufficient growth and development to be able to fly) from the restored Belle Isle habitat on Belle Isle, representing the first island fledging success since the 1960s
Lake sturgeon	No sturgeon spawning was recorded in the Detroit River from 1970s to 1999; in 2001 sturgeon reproduction was documented for the first time in 30 years on the U.S. side near Zug Island; in 2009 sturgeon reproduction was documented for the first time in 30 years near Fighting Island on the Canadian side of the river
Lake whitefish	Substantial decline in whitefish population between the late 1800s and early 1900s; in 2006 whitefish spawning in the Detroit River was documented for the first time since 1916
Walleye	The walleye population in Lake Erie was rated as in "crisis" in 1978; it increased through the late-1980s and then declined through the late-1990s; walleye have increased since the late-1990s; the population is now rated as "high quality"
Beaver	Beaver were hunted to near extinction during the "fur trade era;" during the

	height of oil pollution in 1940s-1970s, beaver could not have survived in the Detroit River because oiled fur becomes matted and they lose their ability to trap air and water to maintain body temperature; loss of riparian forest habitat was another contributing factor; in 2008, two beaver built a lodge at DTE's Conner Creek Power Plant; in 2009, this pair produced at least two pups; beaver have continued to be seen through 2012
Mayflies	Few mayflies present in western Lake Erie between 1950s and 1992; mayflies increased between 1997 and 2004 being rated "good" to "excellent" since 2002
Wild celery	Wild celery tuber (an important food for diving ducks) abundance at selected stations in the Detroit River declined 72% between 1950-1951 and 1984-1985 because of oil and other pollution, and increased 200% between 1984-1985 and 1996-1997 due to pollution controls and increased water clarity

The Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge spans 48 miles of shoreline along the Detroit River and western Lake Erie (http://www.fws.gov/midwest/detroitriver/). The Refuge focuses on conserving, protecting and restoring habitats for 29 species of waterfowl, 23 raptors, 31 shorebirds, and over 100 fishes. It is the first international refuge in North America.

The mission of DZS is to demonstrate leadership in wildlife conservation and animal welfare, provide a broad audience with outstanding and unique educational opportunities that lead to the appreciation and stewardship of nature, inspire our community with engaging, meaningful, and memorable experiences, provide innovative zoological facilities that contribute to the region's economic vitality, and demonstrate organization excellence consistent with a commitment to outstanding service, progressive resource management, and environmental leadership. The mission of the USFWS is working with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, and plants, and their habitats, for the continuing benefit of the American people. The mission of DWSD is to exceed our customers' expectations through the innovative treatment and transmission of water and wastewater, and the provision of services that promote healthy communities and economic growth.

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Common tern (photo credit: Sayer Seely)

Belle Isle common tern habitat (photo credit: Jessica Jozwiak)