

DETROIT RIVER

INTERNATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE



ANNUAL REPORT 2022



OFFICIAL RIBBON CUTTING CEREMONY *John D. Dingell, Jr. Visitor Center*



Dear Friends,

We have many achievements to celebrate as we reflect on 2022 at the Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge (DRIWR).

After overcoming many challenges, it is great to have had a year packed with success where the Refuge was open more than it was closed! The vision that John Dingell had so many years ago is finally a reality.

Last May, we had the honor of welcoming Secretary of the Interior, Deb Haaland, to the Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge. During her visit, the Secretary participated in an insightful roundtable with community partners to discuss safe and equitable access to nature and the outdoors, and she assisted DRIWR staff in the official ribbon cutting for the opening of the John D. Dingell, Jr. Visitor Center. As we walked along the Humbug Marsh trail, it was special sharing John's passion and vision with Secretary Haaland.

The 2022 Annual Report will highlight the outreach, programming, projects, and partnerships from the DRIWR. Last year, the DRIWR had so much to offer, like world-class fishing opportunities, the return of field trips for local students, and more fall and winter programming than ever before. The team continued well-established habitat management and invasive species control projects to protect Detroit's wildlife and habitats for generations to come and celebrated the 40th season of Detroit River Hawk Watch.



Secretary of Interior Deb Haaland & Debbie Dingell at Humbug Marsh | Credit: FWS



Congresswoman Dingell with Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland and DRIWR Staff moments after the ribbon cutting of the John D. Dingell, Jr. Visitor Center | Credit: FWS

The Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge is such a unique destination for conservation and outdoor recreational experiences, and I hope it can continue ensuring the next generation of responsible stewards of our nation's outdoor spaces.

**Best wishes for another successful year at
the Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge!**

Debbie Dingell

FROM THE DESK OF REFUGE MANAGER

Dan Kennedy

I was born and raised in Midland, Michigan and my father was avid outdoorsman. He took me fishing, hunting, and camping and that is where I fell in love with wildlife conservation. I got my master's degree in wildlife ecology from Southern Illinois University at Carbondale and then a job with the Michigan Department of Natural Resources. I worked for the DNR for about 20 years conserving the state's threatened and endangered species. Working to recover rare species is difficult and takes lots of partners to be successful. While I loved working for the DNR, I realized I had a new passion. I wanted to spend my energy on connecting people to nature, public lands, and the abundant wildlife that call these areas home. I am excited to be here at DRIWR and honored to be working with a very talented staff.



I joined the team at the Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge in March of 2022. Over my first year I have learned DRIWR is a leader in fish and wildlife conservation. We continue to improve our lands for wildlife through purposeful and thoughtful wetland and grassland conservation efforts. This includes a robust program to remove invasive species on our lands and those of our partners to help restore the native plant community. These conservation actions improve wetlands and uplands for a diversity of fish and wildlife. During the past 20 years, many species have rebounded and include waterfowl and raptors. Plus, the improved water quality of the Detroit River, a primary location for bald eagles and ospreys to hunt for fish, has also been a tremendous benefit.

“Lastly, did you know the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has 14 flagship urban refuges across the country and that our refuge is one of them?”

Lastly, did you know the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has 14 flagship urban refuges across the country and that our refuge is one of them? This program centers on building strong, meaningful relationships with diverse communities to achieve equitable conservation outcomes. Building new relationships requires a new way of doing business, one that prizes innovation, promotes organizational culture change, and builds a workforce that better mirrors America's racial and ethnic diversity.

With 80% of Americans living in and around cities, ensuring a connection to nature is vital, both to people's quality of life and the future of conservation. Therefore, we are drafting a community engagement plan that will guide us in the coming years. One of our primary focuses is to connect with

underrepresented communities and we are currently assessing different ways we can improve to help make all visitors feel welcome at the refuge. We are also looking to improve how our education and outreach programming can better serve our local communities.



Dan Kennedy bottle brushing

The future success of conservation lies ultimately in our ability to inspire Americans to connect with the outdoors and nature, and to become stewards of the environment. That is why I'm excited and energized to be working at this refuge. This important work will help other refuges across the country and many of our partners here in Michigan. I'm proud of our team and the hard work they do every day to help us on this journey.

Biological Accomplishments - Refuge Biology

Water level management designed to encourage use by migratory waterfowl.

8 successful duck hunting slots used by 13 hunters at the Brancheau unit

**10 INVASIVE
PLANT SPECIES
TARGETED FOR
MANAGEMENT**

Invasive plant species treated by Biology team and volunteer stewardship crew.

**14.87 acres treated chemically
9.06 acres treated mechanically**

THANK YOU FOR YOUR ASSISTANCE, KR VEDOLICH!

