



2021 Habitat Sites Report

Blue Water River Walk and Wetlands County Park

Report prepared for: Community Foundation of St. Clair County and St. Clair County Parks and Recreation Commission

Projects: Blue Water River Walk and Wetlands County Park, Port

Huron **Report prepared by:** Friends of the St. Clair River

Funding provided by: EGLE



Report date: March 28, 2022

Port

Huron – Volunteers assist with Blue Water River Walk assessment

Purpose: The Friends of the St. Clair River visits St. Clair River Area of Concern habitat restoration sites annually to measure success and to identify areas of improvement. The Community Foundation of St. Clair County and the St. Clair County Parks and Recreation Commission sites include the Blue Water River Walk and Wetlands County Park, both in Port Huron. Each site is scored (Good, Fair, Poor) on five criteria: Vegetation, Habitat, Human Impact, Erosion, and Maintenance. This report includes our observations and recommendations from our site visit in October 2021.

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BLUE WATER RIVER WALK

Project completion year: 2014

GLRI investment: \$2,250,000

Owner: Community Foundation of St. Clair County, maintenance provided by St. Clair County Parks and Recreation Commission

Overall score: **GOOD**

This project restored nearly one mile of shoreline edge using rock and creating in-river breakwaters, and native shrubs and wildflowers were planted. The path running through this very popular and accessible shoreline is part of the Bridge-to-Bay Trail. This project addresses the Loss of Fish & Wildlife Habitat beneficial use impairment to the St. Clair River.

Recommendations: A low-growing native ground cover is needed along the border of the pavement and around structures so these areas would not need to be mowed. Invasive Tree of Heaven (*Ailanthus altissima*) needs to be removed. Native plants around the Native American sculptures would be a good addition and a public education opportunity. Several Tree Swallow nest boxes need to be repaired or replaced.

Observations



River Walk

VEGETATION – Score: **GOOD**

At the north end native vegetation is dominant and varied. Canada Thistle (*Cirsium arvense*) is present in disturbed areas. Invasive Tree of Heaven (*Ailanthus altissima*) is present at the ferry dock area. Some areas have standing dead invasive *Phragmites* left after treatment. An approximately one foot-wide section of plants bordering the paved walkway is being mowed short. Native plants are dominant and thriving along the walkway beyond this closely mowed strip.

Native vegetation thrives along much of the

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HABITAT FEATURES AND WILDLIFE – Score: **GOOD**



The Tree Swallow nest boxes appear to be used by the target species but some are in poor condition. Some butterfly and moth activity were observed. Friends volunteers have seen fox, muskrat and various waterfowl including blue heron in the shallows. The outer reef, which helps to reduce wave action against the shore, is visible due to lower water levels. There is ample exposed rock nearshore to provide habitat for amphibians and reptiles, however, the hibernacula originally installed are no longer functional. Beach areas are intact and the

Evidence of spring Tree Swallow nesting from fall clean out of nest box

HUMAN USE IMPACTS – Score: FAIR

There is some damage to the Bridge to Bay shoreline that was reinforced during high water events is stable.

Trail sign at the arch. The rest of the signage is in good condition. A Chronolog station has been added near the north end of the site. Visitors to the site take pictures and post them on the Chronolog web page, which will help us document the condition of the site year-round. Several paths have been

trampled to the water's edge even though there are plenty of access sites. The Little Free Library is in good condition. Debris is present even though there are plenty of trash cans available. Volunteers pick up litter along the River Walk weekly.



Outdoor classroom area

The River Walk is well used by the public for recreation, wildlife viewing, fishing and general viewing of the river landscape. A Friends volunteer noted that kids have been climbing on the sculptures trampling the surrounding plants. There is some evidence of camping on the site. Native American wooden sculptures, a patio and a pergola have been added to the area that was occupied by the River Rat building. Efforts are underway to install native plants that are traditionally used by native peoples.

EROSION/HIGH WATER IMPACTS

Score: **FAIR**

Water levels have receded from the high levels seen in 2019 -2020. Erosion that was previously noted just north of the railway dock has been filled in and the fence repaired. There is some erosion around wooden structures south of the railway dock. The extra rock that was added along the shoreline to help reduce erosion during high water events is stable. Local volunteers were engaged in 2021 to monitor the shoreline annually for erosion and other impacts from their kayaks.

Erosion behind wooden seawall near ferry dock area

MAINTENANCE ISSUES – Score: **GOOD**

The edge bordering the paved walkway, areas around benches and around the ferry dock area are being mowed and trimmed short and frequently. Disturbed trimmed and mowed areas have invasive Canada Thistle (*Cirsium arvense*) patches. Invasive plants are controlled by Friends staff and volunteers and by contracted spraying for invasive *Phragmites* and Japanese Knotweed (*Fallopia japonica*). Weekly maintenance and invasive species control help keep the native species thriving. Some of the tree swallow nesting boxes, which are cleaned out at the end of the season, have been damaged.

WETLANDS COUNTY PARK

Project completion year: 2015

GLRI investment: \$1,039,500

Owner: St. Clair County Parks & Recreation Commission

Overall score: **GOOD**

An upland brownfield was cleaned up and converted to wetland providing habitat and a pedestrian and bike trail bisecting the various wetlands. The path running through this project is part of the Bridge-to-Bay Trail. This project addresses both Loss of Fish and Wildlife Habitat and Degradation of Benthos beneficial use impairments.

Recommendations: Volunteer stewardship efforts and contracted spraying are keeping the invasive plant species controlled. Maintenance practices appear to be working well and should be maintained.

Observations



Middle pond (left photo) and South pond (right photo)

VEGETATION – Score: **GOOD**

Native aquatic vegetation is dominant in the north pond. *Phragmites* and other invasive species are controlled by Friends volunteers and by contractors. Volunteers have planted Ironweed (*Vernonia* sp.) and other native species in several areas of the park. The middle pond has native plants Arrowhead (*Sagittaria* sp.) and Waterlily (*Nymphaea odorata*) present. In the south pond, cattails (*Typha* sp.) dominate, and some Duckweed (*Lemna* sp.) was present. Invasive Japanese Knotweed (*Fallopia japonica*) on the hillside is being controlled by contractors. Invasive *Phragmites* are dominant around the elevated walkway and are also being controlled by contractors.

HABITAT FEATURES AND WILDLIFE – Score: **GOOD**

In the north and middle ponds, the water was very muddy. A muskrat lodge in the north pond that was present earlier in the year is now gone. There is ample basking habitat in the middle and south ponds. In the south pond the water was clear. Wetland Wanderings events held in the summer showed good diversity of macroinvertebrates indicating good water quality and habitat health.

HUMAN USE IMPACTS – Score: **GOOD**

Very little debris was present. Walkers and bikers were staying on the paths.

EROSION/HIGH WATER IMPACTS – Score: **GOOD**

Water levels are down from previous years with a visible high-water mark on the vegetation surrounding all the ponds.

MAINTENANCE – Score: GOOD

Invasive species are being controlled by Friends volunteers and staff and contractors. All signs are in good shape.