

Support of Habitat License Plate Funds Osprey Projects, Amphibian Research

Outdoor Matters

A column from the Michigan Department of Natural Resources

As you drive Michigan's roadways, you may have noticed those license plates featuring the image of a bird and its chick. You may have wondered what their purpose was or even how you could get one of those nifty plates with the duck.

place for all Michigan residents. "We all harbor memories of outdoor adventures that involved capturing insects or pollywogs, or the first time we heard loons, woodpeckers, or turkeys, or saw bald eagles soar above the trees," Mr. Rustem said. "These memories are an important part of our history and highlight the importance of the state's wildlife heritage."

It's not a duck, it's a loon. Six years ago, legislation was enacted establishing six Critical Habitat license plates to raise funds for the Department of Natural Resources Nongame Fish and Wildlife Fund.

But like many things, the environment for Michigan's wildlife has changed. The DNR recently completed a State Wildlife Action Plan to address threats and concerns of wildlife in Michigan. In developing this document, state planners, along with many outside experts, identified more than 400 wildlife species that were considered Species in Greatest Conservation Need.

"When it came time to consider which species to highlight on the plate, it was only natural that the common loon be selected," said Ray Rustem, supervisor of the DNR's Natural Heritage Unit. "For nearly 20 years, the loon has been the symbol of the nongame fund and is recognized by its many donors."

The list includes endangered species, such as lake sturgeon and the Kirtland's warbler, and species which are declining or rare in Michigan, such as the spotted salamander or northern flying squirrel.

The license plate, Mr. Rustem said, also illustrates how Michigan's wildlife diversity provides a significant source of recreation and enjoyment and establishes a sense of



Above: The skies above the tall buildings in downtown Detroit are a prime viewing location for peregrine falcons. The peregrine falcon restoration project there began on top of the Guardian Building. Since then, at least seven nesting pairs have established themselves in the area, producing more than 50 offspring.

The primary source of state funding to address the needs of these species is Michigan's Nongame Fish and Wildlife Trust Fund. Since it began in 1983, the nongame fund has supported projects in each of Michigan's 83 counties to promote conservation, recreation, and education of Michigan's nongame, threatened, and endangered species, and the habitats on which they depend.

new osprey nesting sites, with more expected in the coming years.

Over the years, the fund has supported a variety of efforts, including reintroduction of the peregrine falcon, trumpeter swan, and pine marten, as well as the construction of nesting platforms for ospreys, owls, and bluebirds.

Scientists worldwide are concerned about the future of many species of amphibians. Ten years ago, little was known about the distribution and abundance of Michigan's 13 frog and toad species. The nongame fund provided support for the establishment of a volunteer frog and toad survey program. Each spring, hundreds of people fan out across the state to listen and record data about Michigan's frogs.

Current projects supported by the nongame fund include the release of ospreys in southern Michigan. This project involves transferring chicks from northern Michigan to rearing boxes in southern Michigan. When they are able to fly, the chicks are released. To date, the project has resulted in more than half a dozen

In 2006, the program celebrated its 10th anniversary. More than 100 volunteers were recognized for participating in all 10 years of the survey. Though the resulting data does not indicate any significant decline in Michigan frogs and toads, it did indicate the rarest species are not increasing in population.

Twenty years ago, researchers documented 223 species of birds that breed in Michigan. The data



DNR biologist Lori Sargent (left) and Amy Clark Eagle, a natural heritage specialist, carefully remove two osprey chicks from a nest site in the Upper Peninsula. The chicks were about five weeks old and were transported to a site in the Maple River State Game Area in Clinton County. (DNR photographs by David Kenyon)

gathered during this five-year survey was published in Michigan's first Atlas of Breeding Birds of Michigan. A second survey effort is underway. The results of this effort will document changes in abundance and distribution of bird species in the state and help to make future management decisions.

through the DNR Web site.

Wildlife viewing is the fastest growing wildlife recreation activity. The nongame fund supported the development of a wildlife viewing system with more than 120 sites identified throughout the state. A wildlife viewing guide was published and later the guide was transferred and made available free

These sites include places to see hawks, elk, moose, and butterfly migrations. Many are fully accessible and can provide an excellent opportunity to reestablish a connection with the natural world. The site also updates upcoming wildlife-related festivals.

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Although these accomplishments are significant, the needs remain greater, which is why the DNR encourages residents to purchase the Critical Habitat license plate.

With the sale of each plate, the nongame fund benefits by receiving \$25. Each year when the plate is renewed, the fund receives an additional \$10.

That means each plate, when purchased, actually results in \$50 for projects to protect rare and declining species and \$20 each time a plate is renewed.

There are about 15,000 vehicles in Michigan sporting the "Loon" plate.

"We would like to see this number at least double over the next few years to help meet the needs of Michigan's wildlife," Mr. Rustem said.

Plates can be purchased through the DNR Web site or at local Secretary of State offices.

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