

Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge
9311 Groh Road
Grosse Ile, MI 48138
Phone: (734) 365-0219
Fax: (734) 692-7603
http://www.fws.gov/refuge/detroit_river

News Release



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: November 19, 2014

Contacts: Greg Norwood, Refuge Biologist (734-692-7611) or Richard Skoglund, Stewardship Crew Leader (734-718-5822)

VOLUNTEER STEWARDSHIP CREW BEGINS NEW CHAPTER FOR DOWNRIVER'S HUMBUG MARSH

TRENTON/GIBRALTAR, MICHIGAN – A volunteer stewardship crew is maximizing the biodiversity and aesthetic needs within Humbug Marsh and the Refuge Gateway, including:

- nearly completely eliminating invasive *Phragmites* (which formerly grew as dense stands in excess of 15 ft. tall) which promotes a healthy marsh for people and biodiversity;
- eliminating over 300 (six-inch diameter or greater) invasive European black alder trees that shaded out ferns, wildflowers, and blue-joint grass;
- blocking historical drainage furrows that were left over from when the land was farmed, resulting in more natural patterns of seasonal flooding and a healthier forest;
- cutting and treating the stumps of exotic shrubs with selective herbicide to improve forest health; and
- performing forestry operations to increase diversity of species and ages of trees more typical of a healthy forest.

The 410-acre Humbug Marsh is Michigan's only "wetland of international importance" designated under the international Ramsar Convention. The area contains wet "flatwoods" forest, wet prairie, coastal marsh, open water, and a 20-acre island. It also has a storied history. The majority of the site was nearly developed into 340 luxury homes, a private golf-course, marina, and bridge to the island in the late-1990s and early-2000s. Local citizens and organizations successfully fought to save it from development as the last mile of undeveloped shoreline on the U.S. mainland of the Detroit River and it became part of the Refuge in 2004.

Adjacent to Humbug Marsh is Wayne County's 44-acre Refuge Gateway that is the home of the Refuge's Visitor Center under construction, and the only international example of where a former industrial brownfield has been successfully cleaned up and restored sufficiently to serve as an ecological buffer for a "wetland of international importance."

Despite Humbug Marsh's designation as a "wetland of international importance," past use of the property has reduced the potential biodiversity and aesthetic values. The site was hayed and grazed for generations, and even served as a military equipment storage area during World War II. Forests do not grow back the same way after such intensive disturbance to

existing species, soil, and natural water flow. Most recently, much of Humbug Marsh was “brushhogged” in 1998 in preparation for the planned housing development, which sadly decreased the good forest development that did start to come back after 40 years since haying (Photo 1). When Humbug’s forest began growing back after both the haying and after the 1998 brush-hogging, it was prone to rapid colonization of invasive shrubs that do best in disturbed landscapes.

Many transformative and readily viewable changes have occurred at Humbug Marsh in the last ten years. These include the new habitats at the Refuge Gateway, removal of *Phragmites*, invasive trees and shrubs, and blockages of old agricultural drainage furrows. This new chapter in Humbug Marsh will play out much slower and will be more subtle. Much like human health, ecological health is obtained by taking a holistic approach addressing multiple stressors over many years (Photos 2a and 2b). Greg Norwood, Refuge Biologist responsible for Humbug’s habitat management, has emphasized building a committed team of volunteers who themselves develop a relationship with the land and learn both how and why actions are taken to increase ecological health over the long-term. Often determining what to do or not to do requires evaluating subtle clues into processes related to soils, hydrology, and forest succession.

“The hard management choices the crew and I make and the methods we consider challenge us to gain knowledge and experience of Humbug’s natural communities every time we are out there”, says Norwood. The crew understands existing studies, uniquely applies them to Humbug, and monitors the response.

The crew works twice per week. Some members are certified commercial pesticide applicators and some have been trained by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to safely operate chain saws and heavy equipment. “The program is successful because each volunteer inherently gains deep satisfaction from improving the health of the land. Enabling the leaders of the group to be successful by providing relevant information and training is also critical”, says Dick Skoglund, crew leader. “Our volunteers are extremely motivated by nothing other than passion for the resource where learning is a two-way street between the crew and Refuge staff”. If you are interested in getting involved in such stewardship activities, please contact Dick Skoglund at rcharge@aol.com.

The next major problem affecting Humbug Marsh is a burgeoning white-tailed deer herd which severely over-browses the re-generating forest. The Refuge hopes to address this in the coming years.

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is “working with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people.” More than 80% of Americans now live in urban areas and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service values the role that urban refuges play in bringing conservation to cities and helping develop the next generation of conservationists in urban areas because that is where most of our citizens live. For more information on our work and the people who make it happen, visit www.fws.gov or www.fws.gov/refuge/detroit_river/.

##



Photo 1. A summer 1999 photo showing slash pile from when Humbug Marsh was brushhogged by the prospective developer (photo credit: U.S. Army Engineer Corps of Engineers).



Photo 2a. A view of Humbug Marsh showing a string of invasive European black alder trees, thick stands of invasive *Phragmites* in background, and diminished native grasses at the forefront, November 2012.



Photo 2b. November 2014 photograph taken at the same location as above, showing dead standing invasive alders, no *Phragmites*, and rejuvenation of native bluejoint grass in forefront.