

# Back to nature: Former defense site added to wildlife refuge

The Gibraltar Bay Unit, a former Grosse Ile, Mich., Nike missile site, provides important spawning and nursery habitat for many species of fish and also serves as a critical stopover habitat for birds. After an environmental investigation conducted by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Louisville District concluded that no human or ecological risks existed, the site became the newest addition to the Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge.

By Jenn Domashevich, public affairs

Formerly used defense site that once housed Nike Ajax missiles during World War II is now home to more than 200 species of mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians and fish. After an environmental investigation of former Nike Missile Site D-51 in Grosse Ile, Mich., concluded that no human or ecological risks existed, the site became the newest addition to the Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge.

“It used to be a Nike missile site and now it’s wetlands and prairies and birds and fish,” said John Hartig, refuge manager for the Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge Large Lakes Research Station. “It’s very cool.”

The 40-acre area, known as the Gibraltar Bay Unit, is located off the southern tip of Grosse Ile and includes unique coastal wetland, meadow, prairie, and upland habitats. Gibraltar Bay provides important spawning and nursery habitat for many species of fish and the uplands provide a critical stopover habitat for birds.

“Ninety-seven percent of coastal wetlands along the Detroit River have been lost,” Hartig said. “Only three percent is left along the Detroit River. It’s got huge ecological significance.”

Under the Defense Environmental Restoration Program (DERP) for Formerly Used Defense Sites (FUDS), restoration of the site, including road and building demolition, began in 1991 and was completed in 1993 by the Louisville District. Since then, numerous studies and investigations have been completed in compliance with the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality, U.S. Environ-

mental Protection Agency (EPA) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to address environmental concerns.

The former Nike Missile Site D-51 was part of the former U.S. Naval Air Station (NAS) Grosse Ile in Wayne County, Mich., which served as a Navy airplane, seaplane and blimp training site and U.S. Coast Guard rescue station during World War II. In 1954, 52 acres of NAS Grosse Ile was transferred to the Army for the establishment of a Nike Ajax missile site known as Nike Missile Site D-51, which operated until 1963. It was then transferred back to the U.S. Navy.

In 1972, the U.S. Navy transferred the property to the U.S. EPA, which stewarded and protected the property for more than 35 years. During this time, an effective partnership developed among USACE, EPA, Grosse Ile Township, Grosse Ile Land and Nature Conservancy and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and its Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge. The partnership shared a vision — to transfer the 40-acre, former Nike missile site from the EPA to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Refuge Program to protect, preserve, and conserve the natural resources of the area, with the intended use of nature observance, research and education.

“The vision was created eight years ago and it took a lot of hard work to get here,” Hartig said.

Prior to taking ownership of the property in January 2008, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service completed two Preliminary Acquisition Surveys (Levels I and II) to assess the potential liability associated with any residual contamination that they

may incur by taking ownership of the property.

Additionally, an Ecological Risk Assessment (ERA) at the former Nike missile site was completed by USACE in 2008 to determine if the site required further evaluation for potential remediation to protect the environment.

“We took the results of the Level II Assessment and incorporated them into an Ecological Risk Assessment,” said Angela Schmidt, Louisville District subject matter expert risk assessor and biologist who conducted the risk assessment. “We did a full-blown risk assessment using a different set of criteria to determine if there were any risks to the environment. Our results showed that the ecosystem on Grosse Ile was functional and not at risk. It also translated to no liability for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Both the Corps and Fish and Wildlife Service’s results agreed and the success of these assessments is evident in Grosse Ile becoming part of the refuge.

The ERA was conducted on the two areas of concern (AOCs) on the former Nike missile site, known as AOC 5 and AOC 15, to evaluate the potential for ecological risks.

“AOC 5 and 15 were part of the overall investigation of the Naval Air Station and were two of 25 AOCs,” said Kathy Krantz, Louisville District environmental scientist and technical manager of the project. “AOC 5 and 15 were pulled out from the work that was being done over the overall site to expedite it so that this transfer could happen.”

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