

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge
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News Release



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SUGAR ISLAND ADDED TO THE DETROIT RIVER INTERNATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

GROSSE ILE, MICH. – Sugar Island has been purchased by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service with Great Lakes Restoration Initiative funding for inclusion in the Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge. Sugar Island, a 30-acre, uninhabited island located in Grosse Ile Township at the mouth of the Detroit River, is part of a “conservation crescent” surrounding the southern end of Grosse Ile. Other unique Refuge units within the “conservation crescent” include: Gibraltar Bay Unit, Calf Island Unit, Humbug Marsh Unit, and Lake Erie Metropark Unit. These unique habitats serve as important stopover habitat for migratory birds and important spawning and nursery habitat for fishes.

Sugar Island was purchased with federal funds for conservation of fish and wildlife habitats, and it is now protected in perpetuity as part of the National Wildlife Refuge System. It should be noted that the Service has developed a Hunt Plan for the Refuge that calls for opening Sugar Island, like state-owned Stoney and Celeron Islands, for hunting. This Refuge Hunt Plan has been developed and is under review, and, if approved, will establish hunting opportunities on selected Refuge lands in the fall of 2012. Sugar Island will also support research and environmental education efforts conducted with special use permits.

“The unique habitats of Sugar Island are an outstanding addition to the Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge,” notes Dr. John Hartig, Refuge Manager. “This significant addition to the Refuge permanently protects the island for fish and wildlife populations, and helps protect our internationally-renowned “natural capital” that enriches our quality of life and is a gift to future generations.”

Sugar Island is well known among Downriver residents, dating back to the late 1800s when it was a popular destination for picnicking and a dance pavilion, and later when it was an amusement park. Steamers, like the SS Tashmoo, would bring day-trippers to Sugar Island for recreation and relaxation. In more recent years private interests tried unsuccessfully to develop Sugar Island for housing and it has been used for destructive partying and public gatherings involving excessive alcohol consumption. These unlawful behaviors have resulted in degradation of island habitats, excessive littering, and even arson in the form of boat burning.

All refuge lands are officially “closed” until a Visitor Services Plan has been completed by Refuge staff. The Plan, currently under development, will provide the direction necessary for the management of compatible public uses on Refuge lands. At this time, the Service has made a determination that Sugar Island will be closed to public use, with the exception of hunting, to protect wildlife and to eliminate public safety issues related to partying, picnicking, drinking, boat burning, and other rowdy behaviors considered incompatible with the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System. Signage will be posted on Sugar Island noting these prohibitions.

“Grosse Ile Township Police support the decision of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to close Sugar Island to public use. Our Department will provide the Service with the same police assistance granted to any other Township property owner, with regard to enforcing the laws of Grosse Ile,” notes Grosse Ile Township Police Chief Joseph Porcarelli.

“Sugar Island has a long history of illegal activity and has been a hub of delinquency and misconduct for years. Issues involving noise complaints and underage drinking are common, and more serious incidents of assault and battery and criminal sexual conduct have occurred,” remarked Chief Porcarelli. “Although the decision to prohibit public use on the island will be controversial, our hope is that it will put an end to the unlawful activities.”

Dr. John Hartig, Refuge Manager of the Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge, will be making a presentation on progress in the Refuge, including Sugar Island, at the May 14th Grosse Ile Township Board Meeting at 7:30 PM.

The Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge incorporates more than 5,700 acres along 48 miles of the lower Detroit River and western Lake Erie. The Refuge focuses on conserving, protecting, and restoring habitat for 29 species of waterfowl, 23 species of raptors, 31 species of shorebirds, over 100 species of fish, and over 300 species of birds. It is the first international refuge in North America and one of the few urban ones in the nation. Unique habitats being managed within the Refuge include islands, coastal wetlands, marshes, shoals, and riparian waterfront lands. Visit www.fws.gov/midwest/DetroitRiver for additional information.

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. We are both a leader and trusted partner in fish and wildlife conservation, known for our scientific excellence, stewardship of lands and natural resources, and dedication and commitment to public service. For more information on our work and the people who make it happen, visit www.fws.gov.

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