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High Quality Marsh Returns to Hennepin and Hopper Lakes

SPRINGFIELD, IL – The twin lakes of Hennepin and Hopper are full of water and life again, after the Wetlands Initiative (TWI) and the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) completed an extensive effort to rehabilitate the marsh and lake habitat in the 2,600-acre restoration project area.

The 2,600-acre project area was named the Sue and Wes Dixon Waterfowl Refuge in recognition of the critical waterfowl habitat that the site provides. In recent years, however, common carp had been disrupting the lake ecosystem and the waterfowl population steadily declined. In 2008, the total number of migrating waterfowl dropped by 90 percent from its peak in 2004, according to IDNR surveys.

TWI pumped down the Hennepin and Hopper Lakes last fall and winter as part of a major rehabilitation effort to remove the destructive common carp. IDNR then applied rotenone to the lakes, a plant extract used since the 1930s for managing invasive fish populations. After the rotenone naturally degraded, IDNR restocked the lakes with thousands of fish.

“Groundwater and spring precipitation rapidly filled the lakes, and the water level was back to normal by mid-summer,” said Gary Sullivan, TWI’s senior restoration ecologist.

“We are cautiously optimistic that our efforts to control carp and restore the marsh will be successful,” said Wayne Herndon, IDNR district fisheries biologist. “There are no guarantees when restoration is attempted at this large scale, but a functioning marsh at this location is of great value and well worth any effort.”

The refuge, located along the Illinois River about 40 miles north of Peoria, is owned by TWI and several nonprofit organizations and is managed by TWI. Since 2001, TWI has been restoring the historic lakes to create a high-quality backwater lake habitat to improve

water quality, provide wildlife habitat, and to offer a place for the public to enjoy Illinois' historic native landscapes. Prior to 2001, the lakes had been drained for 90 years to support corn and soybean farming.

“The goal of the rehabilitation effort was to remove the common carp so that they no longer have negative impacts on the marsh,” Sullivan said. “Surveys conducted over the summer have shown that we reduced the carp to well below that level and the habitat has recovered.”

One of the first and most obvious measures of habitat recovery is the return of native flora and fauna.

“We have seen sago pondweed covering nearly 75 percent of the water area. This is one of the most important species for migratory waterfowl and was once extremely abundant, although it is now rarely seen in the Illinois River Valley,” Sullivan said.

Now migrating ducks are returning to the refuge this fall. The number of ducks recorded on this fall's official IDNR aerial surveys have been relatively low, as it will take time for waterfowl to relearn this rich destination,” added Sullivan. “But we are seeing large numbers of wood ducks, pintails, wigeons, mallards, teals, and northern shovelers on the lakes. They can be hard to spot, unless you get out on the lake, due to the dense vegetation.”

The yellow-headed blackbird, a threatened species in Illinois, has also returned, taking refuge and breeding in the dense cattail stands, once again growing in the lakes after a three-year absence due to the devastating impacts of the common carp. Black terns, common moorhens, pied-billed grebes, American bitterns and white pelicans have also returned to the refuge this summer and fall.

In the lakes, IDNR has restocked thousands of game fish, including northern pike, muskie, channel catfish fry, bluegill, crappie and largemouth bass. The state agency also stocked the lakes with breeding stock of several native species that were once common in Illinois backwater lake habitats, but now are very rare due to widespread lost habitat. These include redspotted sunfish, bowfin, spotted gar, starhead topminnow and pumpkinseed.

“The Hennepin and Hopper Lakes are one of the few places in the state these fish can live because there is so little of their habitat left,” Herndon said. “Our goals for this area are all interconnected and center around the desire to sustain a vibrant marsh. To do that, we must maintain a diverse native fish population. Diversity makes the system more resilient and allows us to manage rare fishes, as well as common species.”

IDNR hopes the alligator gar can make its Illinois comeback in these lakes. The fish was once common in the backwater lakes of Illinois, but has been extirpated from the state because of lost habitat. In September, IDNR stocked Hennepin and Hopper Lakes with 43 alligator gar up to 18 inches long, an ancient backwater predator that can grow up to 300 pounds.

Public fishing on the lakes will resume in spring 2011. Details will be announced in January on the TWI website at www.wetlands-initiative.org. Also in 2011, TWI plans to restore the wetland habitat adjacent to the lakes - 150 acres of wet meadow that is being lost to invasive trees, such as cottonwoods and sandbar willow. TWI is seeking grants to fund removal by hand of thousands of these trees, which are shading out the much less common meadow habitat north of the lakes.

“While high-quality wetland habitat is rare in Illinois, opportunities to increase the size and quality of wetland habitat are especially rare,” Michael Ward, avian ecologist at the University of Illinois, wrote in a support letter for the grants. “Currently, Hennepin and Hopper Lakes has one of the best wetlands in Illinois. The addition of a wet meadow will add breeding habitat for king rails and American bitterns. Currently common moorhens and American bitterns breed at fewer than ten sites in Illinois.”

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