

Saving the St. Louis Estuary: An ABA-sponsored Habitat Restoration Project

What do Peregrine Falcons, Sedge Wrens, and Green Herons have in common? Not much, you say. And you'd be right.

Except that the three species (and several hundred other migratory and breeding bird species) all have a safe haven in the St. Louis River Estuary at the western tip of Lake Superior. This bird-friendly area, between Duluth, Minnesota, and Superior, Wisconsin, has been made even safer by the actions of citizens and conservation groups in recent years. One organization, The Nature Conservancy, has a community-based office here, and its work in the estuary recently received funding from attendees at the American Birding Association's 2002 annual meeting in Duluth.

This part of the Great Lakes has long held appeal for birders. But since the mid 1990s, the 12,000-acre freshwater estuary and its mouth in the Duluth-Superior region have gotten special attention from government and non-profit agencies, from the University of Minnesota at Duluth, from conservation groups, and from private citizens.

With habitats that cover some 260,000 acres, including the largest harbor on the Great Lakes, old-growth forest, native fisheries, and unique water courses like baymouth bars, sand dunes, and emergent and submergent marshes, this ecoregion's bird life is impressive, indeed. An estimated 230 species of breed-

ing and migrating birds can be found here—among them migratory songbirds like Yellow-throated Vireo and Blackburnian Warbler, shorebirds such as Whimbrel and Spot-

ted Sandpiper, and raptors like Northern Goshawk and Bald Eagle. Other species seen here run the gamut from Bay-breasted Warbler to Boreal Owl to Black-backed Woodpecker. Tundra Swans also stage here, and Bonaparte's Gulls migrate through.

During the 1970s concerns about pollution in the Great Lakes basin prompted the development of a water quality agreement between Canada and the U.S. The International Joint Commission designated 43 areas of concern (AOCs), each to be addressed by a remedial action plan (RAP). One of the AOCs was the St. Louis River System. Now the St. Louis River Citizens Action Committee (SLR-CAC), an independent nonprofit organization formed in 1996, is largely responsible for facilitating a habitat plan that aims to protect ecological diversity of the lower river.

According to its mission statement, the SLR-CAC is a group of people who are working together to "coordinate community efforts,

Thank you, ABA!

In early 2002, a memorandum of agreement was reached between the American Birding Association and The Nature Conservancy, promising support from ABA members to "assist The Nature Conservancy in its efforts to protect unique ecological attributes and the exceptional biodiversity of the St. Louis River Estuary by engaging in fundraising efforts." The ABA convention was held in Duluth in June 2002 (*Birding*, "Flight Path", p. 418, October 2002), and this event catalyzed ABA members and others around the Estuary's habitat issues. Later that year, ABA Executive Director Paul Green presented a check for \$11,740 to The Nature Conservancy. Matching funds were leveraged—with the help of the ABA donation—from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation and the Duluth-Superior Area Community Foundation and are now helping the Conservancy preserve birds and bird habitat in the area.

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increase public awareness, focus on the St. Louis River AOC, and implement the St. Louis River RAP.” Its broad goals for the estuary are to protect and restore habitat, to improve water quality, and to reduce pollution. And this is good news for bird lovers.

Lynelle Hanson, Executive Director of the SLRCAC, said she has already seen real changes in bird life along the river and estuary. Citizen volunteers for the group recently reported that the 2003 population of juvenile Common Terns at Interstate Island was “as good as last year”. And tern populations in 2002 in this area were the highest in nearly two decades, Hanson added.

Piping Plovers are also rebounding in the Great Lakes ecoregion. Although not documented as nesting in the Duluth-Superior area since 1984, regional populations of this endangered species *are* finally increasing. With some amount of optimism, then, the SLRCAC and the Conservancy are focused on improving and protecting the bird’s habitat in the region.

“Modifications made in the vegetation at Wisconsin Point have already improved habitat for Piping Plovers,” Hanson said. “It’s our hope that the young Piping Plovers we’ve seen will seek out new territory here for nesting in the coming years.”