In 2022, the Biology team welcomed a Seasonal Invasive Species Biological Technician, KR Vedolich.

During their time with us, *KR revitalized our biological stewardship program*. Once a week, a small group of dedicated volunteers worked together to remove invasive plant species such as buckthorn and garlic mustard from our Humbug Marsh and Gibraltar Bay units.

KR Vedolich and their stewardship crew of volunteers conducted nearly 25 acres of chemical and mechanical invasive species treatments across three refuge units in the short six months that they were with us!

With KR Vedolich's assistance, wildlife biologist Jessie Fletcher *completed another successful season of water level manipulation at the Brancheau and Fix units*.

This vital management action encourages desirable native plant species to grow and attracts migratory

waterfowl and waterbirds to these units. In doing so, the refuge was able to host a lottery waterfowl hunt last fall in partnership with the Michigan DNR at Pointe Mouillee State Game Area.



A DRIWR technician, a DR-WLE CWMA technician, and an IWRA board member staff an outreach table at Pointe Mouillee's 2022 Waterfowl Festival | Credit: Emma Delie/DR-WLE CWMA

WETLAND RESTORATION

2022 was a big year for wetland restoration work at the refuge.

Following multiple years of high water levels and extreme storm events in Lake Erie, the infrastructure at the refuge's Ford Marsh Project has become unstable and reduced the capacity of refuge staff to conduct needed habitat management.

To remedy this, the bulk of the work for *the first phase of the Ford Marsh Wetland Restoration project was conducted this year*. This first

phase was a feasibility study conducted by Barr Engineering to develop and evaluate options for restoring desired wetland functions to Ford Marsh by uncovering and addressing the root causes of the marsh's lack of resiliency.

As part of this assessment, Barr acquired and assessed on-the-ground data on Lake Erie water levels, sediment transport, natural communities within the

marsh and so much more. In addition, Barr and our staff hosted stakeholder engagement sessions with local subject matter experts, landowners, and interested partners to make sure we were evaluating all possible options for restoration of this important habitat.

This first phase is expected to wrap up in early 2023 with their findings.

Biological Accomplishments - DR-WLE CWMA

All 16 refuge units and 3 cooperatively-managed units were surveyed using early detection and rapid response protocols for invasive plant species

64.6

acres of invasive plant species treated chemically

20.5

acres treated mechanically across seven refuge units

15

invasive plant species targeted for management in 2022

The Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge is a proud partner of the Detroit River-Western Lake Erie Cooperative Weed Management (DR-WLE CWMA) along with over 20 other partners dedicated to the management and eradication of invasive species in Wayne and Monroe counties.

In 2022, the DR-WLE CWMA invasive species strike team completed nearly 85 acres of chemical and mechanical treatment on six Refuge units after completing invasive species surveys across all Refuge Units. Of the 30 invasive plant species documented for during early detection and rapid response surveys, 15 species were targeted for removal this season. This is just a fraction of the extensive work our strike team conducted on DR-WLE CWMA partner properties across Wayne and Monroe counties in the fight against the spread of invasive plant species.



DR-WLE CWMA's Strike Team sits in the bed of a truck with the piles of European frog-bit they removed from a partner's wetland | Credit: Michala Burke/DR-WLE CWMA

WE CELEBRATED OUR 40TH CONSECUTIVE SEASON OF MONITORING!



573 hours of
MONITORING
Migrating Raptors

September 1st - November 30th

145,577
Birds Counted
Across
15 Different
Species

Increase in Sightings

- Turkey Vulture
- Peregrine Falcon
- Broad-winged Hawk
- American Kestrel
- Merlin

In 2022, the Detroit River Hawk Watch (DRHW) celebrated its 40th consecutive year of raptor and vulture monitoring at the mouth of the Detroit River. This incredible project would not be possible without the collaborative and community effort put forth year after year by our volunteers, apprentices, lead counter, and many partners—including our hosts at Lake Erie Metropark.

This season, the DRHW team counted 145,577 birds in 573 hours at Lake Erie Metropark between September 1st and November 30th. This season saw an uptick in counts of turkey vultures, broad-winged hawks, American kestrels, merlins, and peregrine falcons, compared to the long-term average numbers for each species.

VISITOR SERVICES

WE HAD SO MUCH FUN CONNECTING PEOPLE TO NATURE IN 2022!

VISITORS

563 Hunting Visits
46,463 Fishing Visits
6,250 Visitor Center Visits
158,287 Total Refuge Visits

VOLUNTEERS

105 Total Volunteers
3275 Total Volunteer Hours
\$104,145 Value of Volunteer Time
30+ Active Partnerships

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE EXCITING PROGRAMS AND EVENTS AT DRIWR LAST YEAR

Mindfulness in Nature

We continued our Mindfulness in Nature series providing the community with 11 programs for yoga and meditation to encourage participants to use nature for emotional and mental health.

