



ST. LOUIS RIVER MARSHES WETLAND TYPES

Eric Epstein

Marsh, sedge meadow, lowland hardwood swamp, alder thicket

DOUGLAS COUNTY



ST. LOUIS RIVER MARSHES

Property Owners: Douglas County, WDNR, The Nature Conservancy
Recognitions & Designations: National Estuarine Research Reserve, WI Coastal Wetland Inventory Primary Site, WI Wildlife Action Plan Reference Site, The Nature Conservancy Priority Conservation Area

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ECOLOGY & SIGNIFICANCE

The St. Louis River, the largest river to flow into Lake Superior, empties into an important freshwater estuary, one of the largest in the Great Lakes, with extensive marshes and other wetland habitats. The St. Louis River Marshes are found in the upper portions of the estuary approximately eleven miles upstream from Superior Bay. Along this reach of the river, the shoreline on the Wisconsin side has remained largely undeveloped and undisturbed and much of the Wisconsin lands that drain directly into these marshes, including the Red River and its confluence with the St. Louis River, are roadless. These marshes play a significant role in protecting water quality in the estuary downstream and support a number of rare species. The St. Louis River Estuary has been designated a National Estuarine Research Reserve, a designation that will bring additional federal funds for research, public education, and stewardship of this important freshwater estuary.

FLORA & FAUNA

High quality emergent marsh habitat is found in quieter parts of the river — meander bends, shallow bays and backwaters separated from the main channel by natural levees. Common emergent plants include arrowhead, bulrush, bur-reed, lake sedge, cattail and sweet flag. Pockets of wild rice grow in several protected bays fed by small streams. Submergent and floating-leaved plants such as coontail, waterweed, yellow water lily, wild celery, and pondweeds grow in deep water portions of the marshes.



Swamp sparrow — Dennis Malueg

Some areas of the natural levees are vegetated with woody plants like speckled alder, red osier dogwood, meadowsweet, willows, black ash and box elder. Rare plants include variegated horsetail, marsh horsetail, Vasey's rush, arrow-leaved sweet coltsfoot, small yellow water crowfoot, northern black currant, tea-leaved willow and northern bur-reed.

The St. Louis Estuary is an important bird breeding area and critical migratory stopover habitat; more than 230 bird species have been documented here. Species seen foraging in the marshes of this Wetland Gem include bald eagle, osprey, common tern, merlin, northern harrier and belted kingfisher. Resident birds include double-crested cormorant, Virginia rail, sora, marsh wren, common yellow-throat, swamp sparrow, song sparrow and yellow warbler. The St. Louis River Estuary serves as the primary nursery for the more than 40 native fish species found in western Lake Superior, including walleye, lake sturgeon, muskellunge, northern pike and smallmouth bass.

THREATS

While the Wisconsin side of the river here is largely undisturbed, residential and industrial development on the Minnesota side may lead to water quality problems and habitat fragmentation. Urban impacts from the growing Superior-Duluth region, including future development and disturbance in upland areas that drain into the marshes, are also of concern for this site. Proposed expansion of a nearby oil refinery may result in indirect impacts due to the extensive development that would be necessary to support this project. Increasing recreational vehicle use of uplands adjacent to the marshes as well as recreational boats in the river may degrade marsh habitat. Invasive species like purple loosestrife are of concern. Future invasion by the emerald ash borer beetle threatens the site's ash trees.

ACCESS

These marshes are best explored by boat. Boat launches are located on highway 23 just east of the Minnesota border and on highway 105 in the Village of Oliver.

Sources:

Coastal Wetlands of Wisconsin's Great Lakes (WDNR)
 Priority Wetland Sites of Wisconsin's Lake Superior Basin (WDNR)
 Wisconsin's Strategy for Wildlife Species of Greatest Conservation Need (WDNR)
 Superior Mixed Forest Ecoregion: A Conservation Plan (TNC)
 Lower St. Louis River Habitat Plan (St. Louis River Citizens Action Committee)