In the development of a so-called *Ecoregional Plan* for the Great Lakes (1998–2000), The Nature Conservancy specifically recognized the global significance of the St. Louis River for its biological diversity. For years, biologists from



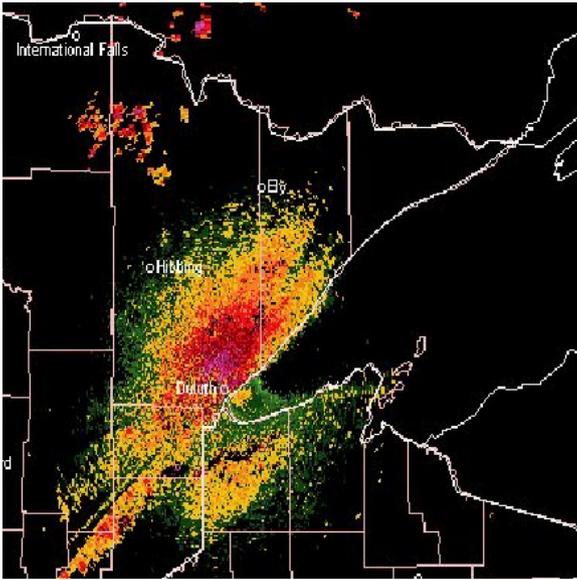
TOP LEFT: Larger Blue Flag (*Iris versicolor*). Summer 1998. © Pat Collins. TOP RIGHT: The St. Louis Estuary is home to well over 200 species of birds. October 2002. © Meredith Cornett. BOTTOM: Aerial view of the St. Louis Estuary. Summer 1998. © Pat Collins.

both Wisconsin and Minnesota have been collecting data on species and creating maps of the region. Both states’ Departments of Natural Resources, along with the Conservancy and the Natural Resources Research Institute (run by the University of Minnesota at Duluth), have hired student researchers or staff to conduct field surveys and collect species data in preparation for development of a habitat plan for the St. Louis River. Following the strategy of ecoregional planning, threats have been identified and strategies for abating them outlined through a rigorous scientific process. The Conservancy has led the way by raising funds for research and training others in methodology. Birds—and bird habitat—were identified as major “conservation targets”.

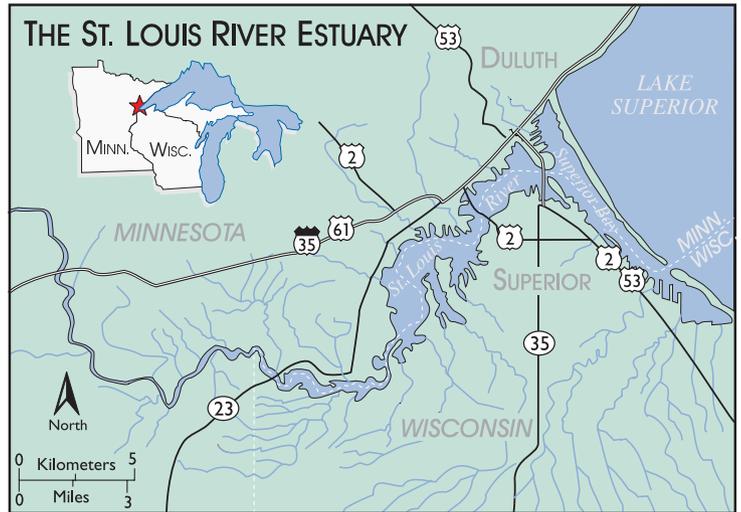
Today the Duluth Natural Areas Program (DNAP) is of considerable importance to the



The Green Heron is one of many migratory species that breed in the wetlands associated with the St. Louis Estuary. *St. Louis Estuary, Minnesota; June 2001.* © Sparky Stensaas.



This Doppler radar image shows large numbers of birds migrating over Duluth at 8:09 p.m. local time on the evening of 12 September 2000. © Robb Diehl.



Map by Virginia Maynard.

