

St. Louis River Area of Concern

Projects in partnership to restore the river and revitalize the community

Interstate Island Avian Habitat Restoration



Common Tern

Purpose

A project on Interstate Island in the St. Louis River between Duluth and Superior restored and protected critical nesting habitat for the Common Tern while providing stopover habitat for Piping Plover. Restoring avian habitat on Interstate Island is a management action required to achieve the removal objectives for Beneficial Use Impairment (BUI) 2: Degraded Fish and Wildlife Populations in the St. Louis River Area of Concern (SLR AOC).

Background

Interstate Island is the largest of only two remaining Common Tern nesting areas in the Lake Superior watershed and is the only federally-listed critical habitat for Piping Plover in Minnesota. The Piping Plover is listed as endangered in Minnesota and federally; the Common Tern is listed as threatened in Minnesota. Approximately two-thirds of all Common Terns breeding in the Lake Superior watershed make their nests on Interstate Island.

The island was created from excess dredged material circa 1934 and was nearly 8 acres in size. Part of the island was mined for sand fill in the late 1960s. Sustained high water levels in Lake Superior have exacerbated

erosion, flooding, and scour of the island's environment for the past several years.

Project partners developed a plan to restore habitat in three phases. The MDNR implemented Phase I of this project in 2015 by stabilizing and enhancing the critical tern nesting area. This emergency effort saved a portion of the island's nesting area from flooding. Phases II and III addressed habitat loss due to sustained high water levels and increased storm surges and will protect critical Common Tern nesting habitat long into the future.



Banding Common Terns



Addition of substrate and removal of roosting options for predators was completed in May 2020



1938 image of island

Completed Project

Restoration in 2021 created and restored habitat for the largest Common Tern nesting colony in the Lake Superior watershed and provided stopover habitat for Piping Plover. Partners will continue to perform long-term maintenance of this habitat.

Objectives included:

- Increased island's footprint and elevation to protect against flooding
- Stabilized the island to prevent further habitat loss
- Enhanced sandy habitat with minimal brush
- Monitored use by Piping Plover, and population status and nesting success of the Common Tern
- Developed a long-term monitoring and maintenance plan



Restoration Outcomes

- Restored approximately one mile of shoreline
- Created approximately 5.5 acres of long-term high-quality terrestrial shorebird habitat
- Improved protection of the existing Common Tern nesting area
- Restored Interstate Island's historic footprint at a higher elevation to improve resiliency from higher water levels and intense storm events
- Enhanced island's substrate composition and remove woody vegetation used by predators
- Increased stopover habitat in the estuary for migrating birds such as Piping Plover
- Increased potential for higher Common Tern nesting populations and reproduction rates

Timeline:

- 2015 Phase I: 3,300 CY of sand berm added to habitat
- 2019 Phase II: Engineering, design and permitting
- 2020 Phase II: Construction
- 2021 Phase III: Maintenance and monitoring
- 2022+: Common Tern monitoring and predator control

Partners:

- American Bird Conservancy
- Environmental Protection Agency
- Minnesota DNR
- Minnesota Land Trust
- Natural Resources Research Institute
- US Fish and Wildlife Service

High water levels had greatly reduced acreage on Interstate Island

To Learn More

Visit <https://dnr.wi.gov>, search "St. Louis River AOC"

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