



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Islands of the Great Lakes

An Island System Like No Other in the World

More than 30,000 islands dot the clear blue waters of the Great Lakes – the largest inland island system on earth. These pockets of land—ranging in size from small boulders to more than a hundred thousand acres—are vitally important to conserving wildlife and allowing continued recreational opportunities in the Great Lakes Basin.

Homes for wildlife

Great Lakes islands are of great value to fish and wildlife because they can provide relatively undisturbed habitat that may have fewer predators, allowing vulnerable species to survive. Many islands of the Great Lakes are also located in key positions on bird migration routes, providing habitat for ducks, geese and other waterfowl, and other migratory birds such as terns, hawks and bitterns. The very nature of islands results in high biodiversity compared to similar mainland habitats because of the significant expanses of shorelines (where the water meets the land), which provide essential habitat for a large variety of fish and wildlife species.



Encompassing just 1 percent of the land area in the 288,000 square-mile Great Lakes Basin, islands provide habitat for 10 percent of the endangered, threatened or rare species that live in the basin. Endangered and threatened species such as piping plovers and gray wolves use both island and mainland habitat in the Great Lakes region, while the threatened Lake Erie Watersnake occurs on only a few Great Lakes islands. The shoals and shallow waters of the islands provide spawning and nursery areas for many imperiled aquatic species of the Great Lakes, including freshwater

mussels. Many islands provide habitat for rare plants that have largely disappeared from the mainland, such as the Eastern white-fringed prairie orchid and lakeside daisy.

The waters surrounding the islands are also home to walleye, bass, northern pike and other fish species, helping to support the \$4 billion Great Lakes sport fishing industry.

Threats

The natural resources in world's largest freshwater island system face a number of threats.

Many of the islands have recreational, commercial and residential uses such as hiking, camping, birding and boating. Over-use, over-development or abuse of island habitat and natural resources can cause unintentional destruction of natural plant and animal communities. Urban sprawl can damage wildlife habitat, as well.

Native plant and animal communities on and around islands are vulnerable to invasion by non-native species such as purple loosestrife and zebra mussels.

Sewage disposal, toxic contamination through heavy metals and pesticides, runoff from agriculture and urbanization, and air pollution are other threats to island habitat.

How the islands are protected

Great Lakes islands are protected in many ways. Some islands are part of the National Park System, and others are managed or protected by U.S. states, the Canadian government or Canadian provinces, or by

non-government organizations such as The Nature Conservancy and The Nature Conservancy of Canada.

Some islands are units of the National Wildlife Refuge System, a 95-million-acre nationwide network of lands and waters managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for wildlife conservation. Refuges such as Harbor Island in Lake Huron, Lake Michigan's Gravel Island and Huron Island in Lake Superior are part of the refuge system, vital links in conserving the unique natural legacy of islands in the Great Lakes Basin.

Similarly on the Canadian side, islands can be included in the federal system of National Parks and National Marine Conservation Areas and provincial parks or reserves. Non-government organizations including the Nature Conservancy of Canada, the Federation of Ontario Naturalists and other land trusts such as the Georgian Bay Land Trust and the Canadian Thousand Islands Heritage Conservancy protect many island habitats through ownership and conservation easements or covenants.

Aside from its management of island wildlife refuges, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service plays another key



role in Great Lakes island management and conservation. Because of the numerous resources in the Great Lakes Basin, a team of 43 Fish and Wildlife Service field stations representing a range of Service programs including fisheries, national wildlife refuges and law enforcement, joined with Service partners such as the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and numerous state and provincial agencies, universities, and non-profit organizations, to form the Great Lakes Basin Ecosystem Team. The team addresses landscape-scale resource objectives using a holistic approach to conservation.

How you can help

There are several ways that island users can help conserve these jewels of the Great Lakes.

Help stop the spread of invasive species. Learn to identify non-native species and never use exotic species as bait. Transporting exotic species on boats and other personal watercraft is another way exotic species are spread; properly clean boats to prevent the transport of non-native species from one body of water to another.

Minimize your "footprint" on islands you live on or visit.

Reduce disturbance to wildlife and habitat by cleaning up litter and completely dousing campfires; keep pets leashed to help avoid injuring wildlife or disturbing habitat; boat responsibly; plant only native plants in island gardens to keep non-native plants from invading; and minimize disturbance of soils and vegetation which provide important habitat features for many types of wildlife.

Maintain and restore natural shorelines. They provide some of the most important habitat for birds, fish, plants and wildlife on islands.

Respect the closures of some islands to public visitation.

This is done to protect the rare species that occur in these unique habitats.

For more information about the islands of the Great Lakes and how you can help conserve them, visit the Great Lakes Basin Ecosystem Team Web site at <http://greatlakes.fws.gov>.