Conservancy's efforts to protect habitat here. (The City of Duluth is a major landowner in the estuary.) Threats to birds and their habitats are numerous: development and sprawl, commercial fishing and shipping, sedimentation, certain forestry practices, and contaminants from industry. But a creative synergy occurred when the Conservancy proposed the formation of DNAP in partnership with the city government. A direct outgrowth of the habitat plan for the St. Louis River, the DNAP provides a mechanism to protect lands that harbor birds and other native animals and plant communities within the city limits.

Written into law by Duluth mayor Gary Doty in 2001, the DNAP aims to:

- ✓ Conserve discrete significant places.
- ✓ Help put development in the right areas.
- ✓ Enhance public and private property.
- ✓ Use objective and accepted criteria for city decisions.
- ✓ Act as a tool to help evaluate natural areas for the city's Comprehensive Plan and leave a legacy for future generations.

The Conservancy helped draft the law's protection guidelines, which focus on five ecological factors critical to the St. Louis River Estuary's biodiversity: **significant native plant communities** (undisturbed plant communities native to the area, in a unit like a maple forest, marsh, or sand dune); **special**

species (viable populations of endangered or threatened species or of species of special concern); **important bird congregation areas** (discrete geological areas holding large concentrations of birds during breeding, wintering, or migratory seasons); **high-quality water features** (within the Duluth watershed, hosting native fish, insects, and/or plants) and **geologic landforms** (areas containing undisturbed geological or rock formations that clearly depict natural processes).

To become a Duluth Natural Area, a piece of property must be assessed by qualified scientific professionals. Next, by using existing guidelines, a recommendation is made through the city's Environmental Advisory Committee to the Planning Commission and then finally put to the City Council for a vote as an ordinance/resolution. Funding and a management plan need to be in place within one year.

Using the DNAP process, the Conservancy has protected two sites within the estuary, specifically to help protect bird habitat and native plant communities: One is in Magney-Snively Forest (1,800 acres); another, smaller parcel is North Bay in the upper estuary. Tom Duffus of the Conservancy says

Contacts and Resources

- ✓ <www.ci.duluth.mn.us/city/planning/dnap> – City of Duluth Natural Areas Program.
- ✓ <www.dnr.state.mn.us> – Minnesota Department of Natural Resources.
- ✓ <www.dnr.state.wi.us> – Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources.
- ✓ <www.nature.org> – The Nature Conservancy.
- ✓ <www.stlouisriver.org> – St. Louis River Citizens Action Committee habitat plans.
- ✓ Tom Duffus, Jana Pastika, Meredith Cornett, Mary Harkness – The Nature Conservancy.
- ✓ Lynelle Hanson – SLRCAC.
- ✓ "For the Birds: An Uncommon Guide" by Laura Erickson; published by Pfeifer-Hamilton (Duluth, 1994).

that the sites are open to birding and that visitors will enjoy exploring the large expanses of public wildlands in both the cities of Duluth and Superior.



Unique features like estuarine wetlands and baymouth bars offer insects, fish, and birds a smorgasbord of nutrients. The large expanse of marshes, sand dunes, and forests near the estuary also offers nesting habitat and, according to Conservancy ecologists, is one of the major reasons for the number and diversity of breeding birds.

In the spring and early summer, many migratory songbirds use the estuary's wetlands as their Stop-'n'-Go (See NEXRAD image, p. 30), resting and refueling for trips farther north and east. Many, however, like the Ruby-crowned Kinglet and the Brown Creeper, fly only a little farther before getting to their summer homes. For example, Connecticut Warblers—or Bog Blackthroats, as they are known locally—breed in the tamarack bogs and Jack Pine forests of northern Wisconsin and Minnesota. On migration, you'll see everything from the Spotted Sandpiper to the Double-crested Cormorant—both are easily found near the breakwater where ships enter Superior Harbor.

It really is up to us to ensure that the Conservancy's and SLRCAC's vision for "a thriving human community together with aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems" becomes reality. What the public agencies, nonprofits, and private citizens can do is to *pay attention* and *get involved*. With patience and planning, birders can find bliss here at the St. Louis River Estuary and surrounding areas. And we all need to continue supporting the groups and individuals who make a difference in the lives of birds and bird lovers.

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