Hike or Treat

We hosted the first refuge Halloween event, Hike or Treat, teaching many participants about the wonders of nocturnal wildlife.

Metro Detroit Youth Day

We participated in the Metro Detroit Youth Day event! During this event we reached over 300 youth; informing them about the refuge and the different wildlife here in Michigan.

Interacted with over 500 participants at Hawk Fest, put on by our partners at the Lake Erie Metropark.

Donated to Milliken State Park

We donated two view scopes to Milliken State Park, equipped with the Enchroma technology which helps correct for color deficiencies—adding one more component to creating a more accessible outside for all.

Sturgeon Day at Milliken State Park

With our partners at the Detroit River Substation of the Alpena Fish and Wildlife Conservation Office and the Detroit Riverfront Conservancy, we hosted the annual Sturgeon Day event at Milliken State Park. Over 300 people came out to enjoy the day.

“We started field trips to the refuge after two long years of not being able to...”



Park Ranger leads class discussion on animal tracks by Hedke Elementary School

Field Trips to the Refuge

We started field trips to the refuge after two long years of not being able to have school groups at the refuge, bringing students from various schools out to the refuge to gain firsthand nature experiences.

Virtual Story Time

Started a virtual Story time with a Ranger program which brought people from around the world to a refuge event.



DRIWR volunteer greets girl scouts at the Buggin' Out event | Credit: Jazmyn Bernard/USFWS

MAINTENANCE & IRWA

MAINTENANCE UPDATE



New parking lot and gates at the Taylor Unit | Credit: John Nicely/USFWS

Improvements to the Taylor Unit included building the new parking lot and widening and installing new gates to the entrance in preparation for environmental education programming to take place there. Since the water levels on Lake Erie were low during 2022, we were also able to mow the Taylor Unit trails, which remain closed to the public.

We welcomed a new maintenance worker, Ryan, to the team. Time was spent teaching and training him on the day-to-day operations of the refuge. We also developed Standard Operating Procedures for the Visitor Center to ensure proper maintenance of the building.

IWRA UPDATE

The International Wildlife Refuge Alliance had a busy year of grants management, staff development, and transitioning focus from opening the Refuge Gateway to learning the new ways to support DRIWR in its present and future projects.

In March, staff attended the Public Lands Alliance Convention and Trade show to connect with other conservation-based nonprofits and meet new vendors for the Canvasback Corner Nature Store. IWRA Board Members were pleased to host Secretary of the Interior, Deb Haaland, for lunch and conversation during her visit in May—kicking off an exciting summer of learning Nature Store operations and engaging with visitors to the refuge.

The arrival of fall brought IWRA's 16th Annual Benefit Dinner and the presentation of the Friend of the Refuge Award to Chief, Ted Roll, for his contributions to successful partnerships at DRIWR.

September also brought the retirement of longtime Executive Director, Joann Van Aken, who dedicated so much of her time and talents to IWRA. She is surely missed but continues to share her expertise through the Friends Mentoring program at Refuges across the country.

Lastly, after serving 14 years as Chair of the IWRA Board, Richard Micka, handed duties over to newly elected Chair, Gary Kirsh, in December.

We thank Mr. Micka for all of the support, knowledge and the friendships he provided over the years. We know he will continue to deliver the mission of DRIWR as an at-large board member.



Wyandot of Anderdon Chief Ted Roll accepts the 2022 Friend of the Refuge Award from Chair, Dick Micka | Credit: Mark Messer FWS volunteer

2022 DRIWR STAFF

Dan Kennedy | *Refuge Manager*
Steve Dushane | *Deputy Refuge Manager*
Jody DeMeyere | *Visitor Services Manager*
Lisa Bryant | *Community Engagement Coordinator*
Jessie Fletcher | *Wildlife Biologist*
Aleigha Alexander | *Volunteer Coordinator*
Jazmyn Bernard | *Park Ranger*
Todd Weston | *Park Ranger*
John Nicely | *Maintenance Mechanic*
Ryan Wulf | *Maintenance Worker*
Nicole LaFleur | *IWRA Executive Director*
Alexa Blankenship | *Biological Technician*
Dave DeMeyere | *Maintenance Technician*
Erika Van Kirk | *Hawk Watch Apprentice*
Michelle Sorensen | *Nature Store Manager*



Secretary of Interior Deb Haaland with Detroit River IWR Staff | Credit: FWS

Front and back cover image | Marsh | Credit: Nathan Armstrong

Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge

5437 W. Jefferson
Trenton, MI 48183

(734) 365-0219
detroitriver@fws.gov

