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Common Tern Habitat Restoration Efforts Expanded on Belle Isle

The Detroit Zoological Society (DZS), the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD), and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) have expanded their efforts to restore common tern habitat on Belle Isle. In 2008, approximately 3,200 square feet of crushed limestone and cobble substrate were placed on DWSD property on the northern tip of Belle Isle where as many as 1,200 nesting pairs of common terns were found in the early 1960s. In November 2010, this common tern nesting habitat was expanded to about 9,600 square feet. This site now has 100 decoys and a solar-powered sound system to broadcast mating calls to help attract this threatened migratory bird species back to Belle Isle.

The primary reason why researchers from DZS and USFWS wanted to expand this common tern habitat on Belle Isle was that in 2010 common terns were found feeding at the site and fiercely defending the territory. "One muggy July day in 2010, a common tern pecked at our heads while we were monitoring the site," noted Greg Norwood, biologist at the Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge. "This feisty behavior was precisely what we were hoping to see because that means that the common terns had established an affinity for the site and were fiercely defending it as their breeding habitat."

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 species in monitoring the health of the Detroit River ecosystem. With its buoyant flight and acrobatic maneuvers, it catches small minnows chased to the water's surface by bigger fish. Many terns overwinter along the shores of southern Peru, but return to the northern latitudes, including the Detroit River, for its long summer days, milder climate, and abundance of food.

In the early 1960s, there were approximately 4,500 common tern nests on islands in the Detroit River. Today, there are only about 200 nesting pairs on two Grosse Ile bridges, representing a 96% decline over the last 50 years. This decline was the result of human encroachment and habitat loss, predation, effects of contaminants, and competition with other birds. 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 nearly 50 years because it is isolated from human disturbance and can be managed to keep predators out," noted Tom Schneider of DZS. A recent roundtable of common tern experts was convened at the Detroit Zoo in December and 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.

“The Detroit River is now a centerpiece for common tern conservation in the entire Great Lakes, where effective public-private partnerships are working to bring this threatened species back,” said Dr. John Hartig, Manager of the Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge. “Common tern restoration in the Detroit River would be an amazing accomplishment, and together with the lake sturgeon, lake whitefish, walleye, bald eagle, peregrine falcon, and osprey recovery underway, would represent one of the most dramatic ecological recovery stories in North America.”

This project also helps implement the Belle Isle Master Plan. Belle Isle was originally designed by world renowned landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted (the designer of New York’s Central Park) in the 1880s. The current City of Detroit Belle Isle Master Plan calls for restoring the 982-acre island park to a more natural state, consistent with the original intent of Frederick Law Olmsted. His philosophy was to have a park as a place where people could enjoy the natural landscape amidst an urban environment. Common tern habitat restoration on Belle Isle is fully consistent with this philosophy. Mary Sevakis of Detroit Water and Sewerage Department commented, “we are so pleased to be part of this effort to restore island habitat for a threatened bird species and to enhance the natural landscape of Belle Isle for eight million annual visitors.”

Funding and in-kind support for this phase of the project (totaling \$5,000) came from all three organizations and included purchase of crushed limestone and cobble, and the decoys and solar-powered sound system, and staff time to construct the habitat.

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)