



ROUGE RIVER BIRD OBSERVATORY

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Over 5,000 Mallard Ducks Documented in Humbug Marsh

Grosse Ile, Michigan – On December 26, 2010, the Rouge River Bird Observatory tallied 5,500 mallards in a 50-acre area of the Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge’s Humbug Marsh Unit. Also tallied was a significant over-wintering population of 142 great blue herons, and four cackling geese, a small goose species which nests in the high arctic and formerly considered a sub-species of the Canada goose. Tundra swans, American black ducks, hooded mergansers, and canvasbacks were all present, along with 181 mute swans, which are non-native and un-wanted on Refuge land. This is a significant number of birds utilizing the Refuge for its sheltered, ice-free location, and for aquatic plants for food.

The Rouge River Bird Observatory (RRBO) has conducted a mid-winter annual bird survey of the Humbug Marsh Unit since 2004. The count contributed to the Rockwood Christmas Bird Count, which began in 1974 to track wintering bird populations in conjunction with hundreds of other counts throughout the country.

According to Greg Norwood, a biologist at the Refuge, such baseline surveys of fish, wildlife, and plants show what specific species the Refuge protects and are the foundation and rationale for more specific studies and management efforts. “These surveys tell us how and when the Refuge is important for certain plants and wildlife. We can then prescribe land management actions, such as prioritizing invasive species removal, setting the frequency of prescribed fire, or the schedule for manipulation of water levels in units connected, but closed to Lake Erie, all in an effort to protect and sustain healthy fish and wildlife populations.”

Norwood went on to say, “RRBO’s survey is important because it has been consistent over the years; these datasets become more valuable for management purposes as they accumulate with future years and become early warning signals of population changes or habitat degradation that might require correction.”

Julie Craves, supervisor of avian research at RRBO, and an ecologist specializing in migratory birds and insects of urban habitats noted, “these surveys are a snap-shot at a particular time that,

when compiled with others in the region and appropriately analyzed, can help evaluate the population status and changes of certain species.”

Craves prepared a publication in 2004 analyzing 20 years of the Rockwood Christmas bird count. Key findings were steep increases in Canada goose, mute swan, Cooper’s hawk, and a decline in American black duck. The count documented a significant decline in American crow in the winter of 2002-2003, in response to West Nile Virus.

The RRBO has conducted breeding bird surveys and comprehensive inventories of dragonfly and butterfly communities in the Humbug Marsh Unit and adjacent Wayne County Refuge Gateway property under numerous grants. “We are fortunate to have these baseline surveys which flag the need for species-specific surveys and help prioritize restoration projects,” Norwood said, “...they build the foundational knowledge from which hypotheses can be tested in a more experimental approach.”

Humbug Marsh was designated Michigan’s first Wetland of International Importance under the International Ramsar Convention in 2010. Humbug Marsh, located on the lower end of the Detroit River in the cities of Gibraltar and Trenton, is considered an internationally important wetland because of its ecological importance in the Detroit River corridor and the Great Lakes Basin Ecosystem. Humbug Marsh is also a part of the Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge, and represents the last mile of natural shoreline on the U.S. mainland of the Detroit River.

More information is available at the Rouge River Bird Observatory (www.rrbo.org) and Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge (<http://www.fws.gov/midwest/detroitriver/>).

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