

# Detroit River Wildlife Update

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## Conner Creek Area

Operating quietly in the background, the Conner Creek combined sewer overflow (CSO) retention treatment basin (RTB) continues to support efforts to attract wildlife to this upper reach of the Detroit River. Consistently meeting MDNRE permitted requirements since beginning operation five years ago, the RTB prevents the discharge of untreated CSO into Conner Creek. This has helped set the stage for neighboring wildlife projects to prosper along the Detroit River.

The first Operation Clean Water article, published in February 2010, highlighted the success of the facility in impacting water quality and the sighting of a beaver family at DTE Energy's Conners Creek Power Plant, next door to the RTB. Progress on habitat projects continued over the summer and wildlife is flourishing.

At the request of DTE Energy, the Conner Creek CSO RTB staff stopped mowing the area adjacent to the power plant in an effort to expand the area for birds and wildlife. The field has a more naturalized appearance and insects abound.

"Extending the natural habitat created by DTE Energy for wildlife onto our property is the next logical step," stated Terry Moore, Detroit Water & Sewerage Department (DWSD) CSO Supervisor. "The larger the area, the bigger a positive environmental impact we can make."

"I have to admit, it took awhile to get used to the overgrown field," added Terry. "From a maintenance perspective, trimmed grass looks cared for. There is a natural tendency to think overgrown grass is neglected, particularly when you are responsible for the maintenance of a facility. However, from the river, we look like an extension of the DTE Energy site."

Jason Cousino, a Local 223 Union field safety specialist at the River Rouge Plant who also serves as a DTE Energy Wildlife Coordinator, confirmed the unmowed section of the Conner Creek RTB is beneficial to the stopover area. "This fall, we saw a lot of migratory birds use the green areas to stop and rest. Certain birds like the ground floor and pop through the weeds. The combined area created through our sites provides the bugs and berries these birds need to eat before continuing on their journey. While our osprey platforms haven't seen a lot activity, I'm confident ospreys will return at some point."

Jason is pleased with the progress at DTE Energy's Conners Creek Power Plant in 2010. "The native vegetation planted last fall came in nicely for the first year. We converted three light towers into osprey nesting platforms. We also added some barn swallow nesting cups inside an old transfer house that is no longer used and opened the doors so birds can come and go as they please. The inventory of wildlife we have seen keeps growing. It is gratifying to see our efforts produce results."



*Barn swallow nesting cups were placed in this vacant transfer house in the summer. One of the osprey nesting platforms can be seen in the background.*



*New vegetation planted by Detroit students came in nicely in the spring. One of the tree swallow nesting boxes placed on the site by USGS is shown to the left.*



*A white-tailed deer was spotted on the site by DTE Energy staff.*

The tree swallows came this summer to the satisfaction of US Geological Survey (USGS) scientists who set up nesting boxes on DTE Energy's property as part of Project 80, Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI), Birds as Indicators of Contaminant Exposure in the Great Lakes. The Conners Creek site was one of 21 sites selected in the five Great Lakes states. Tree swallows feed on aquatic insects. If pollutants are present, they can be found in their eggs and tissue.

The filming of a scene for "The Double" featuring Richard Gere brought trailers to the site for a few weeks and a little excitement to the study, but didn't disturb the tree swallows. The swallows prospered, laying eggs that produced fledglings. The nesting boxes had a 55% occupancy rate, above the study average of 45%. The nesting boxes were cleaned out in September and prepared for the winter. Next spring, USGS scientists will return to start the process all over.

The beaver hasn't been spotted in awhile but fresh chewings have been seen. Overall, it's looking like 2011 will bring a spring active with wildlife.

### **Terns on Belle Isle**

Across the river, along the eastern edge of Belle Isle, another project is under way on a DWSD property to encourage tern nesting. Common terns, a threatened species in the state of Michigan, historically had nested on the site but left the area in the 1960s. DWSD, the Detroit Zoological Society (DZS) and the US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) have been working together to create a tern nesting site that will be safer from predators than two existing sites in Grosse Isle.

Common terns build their nests on sites with a gravel substrate. Because they build their nests on the ground, terns are susceptible to foxes, raccoons, dogs and other predators. Terns feed on small minnows. They retreat south in the winter and return in early April.

According to Tom Schneider, Curator of Birds for DZS, "The Belle Isle site offers a better habitat because it is easier to restrict predator access. This year was disappointing for the tern colonies on Grosse Isle. One black crowned night heron predated the site and ate the majority of the tern chicks. On Belle Isle, predator fencing can be installed that should greatly reduce the possibility of predation of the tern chicks if we can get the birds to nest there. The site is also remote enough that there will not be any disturbance from people."

The Belle Isle site is located on DWSD property for a water intake on the tip of the peninsula. This past two years, decoys and a sound system were used to attract terns. DZS visited the site weekly and monitored it with field cameras. While terns did not nest, two terns stayed for more than a month and a third tern visited providing a positive outlook for 2011. Local birders observed additional birds at the site.

In August, a load of gravel was added to the site. Herbicide was also applied by a licensed FWS technician. Improvements are planned for next year as well.

"We purchased new signs to keep visitors away from the area that will be installed next year. In addition, the Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge has allocated funds to spend at the site for equipment, additional decoys and more field cameras. We are optimistic the site will be even more attractive to the terns next year," added Tom Schneider.



*A territorial tern protects the Belle Isle site as an FWS scientist goes to check on a field camera.*



*New signage will be installed in 2011 at the Belle Isle tern nesting site.*